

**Course Code: 211105, Introduction to Poetry**

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**A Prayer for My Daughter**

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<b>Writer</b>	: William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)
<b>About the Author</b>	: An Irish poet, dramatist, writer, and politician. Helped to found the Abbey Theatre. Served two terms as a Senator of the Irish Free State.
<b>Written Date</b>	: 1919
<b>Publication Date</b>	: 1921
<b>Tone</b>	: Gloomy, precarious, and frightening, and didactic.
<b>Genre</b>	: A modernist contemplative poem.
<b>Total Words/ Lines</b>	: The poem has been composed in ten stanzas of eight lines each: two rhymed couplets followed by a quatrain of enclosed rhyme.
<b>Setting</b>	: "The Tower"

This poem is addressed to Anne, Yeats's daughter with Georgie Hyde Lees, whom he married after his first marriage proposal to Maud Gonne was turned down in 1916. After the First World War, the entire world underwent severe turmoil in every sphere of life, agitating Yeats about his daughter's future. The poem portrays the love and anxiety of a father who has been blessed with a daughter. It was written in 1919 and published in 1921 as part of Yeats' collection, 'Robartes and the Dancer'. This poem contains 10 stanzas: each has eight lines (written in iambic pentameter or iambic tetrameter) and follows a loose rhyme scheme of AABBCDDC.

Yeats' poem "A Prayer for My Daughter" is one of the most celebrated poems ever written by him. It was written at the time when he saw his infant girl on a fiercely stormy day. His eldest child, which was a daughter, was born in January 1919. When the infant was a few days old, there was a fierce storm outside his house in the Norman tower called Thoor Ballylee in Galway Country. Seeing the storm, he was much disturbed in his mind.

He glanced at his daughter to whom he had given the name Annie Butler Yeats. His infant daughter was asleep in her cradle at that time. Yeats prayed for her. Then, an idea came into his mind and he started to write the poem but he left it unfinished. Then, he completed this poem in June 1919. Later on, he published his poetic volume entitled "Michael Robartes and the Dancer" in 1921 in which he included this poem. The poem has 80 lines which have been divided into ten stanzas of eight lines each. The poet has infused great thought content in the poem in which he prays for certain natural gifts in his daughter. He also expresses his views on the heartlessness of a great beauty. In fact, he refers here to Maud Gonne's cruelty to the poet's

love. In this poem, the poet prays to God to grant his little daughter ordinary beauty without pride, refined courtesy and enlargement of soul. The poet wants that his little daughter may be free from empty pride which gives rise to intellectual hatred. He thinks so because of her intellectual hatred that Maud Gonne ruined her life and prospects of happiness. In the end, the poet prays to God to grant boon to his daughter to be married to a man, belonging to an Aristocratic family so that she may learn and love courtesy, tradition and ceremonies.

### **Summary of the Poem:**

There is a great gloom in the poet's mind. He is deeply worried because a furious storm which is born on the Atlantic ocean, is almost massacring the Irish countryside. The storm is growing violent due to receiving no obstruct on its way. The sea wind is howling. The poet can hear it under the arches flooded stream. Hardly anything excepting Gregory's wood and one bare hill can give any resistance to the storm. The poet's one month's daughter is lying asleep in her cradle. She is half - covered under her coverlet and her cradle hood. The poet feels much worried about her safety. For an hour the poet has walked and prayed for her daughter's safety. The storm is noisy and seems to be destructive which has excited in him a visual fear, filling his mind with thoughts. While strolling and praying for his daughter the poet hears the furious sound of the storm while it passes upon the tower, under arches and of bridges and over elm trees. He fancies in his excitement that the years of future have come out with shattering effect for the mankind the devastating future ahead have come out dancing with the rhythm of the wild beating of drums (the furious sound of storm is compared with the beating of a frenzied drum) it has indeed, leaped up from the sea which though seems to be innocent, yet is destructive because it gave rise to the violent storm.

Now, the poet wants that God may grant certain natural gifts to his infant daughter. She should have an ordinary beauty because exceptional beauty makes a lover mad with love. And the girl becomes full of pride when she views in the mirror. In the state of pride, she fails to choose a suitable life - partner and the right man for her husband like Helen. Helen was extremely beautiful and she was married to Menelaus, King of Sparta. Paris, Prince of Troy and her foolish seducer caused her much trouble. Likewise, Venus, sprang from the foam of the sea, was extremely beautiful. She was unguided as she was fatherless. She married to the lame ironsmith of the gods because of her whim. Her marriage with the ironsmith shows that great beauties are too proud. They become crazy and this craziness destroys their great marital happiness and becomes sad.

The poet is anxious that his daughter may be granted courtesy. Its reason is that the girl of an average beauty wins her lover's heart by her virtues and good manners. She can't impress a young man with ordinary beauty. She should be granted courtesy and good manners. Whatever, she thinks, should be innocent and cheerful like the notes of linnet. Her soul may flourish like a tree whether she drinks or quarrels, should be for the sake of fun . She should shine like the leaves of green laurel. The poet wants that her daughter's mind may be free from hate and intellectual hatred. The poet refers that Maud Gonne's intellectual hatred kept her aloof from lovers and in the end, her intellectual hatred inspired her to become a revolutionary orator full of inflammatory speeches. In this process, she ruined her life. That's way, the poet wishes that his daughter should be free from this vice and may live happily even though the whole world turns hostile to her. In the concluding part of the poem, the poet prays to God that his daughter may be married to a man, belonging to an aristocratic family in which refined manners, courtesy and traditions are maintained. The custom and ceremony are the sources of innocence, beauty, happiness, prosperity gladdening success and honour in life.

### **Theme of the Poem:**

In the poem the poet prays that his daughter may be gifted with beauty which does not make a stranger's eye distraught, that she may grow up to be kind and capable of closest intimacy and not like Helen bored and troubled by a fool, that she may have courtesy and aristocratic traits in keeping with the name of her house, and that she may have a fixed home and happy thoughts. The poet looks within himself and finds that there is hatred inside. He thinks that hatred kills innocence and wishes that his daughter should not harbour hatred. He realises that intellectual hatred is of the nastiest kind. It was because of this unwholesome bent of the mind that Maud Gonne married a fool. The poet wished that her daughter should not cultivate a fanatic intellect. He thinks that her daughter can remain innocent if she is free from hatred and intellectual fanaticism. The innocence is “self-delighting,” “self – appearing” and “self-affrighting”. The poet's last wish is that her daughter should marry a person of aristocratic family who may take her to a home where tradition and ceremony fill the atmosphere.

### **Critical Appreciation of the Poem:**

The poem entitled “A Prayer for my Daughter” is one of the most celebrated poems that have ever come from the pen of Yeats. In this poem, the poet recalls his merciless beloved —Maud Gonne and his infant daughter, sleeping in her cradle on the other. He was full of emotions which were excited by storm which howled outside his house, in the Old Norman tower in ThoorBallylee which is located in the county of Galway. He used to live in the tower with his wife. When his eldest daughter Annie Butler Yeats was born in Jan. 1919, he was extremely happy and prayed to God to give her courtesy as well other qualities. One day there was blowing a great storm out of his house. His mind was dipped into deep emotions and he began to think about his youthful days, his beloved — Maud Gonne and a sad separation from her. His heart was filled with deep emotions and affection for her. He began to write the poem but left it unfinished. In June, 1919, he started this poem again and finished it. Then it was published in his poetic volume entitled Michael Robartes and the Dancer which was published in 1921.

### **Portrayal of An Aristocratic way of Life:**

In this poem, he has portrayed an aristocratic way of life and wishes his daughter to adopt it. He considers it an ideal way of life, but this ideal is not a Polonius like ex - cathedra statement. His is a leisurely, well-reasoned ideal, based not only on mythology and history, but on his own experience of men and women. Its homely tone and air of intimacy give it great appeal. The poet advocates an essentially non - Christian order the keynote of which is a man's sense of his own nobility and self-sufficiency.

### **Tragic Outlook:**

The poem is a landmark in the poet's journey along the road to the goal of poesy. He has left sentiments and pathos far behind and has cultivated the tragic outlook. He can now combine the appreciation of beauty with a sense of the tragic rather than with the pathetic element of life. He can now impart meaning to the ordinary events of life which his earlier poetry did not attempt. In the process his poetry becomes a vehicle of public speech.

The poem is striking flexible. A. N. Jeffares points out that the poet was achieving flexibility as revealed in the poem. The poem can move through description of the place we are beginning to recognise, the tower, it

can freely describe the poet's mood of gloom and then move to the idea of beauty in women, from there to symbols of great love found disappointing, to Helen, Aphrodite and by implication to Maud Gonne.

### **A Great Treasure of Phrases and Images:**

The poem is adorned with wealth of phrases and images that are suggestive and evocative. Much is implied and more is meant than strikes the ear. The poem is an amalgam of symbols, its richness of texture is remarkable, and its easy flow of ideas, more subtly linked than may at first appear, is a result of Yeats' increasing ability to make his concepts cohere. The storm howling symbolises destruction recalls the mere anarchy of The Second Coming. The flooded streams also recall the havoc to be wrought in The Second Coming. The murderous innocence of the sea recalls the images of blood - dimmed tide and the violence of the Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen. The bandy - legged Smith is McBride and Helen is Maud Gonne by implication. Yeats has Maud Gonne in his mind when he says that It's certain that fine women eat a crazy salad. The rich Horn of plenty is suggestive of courtesy, aristocracy, and ceremony. The hidden laurel tree can provide through custom the innocence of soul. So the images follow one after another in succession. The image of Helen evokes another figure — Aphrodite —who rose out of spray. The union of Aphrodite with Hephaestus, the bandy legged. Smith brings to mind the Maud Gonne - McBride episode. Thus the image cluster becomes increasingly complex.

### **Denunciation of Intellectual Hatred:**

In this poem the poet eulogises courtesy, charm, wisdom and the glad kindness that Yeats had found in marriage. His main tirade is against hatred, and specially the intellectual hatred. The idea is that a beautiful woman should despoil the subjectivity of her nature by the politics of objectivity, or sacrifice the unity of her being to a cause outside itself. Because of this showing of hatred in the poem some critics have pointed out that the poem is snobbish. But Arnold Usher in Three Irishmen defends the poem and says that this criticism is unjust. The poem has a ring of optimism about it in thinking that mere anarchy cannot harm the child if she is innocent and is nicely bred.

### **Literary Devices**

- **Paradox**— “murderous innocence of the sea”
- **Personification**— “future years.....dancing”, which implies the transience of life.
- **Symbols** “sea wind” and “flooded stream” denote turbulent workforces.
- **Alliteration**— “be granted beauty.”
- **Imagery:** “the storm-driven bird” and “the dancing bough” convey the poet’s concerns about the world’s tumultuous nature.
- **Metaphor:** The “dancing bough” and “storm-driven bird” mentioned above can also be interpreted as metaphors for life’s unpredictable and challenging experiences.

### **Themes:**

- **Innocence and Experience:** The poem contrasts childhood innocence and adulthood’s challenges.
- **The Passing of Time:** Yeats reflects on the passage of time and how it brings change.
- **Beauty and Fragility:** Yeats talks about his daughter’s physical beauty and the problems that come with it.
- **The Role of Women:** The poet discusses how women shape the situation.

- **Spiritual and Moral Guidance:** The poem is a prayer in the true sense. Yeats prays for his daughter's spiritual and moral development.
- **Love and Fatherhood:** The poem ultimately expresses Yeats' deep love and concern for his daughter's well-being.

**According to new question pattern, the question in the exam can be a set type. Such as:**

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|---|---|
| 1. a) What kind of beauty does the poet wish for his daughter?                            | 1 |
| b) Why does Yeats compare his daughter with beautiful women of mythology?                 | 2 |
| c) Discuss Yeats as a poet of love from your reading his poem "A Prayer for my daughter". | 3 |
| 2. a) Who is called the Fool in this poem?  | 1 |
| b) What is Yeats final prayer for his daughter?   | 3 |
| c) Consider Yeats as a romantic poet/ romantic elements in this poem.                     | 6 |

**Brief Questions with Answers**

**1. What is the nationality of Yeats?**

**Ans.** William Butler Yeats is a patriotic romantic poet of Ireland.

**2. Who is Maud Gonne?**

**Ans.** Maud Gonne is the Irish beautiful woman whom Yeats fell in love with.

**3. Who is Lady Gregory?**

**Ans.** Lady Gregory is a friend and patron of the Yeats.

**Ans.** The setting of the poem suggests a stormy weather when his daughter sleeps.

**4. How many lines does Yeats use in each stanza of this poem?**

**Ans.** William Butler Yeats uses eight lines in each stanza of this poem.

**5. What is the rhyme of the eight lines stanza?**

**Ans.** Yeats uses abab cd de rhyme in the eight lines stanza of the poem.

**6. How long did the poet pray for his daughter?**

**Ans.** The poet prayed for his daughter for an hour.

**7. Why does the poet pray for his daughter?**

**Ans.** The poet prays for his daughter because there is a great gloom in his mind due to the threat of 2<sup>nd</sup> World War.

**8. What did he imagine about the future?**

**Ans.** He imagined that the future may bring violence and disorder because there is the threat of war.

**9. What kind of beauty does the poet wish for his daughter?**

**Ans.** The poet wishes that, she should be beautiful but not too beautiful to distraught stranger's eye or looking glass beautiful.

**10. What kind of life did Helen live?**

**Ans.** Helen lived a flat and dull life because she lead a life in confinement.

**11. Who is called the Fool in this poem?**

**Ans.** Paris, the prince of Troy is regarded as the fool because his choice brought ruin to the Trojans.

**12. What kind of bride groom does the poet wish for his daughter?**

**Ans.** Yeats prays that, the bride groom of his daughter will bring her to a house where custom and ceremony dwell.



### 13. When was the poem a prayer for my daughter written?

**Ans.** The poem was written in 1919.

#### Short Questions with Answers

##### 1. Usage of symbolism in “A prayer for my Daughter.”

**Ans.** W.B. Yeats is considered as the founder of symbolic school of poetry. His symbols are derived from occult studies which included a fascination for fairies, astrology, automatic writing and prophetic dreams.

Yeats was a symbolist and he was a symbolist from the beginning of his career to the end. The term symbolism is derived from a Greek verb: ‘Symbollein’, means ‘to put together.’ A symbol means, a mark, token or sign. It means representation of some hidden things through a sign or mark that is called a symbol. When an unseen thing or idea is expressed through seen, we use a symbol. The symbolism is the presentation of objects, moods and ideas through the medium of symbols.

“Storm” represents outside forces which threaten Anne’s safety.

“cradlehood” represents Anne’s innocence and infancy.

“coverlid” represents innocence and ignorance, frail protection.

“wind” represents turbulent forces.

“one bare hill” may represent Robert’s death. (Why is the hill bare? Replies are appreciated.) The hill is empty, it may represent his death – there is no one to occupy it. Or it may be a hill where his tombstone lies. As I have said, I have no idea.

##### 2. What does the poet pray to God and why in the poem “A Prayer for my Daughter”?

**Ans.** Yeats prayers should not be too beautiful because she might be aloof from the people. She may not be able to establish human connection. And she may lose natural kindness. He also prayers that, she might not be a fanatic, Yeats wishes to protect her from danger. He sees glimpses of horrors of the future years. Therefore, he prayers for his daughter. Yeats refers to mythical beauty and says, Helen chose a fool husband and Aphrodite chose a bandy-legged god of the black smith- Hephaestus for a husband. Yeats says that beautiful woman do absurd things. They cannot chose right husband and suffer for their wrong choices. Yeats humorously says-

Beneath the humorous remark there is a reminder that beautiful women are not guided by reason but they are blind by their beauty.

The father Yeats prays that she should be curious and learned. He emphasizes on the spiritual beauty because happiness comes from soul itself. She must learn that love is not a gift. One must love first, in order to be loved His prayers that she should possess three qualities of the self- self-delighting, self-appeasing, self-affrighting. These three qualities of self-convey his idea that his daughter should possess custom and ceremony.

Yeats wishes that she will think “Opinions are accursed”. Yeats think of Maud Gonne’s politics which was different to his politics. Her politics caused sufferings to people.

Yeats refers to a plenty horn in which saint George killed a Dragon to rescue a lady. Yeats sees this as an image to rescue her from her own thinking. Yeats advises her to be learned not to be looking glass beautiful.

He prays that she should be pleasing like a flourishing hidden tree where linnets will sing. She will live like green laurel and in a dear perpetual place.

#### **Broad Questions with Answers**

**1. What autobiographical elements do you notice in the poem, "A Prayer for My Daughter"?**

**Ans.** This poem is a prayer for poet's daughter because he is worried about the possible danger in her future. So, he prayed God to keep her safe from cruelty of the world.

The poem begins with the burden of a personal occasion but concludes with a resolving generalization. There are many autobiographical elements of the poet in this poem. Yeats first prayed for beauty but this beauty must be tinged with compassion.

Yeats discards beauty as that of Helen of Troy because excessive beauty makes a woman incapable of compassion. He thinks that without it no intimate relationship is possible. The second gift sought for the daughter is courtesy. Yeats asks that his daughter may become a living image of the tree of life.

According to the poet, intellectual hatred is the worst of all. If it replaced by innocence & purity it can bring joy & consolation to the individual. It will give an inner peace which cannot be disturbed by misfortune or opposition.

Yeats prays for his newly born/unborn daughter who sleeps on the cradle. There is a storm outside, he feels gloomy. He walked for an hour and prayed for his daughter because of the gloom in his mind. The storm outside reflects the storm of the war which the poet feels internally. He hears the roaring of the sea and the storm of nature and feels sad thinking of the excited reverie. In fact, Yeats feels gloomy and dejected because of the upcoming 2<sup>nd</sup> world war. In fact, the poem is written under the background of the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war when there was treat of another world war. Therefore, the father prays for the daughter how she will live in the war ravage civilization.

In short the poem shows Father's worry for his daughter & her future. Finally he wishes that she grow up & get married in an aristocratic family which observes traditional manners & courtesy.

**2. Describe Wordsworth's feelings after seeing the Daffodils.**

**Ans.** William Wordsworth is widely admired in the field of English literature for his intimate love for nature and romanticism. He is the pioneer of Romantic Movement who has used simple language, common phenomenon of life and common natural objects. He has avoided poetic diction, balance and restraint of 18th century literature completely, In other words, he has brought poetry close to the door of common man. His poem, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' is a beautiful example of romantic poetry. Here we find romantic characteristic like imagination, love for beauty, love for nature, recollection of past, etc. Actually it is a romantic poem both in theme and style.

The ordinary occasion of seeing beautiful daffodils has become extra-ordinary in the hand of Wordsworth. Once, the poet was roaming aimlessly and he was in a vacant mood. Suddenly, a number of daffodils came to the sight of the observer. The observer simply became happy seeing the daffodils which were moving to and fro in the gentle breeze. It is the first part of the incident. In the second part, the poet describes the influence of the happy incident. When the poet is in pensive mood, the beautiful scenery of daffodils comes to his mind's eye. It sweeps away the pensive mood of the poet and he becomes doubly rejoiced. At last, the poet enables himself to write poetry.

The immediate reaction of the poet of seeing daffodils is very joyous and happy. Wordsworth's charming mood is evident in his superficial expression. He exaggerates the beauty of the daffodils, the number of daffodils and its moving way. Wordsworth establishes a spiritual communion between himself and daffodils— through his joyous mood. He portrays daffodils to be golden in colour. They do not appear like general flower to the poet's eye. They shine and sparkle like the stars of Milky Way—

galaxy. In other words, Wordsworth compares the flower with stars. Thus, in describing the beauty of daffodils the poet shows his jovial mood. Wordsworth is so happy that he describes the number of daffodils in a hyperbolic way. He writes–

“Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.”

His excited mood is evident when he writes ‘dancing’ and ‘tossing’. The daffodils appear as living being. Thus, the poet takes every care to reflect the happiness of daffodils and himself as well. Moreover, the poet makes use of figures of speech like ‘as a cloud’ which is an appropriate simile to create carefree mood.

Wordsworth shows oneness with the happiness of daffodils saying–

“A poet could not but be gay”

He watches the beauty of the flower for long time. The sight thrills not only his physical eyes but also his inner-eyes-his soul. We come to know that his heart starts dancing with, the ‘sprightly dance’ of the daffodils. Thus, we find happy communion between man and nature. Therefore, the poet can see the beautiful flower through his mind’s eye when the ‘jocund company’ is not present in front of him.

The rapturous impression of having the sight of beautiful daffodils leads the poet to write romantic poetry. It testifies to his theory of poetry “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings... recollected in tranquility”. The poet recollects his past memory. His jubilant mood enhances his imaginative power. Wordsworth gives a very sensuous description of the flower due to his merry mood. From the beginning to the end, the poet remains happy and tries to keep his readers happy. In this way, he gives a different philosophy of nature.

  
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