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THE CONCEPT OF TEACHING IN *THE HOUR– GLASS (1914)*

Asst.Prof.Kamal Walee , M.A

Asst.Prof .Asmaa Mukaram ,M.A

THE HOUR– GLASS (1914)

The Hour-Glass is a morality play in terms of plot, characters, and theme. Further, Yeats subtitled the play a morality play and critics hail the play as one of the most remarkable moralities of modern literature. 'Ellis-Fermor points out that the play "is a morality of the modern rather than of the medieval kind."[1]

The play is based on "The Priest's Soul" a tale in Lady Wilde's **Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions** (1887).The main characters of the tale are a priest, an angel and a child.[2] There is no Fool in Lady Wilde's tale. Teigue, the Fool of **The Hour-Glass** is Yeats's creation. The Protagonist isa schoolmaster – Wise Man. The other characters of the play are the pupils and the family of Wise Man-his wife and children. The setting of the play is a classroom. Hence the setting is suggestive. . The action is a day in the life of Wise Men.

The stage direction stipulates that [The stage is brought out into the orchestra so as to leave a wide space in front of the curtain]. (p. 299). Thus the curtained area is used to represent Wise Man's study. The scene is discovered only when the curtain is drawn. When the play opens the pupils are standing before the curtain which is still closed. One of the pupils carries a book. The action begins with a simple incident. The pupils try to choose a subject for the day'slesson. The opening dialogue of the pupils sets the atmosphere and the situation of the play. The pupils are nervous and inhibited. They are in a state of confusion about what to choose for discussion. They doubt the wisdom of their master's teaching that there is no God[3]. One pupil says that he know the question that must be asked. He says that in a dream he heard a voice telling him to challenge Wise Man on account of his claim that there is no God: "I was to say to him, you were wrong to say there is no God and soul – may be, if there is not much of either there is yet some tatters, some tag on the wind – so to speak". (p. 299). Thus the remark of the pupil helps us to know that the Protagonist is a skeptical man. The pupils want to refute his ideas but they are afraid.

The pupils decide to choose a text for discussion by chance

> Here is his big book. Let us turn the pages slowly. Let one of us put down his finger without looking. The passage his finger lights on will be the subject of the lesson.(p. 300).

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At this point the Fool enters. In a childish and monotonous way, the Fool e peats "Give me a penny". Noticeably, the Fool goes on asking for pennies and repeating this phrase like a refrain throughout the play. This is his assumed foolishness. In this scene the pupils do not treat him as an ordinary human being. In fact, the scene is a ludicrous one. The pupils balance the big book on the Fool's back making him kneel and stretch his arms : "Down on your knees. Hunch up your back. Spread your arms, and look like a golden eagle in a church.Keep still, keep still." (p. 300). While the Fool holds the book, all the pupils stand around him to see the book. As the pupils search for a text, the Fool, in Katharine Worth's-words, functions as "a living lectern"[4] Commenting on the pupil's search for a text and the frequent demand of the Fool for pennies, Karen Dorn remarks, that "their [pupils'] poking for snippet of a text differs little from collecting the odd penny"[5] by the Fool.

It is worthwhile to consider the allegorical character of Wise Man and the Fool. Both of them are personified abstraction. Denis Donoghue points out that Wise Man and Fool, respectively, represent "Reason and Faith; Intellect and FolkIntuition."[6] Hence they are symbolic rather than real individuals. Their very name-Wise Man and Fool, helps to renderthem archetypal. The conflict of the play is the opposition of reason to intuition; Wise Man and Fool. However, the role of the Fool is seen as complementary to that of Wise Man in the sense that intuition and reason are elements in one personality Yeats celebrates the spontaneity of the Fool and stresses how Wise Man places his trust in absolute reason. He represents reason unredeemed by intuition.

Only when the pupils choose a text for discussion Yeats introduces the protagonist. As soon as the pupils hear the voice of the schoolmaster, along with the Fool they draw back the curtain to reveal Wise Man sitting at his desk. The study is a bare room. The only stage property is an hour-glass upon the desk of Wise Man. The lesson begins when one of the pupilsreads the text for the school master: "There are two living countries, one visible and one invisible, when it is summer there, it is winter here, and when it is November with us, it is lambing-time there." (p. 301). The above passage is a valuable key to the play's meaning. The pupils ask their master to explain and refute the passage in the light of the theories he propagates. Actually, Wise Man has taught his pupils that there is no spiritual world. To Wise Man what is invisible is a dream and the material world is the only reality. Hence it is Worth noting that, as Denis Donoghue puts it, "the metaphysical theme is located with ironic significance in the word dream."[7] Since it is Wise Man who regards the spiritual world or rather the other world as a dream and as the pupil reads the text for Wise Man, we see his discomfort in the reaction to the text.

Hence, as one of the pupils says that the text was written by a beggar "upon the wall of Babylon."[8] (p. 301). Wise Man dismisses it as a theme fit only for beggars. So the pupils call their beggar-Teigue, to suggest a meaning for the text. Teigue confirms the truth of the passage saying that the seasons of this world are the reverse of ours. Noticeably the answer of the Fool comes in parenthesis, that is he takes the existence
of this world as a matter of fact :

Fool.To be sure - everybody knows, everybody in the world knows, when it is spring with us, the trees are withering there, when it is summer with us, the snow is falling and have I not myself heard the lambs that are all bleating on a cold November day - to be sure. (p. 302).

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This passage reveals the difference between the Fool and Wise Man in apprehending the surrounding World. Whereas, Wise Man negates the existence, of the spiritual, the Fool believes in its existence.

At this stage a feeling grows in Wise Men that an invisible world does exist. As Ernest A. Boyd puts it, "his spirit pass [es] on to him premonitions of the phenomena he denies"[9], which is the existence of the metaphysical world. Wise Man begins to sense that something is going to happen but he is not sure what it is. He points out that he had dreamed about the passage which his pupils bring him to interpret: "That I should dream it twice, and after that, that [sic] theyshould pick it out !" (p. 303). Gradually Wise Nan begins tobrood over the existence of a spiritual world and how the existence of souls would reduce his achievement to nothing. He proceeds to question his religious skepticism:

> ... Reason is growing dim; A moment more and Frenzy will beat his drum And laugh aloud and scream; And I must dance in the dream. (p. 303).

While Wise Man is absorbed in his own thoughts contemplating the existence of spirits, the Fool interrupts his meditation by asking him for pennies and praising his wisdom. However Wise Man violently reacts to the Fool: "Seeing that everybody is a fool when he is asleep and dreaming, why do you call me wise?" (p. 303). The Fool goes on calling him wise and next he relates the effect of the wisdom of his teaching. Thus the Fool, as an experienced traveller or rather wanderer, tellsWise Man that bells no longer ring in the churches and people no longer wake up early in the morning. Furthermore, Teigue says that young men instead of visiting holy places such as the holy wells, they sit at crossroads and play cards. The Fool also points out that friars instead of fasting and serving the poor, they drink wine and obey their wives. The Fool concludes his speech saying: "And when I asked what misfortune had brought all these changes, they said it was no misfortune; but that it was the Wisdom of your teaching". (p. 304). Of course, ostensibly the Fool endeavours to convince the schoolmaster that he is wise but the Fool is ironical when referring to the skeptical results of Wise Men's teaching.

The Fool adopts the style of a beggar so as to obtain Some pennies. He assumes that people keep his as a mascot and he tells Wise Man that his presence has brought luck to fishermen:

> The fishermen let me sleep among their nets in the loft because I bring them luck; and in the summer time, the wild creatures let me sleep near their nets and their holes. (p. 305).

As Wise Man sees the Fool holding a pair of shears-here Yeats brings in a sense of peasant life – he asks the Fool about the shears. However, the Fool refuses to speak unless given some pennies. Eventually Wise Man consents to give him some pennies and so the Fool proceeds to tell the reason that had made himhold the shears: "Every day [sic] men go out dressed in black and spread great black nets over the hills, great black nets." (p. 304-5). To Wise Man's provocative "A strange place to fish in", the Fool replies:

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> They spread them out on the hills that they may catch the feet of the angels; but every morning, just before the down, I go out and cut the nets with the shears and the angels fly away. (p. 305).

Throughout the play the Fool talks about angels as familiar beings. However, Wise Man mocks the Fool's tale and puts him down as foolish. Actually, to Wise Man the Fool is a foolprecisely because he believes in the existence of angels. Thus Rise Man can see only the Fool but he is blind to the moralbehind the daft speech of the Fool. In fact, the speech of the Fool is significant. On the one level, the Fool foreshadows the action. On another level, the speech of the Fool brings out Wise Man's skepticism. Their talk in this scene circles round angels. While Wise Man goes on denying and defying theexistence of angels, the Fool asserts that in moments oftranquility one can see angels:

> When one is so quiet that there is not a thought in one's head ... then all in a minute one can smell summer flowers, and tall people go by, happy and laughing but they will not let us look at their faces. (p. 306).

Therefore Wise Man claims that the Fool is a dreamer and that he is daydreaming; turning fantasy into reality.

The speeches of the Fool which are rich in reference to angels pave the way for the coming scene. as Flannery writes, "the audience is prepared for the appearance of the Angel"[10] who appears in the next scene. Thus Yeats by the speeches of the Fool makes the jump easy from the natural to the supernatural when the Angel suddenly appears on stage. In line with the Significance of the Fool's tales about angels, it is worth noting that these tales evoke a train of thought in Wise Man. He begins to doubt whether his pupils really share his World of learning or they merely repeat his words just as the Fool mimes his words. Consequently, Wise Man gives the Fool orders:

> Well,there are your four pennies. - Fool you arecalled And all day they cry, 'come hither , Fool'.
>
> [The Fool goes close to him.]
>
> Or else, it's, 'Fool, be gone'.
>
> [The Fool goes further off.]
>
> Or 'Fool, stand there'.
>
> [The Fool straightens himself up.]
>
> Or, 'Fool, go sit in the corner'.
>
> The Fool sits in the corner. (p. 307).

Thus the Fool carries out the instructions of Wise Man without questioning. Hence, Katharine Worth suggests that the Fool "like a dazed lucky respond [s] to the pull of Pozzo's rope."[11]The point is that they, Wise Man and Fool, develop a master slave relationship. However, despite the affinity with Beckett's **Waiting for Godot**, Yeats differs from the Absurdists in that he expresses faith against doubt.

While Wise Man boasts of the achievement of his teaching an angel suddenly appears on stage. The Fool sees the Angel before Wise Man does. Hence, Wise Man asks the Fool "Why do you put your fingers to your lip, / and creep away?" (p.308).

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A recurrent motif in **The Hour Glass** as in Sophocles'**Oedipus Rex**, as Karen Dorn remarks, "is that sight is blindess, insight is seeing into what has been invisible."[12]a close reading of the play reveals that the Fool has an insight; an access to reality and that Wise Man is spiritually and imaginatively blind. As the Fool labels the protagonist "Wise"- as mentioned before - the latter maintains that whole wisdom is "to see rightly whatever dream be with us." (p. 303). When next the Fool claims that he has been followed by an angel: "I saw one but a momentago – that is because I am lucky. It was coming behind me, but it was not laughing." (p. 306). Consequently, expressing his skepticism, Wise Man regards the Fool's claim to be nothing: "There is nothing but what men can see when they are awake. Nothing, nothing." (p. 306). In fact, Wise Man states that the Fool is blindfold with illusion and dream. Moreover, WiseMan, in an aside, renders those who believe in foolish tales of angels as blind. Ironically the description applies to himself. This becomes clear in the confrontation scene with the Angel. Wise Man does not beg for mercy in submission but endeavours to explain the rational reason for his doubt:

> Pardon me, blessed Angel, I have denied and taught the like to others.
> But how could I believe before my sight Had come to me. (p. 309).

Finally the blindness of Wise Man is blindness of abstract reason and the Fool, as F.A.C. Wilson write s, is "a visionary Fool."[13]

The appearance of the Angel negates the earlier views. of Wise Man but the nonsense of the Fool turns out to be true. And the Pool exits after the appearance of the Angel. As Wise Man sees the Angel the latter announces that he is the messenger of death. The Angel declares that Wise Man will die as soon as the last grain of sand has fallen through the hour-glass which stands on his desk. The angel also informs Wise Man of the active role he has taken in converting all the people aroundhim :

> You have to die because no soul has passed The heavenly threshold since you have opened school But grass grows there, and rust upon the hinge; And they are lonely that must keep the watch. (p.308)

The Angel also tells Wise Man that he is destined for Hell because he has denied the existence of Heaven and Purgatory. But as Wise Man pleads the Angel to allow him to undo what he has done; "Give me a year - a month - a week - a day." (p. 310). The Angel postpones his summon. He gives Wise Man an hour to find a believer who confesses his belief. In other words, the Angel tells him that his salvation lies in finding one believer:

> One fish to lie and spawn among the stones Till the great Fisher's net is full again, You may, the Purgatorial fire being passed, Spring to your peace. (p.310).

Clearly the above lines remind us of the Pool's tale about angels and nets. As a result of his learning in the previous scene Wise Man mocked the Fool's tale of freeing angels from people's nets. Now Wise Man is netted. He must find a believer "one fish" as a condition to his freedom.

Katherine Worth demonstrates that **The Hour-Glass's** affinity with **Everyman** is very clear "in the appearance of the Angel as messenger of death and the Wise Man's stupefied reaction to

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the news that he has only an hour to live."[14]Wise Man as Everyman goes through a succession of meetings with his companions and family to find a believer. Yeats skillfully depicts the inner conflict of Wise Man and his fear. Hence,Wise Man is seen as a round figure with psychological depth and also social background. He goes through a hopeless process of questioning his family and pupils to find a believer though he knows it is no good for they have been converted. Wise Man's first recourse is to his pupils. While the pupils enter for their lesson they find Teigue in the room and they dance in mockery about him until Wise Man interrupts them. Wise Man begins the lesson by saying: "I have asserted the God and the mother of God to be nothing; but I have lied, both God and the mother of God exist for the truly wise man." (pp.315-14). How-ever, the pupils never admit any belief. It is worth noting that while Wise Man questions his pupils, for dramatic effect the Fool is on stage.[15] The contrast between the Fool and WiseMen conveys the presence of the Fool. Therefore, the importance of the Fool as a character in the play is much greater than the duration of his actual presence on the stage might indicate.

Next Wise Man learns that Bridget, his wife has lost her faith in God because of his teaching. When he asks her "Do you believe in God?", she answer: O, a good wife only believes in what her husband tells her." (p. 317). Each time Wise Man confronts one of those about him the action reaches a climax soon his hope comes to nothing. Between his encounter with his wife and with his children Wise Man soliloquies:

> Only when all our hold on life is troubled, Only in spiritual terror can the truth Come through the broken mind - as thepease burst Out of a broken pease-cod (p. 318)

These lines reflect that Wise Man repudiates his philosophy and reason, He is no longer the self-assured man we face in the beginning of the play.

However, in vain Wise Man goes on searching for a believer. In despair he turns to his children but they have been convinced by his ideas. Thus when he asks his children: "I want to know if you believe' in Heaven, /God or the soul", they repeat his former lessons: "There is nothing we cannot see, nothing we cannot touch." (p. 320).

As the action proceeds his family and companions desert him and he faces a progressive loneliness which is of his creation. Hence Yeats compares his utter loneliness to "a shelled pease" (p. 318).

As the Fools of **On Baile's Strand** and **The Herne's Egg**. attend and accompany the dying hero, Teigue accompanies Wise Man who is faced with death and damnation. Addressing the Fool, Wise Man emphasizes his increasingly desperate loneliness :"I will have no one here when they come in, / I will have no one sitting there-no one!" (p. 321). However the Pool does not give him any relief, but as Desai notices "he needles his superior with witty gibes."[16]

In the scene in question Wise Man shrinks in panic from the sight of the hour-glass which reminds him that he is to die when the sands have run out through the glass. Then Wise Man finds the Fool measuring out time by blowing a dandelion clock:

> Fool. Wait a minute four - five - six - Wise Man. What are you doing that for? Fool. I am blowing the dandelion to find out what hour it is.

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> Wise Man. You have heard everything and that is whyyou'd find what hour it is - you would findthat out. That you may look upon a fleet of devils Dragging my soul away. (p. 321).

The passage quoted above shows that Teigue is neither an ignorant buffoon nor a jester. Nevertheless he makes use of the traditional license of the Fool. Teigue is a cynical character. His cynicism is meant to bring Wise Man to a realization as to whom he must turn for confession of belief in his extremity.

We have to recall that the Angel gives Wise Man only an hour within which to find a believer. All those about him are of no help. The Fool, as Raymond Williams points out, "is the only person whose faith has not been destroyed by Wise Man's rationalism."[17] Actually the Fool is the only one who has escaped the teaching of Wise Man. But in his rational haste Wise Man completely overlooks the Fool. Hence when he asks the Fool: "Do you believe in God and in the soul?" (p. 321) the Fool begins to taunt him with his slowness !

> I thought when you were asking your pupils, Will he ask Teigue the Fool? - yes, he will), he will; no, he will not - yes, he will'. But Teigue, will say nothing. Teigue will say nothing.(p.321).

Obviously the Fool is faithful and conscious but he does not tell what he knows. He appears as a lunatic and continuously asks for pennies. But Wise Man needs not only a believer. He needs a confession of belief and the Fool refuses to confess his belief. Wise Man entreats the Fool to acknowledge his belief and reminds him of his talk about angels:

> Yes. I remember now you spoke of angels. You said but now that you had seen an angel. You are the one I seek, and I am saved. (p. 322).

The Fool refuses to confess his belief. His refusal to admit belief is mysterious. Hence Katharine Worth writes, that "the Fool is the slippery elusive being who exults in the knowledge
he has and will not give."[18] Thus as Wise Man asks him, the Fool once more mimes the action clutching his large bag: "I will not speak, I will not tell you what is in my mind. I will not tell you what is in my bag. You might steal away my thoughts. (p.322).

To evade revealing what he knows,Teigue the cunning Fool leaves Wise Man alone. Consequently wise Man soliloquies:

> The last hope is gone, And now that it's too late I see it al We perish into God and sink away Into reality - the rest is a dream. (p. 322).

These lines show Wise Man's conversion from doubt to faith.
This is the first time he uses the term "dream" as an act of belief. He admits that God is the only reality. However hissudden belief in God is not very convincing. Perhaps it is motivated by fear.

In the last agonizing moment Wise Man recognizes the futility of his quest and he realizes that it is better to submit to the will of God. At this point the Fool comes backready to confess his belief in return for some pennies. ButWise Man silences the Fool crying out:

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> Be silent. May God's will prevail on the
> instant Although His will be my eternal pain. I have no question : It is enough, I know what fixed the station of stars and cloud. And knowing all, I cry That what so God has willed On the instant be fulfilled, Though that be my damnation. (p.323).

This is the last of a series of soliloquies describing his changing feelings. Wise Man's reaction to death is one of utter resignation. He submits himself to destiny no longer caring what happens to his soul. S.B. Bushrui demonstrates that "Yeats subordinates the role of the Fool in this particular situation ... and rais [es] Wise Man to tragic heights and confers upon him the qualities of the Yeatsian tragic hero."[19] Thus no longer Wise Man interviews the Fool and instead of compromising his pride to gain his salvation from the Fool, Wise Man overcome a his own suffering and accepts his fate.

As Wise Man dies the Fool remains on stage assuming the role of a chorus.[20] He observes and mocks. He dupes Wise Mana fool: "you and I, we are the two fools, we know everything, but we will not speak." (p. 323). The Fool shows no human sympathy and plays the part of a cynical chorus. Addressing the dead man he says:

> Wise Man – Wise Man, wake up and I will tell you everything for a penny. It is, poorTeigue the Fool. Why don't you wake up and say, "There is a penny for you, Teigue?' No, no, you will say nothing. (p. 323).

As the Angel re-enters holding a casket the Fool goes on describing the action. It is the Fool who informs us that the soul of Wise Man comes out in shape of a white butterfly from his mouth. Then the Fool and not the Angel catches the escaping soul of Wise Man - the butterfly - and hands it over to the Angel who puts in the golden casket. Again it is the Fool whotells us that Wise Man has won his salvation "he has gone through his pain, and you will open the lid in the Garden of Paradise."(p.324). Yeats in his poem "Another Song of a Fool" describes the scene of Wise Man's death:

> The great purple butterfly, In the prism of my hands, Has a learning in his eye Not a poor fool understands
> Once he lived a schoolmaster With a stark, denying look; A string of scholars went in fear Of his great birch and his book.
> Like the clangour of a bel1, Sweet and harsh, harsh and Sweet That is how he learnt so well To take the roses for his meat.[21]

The Fool invites the audience to considerthe audience to consider the end of Wise Manwho appears in the play as a self-containedcharacter.

As the Angel carries away the soul of Wise Man, the Fool closes the curtain and stands in front of the audience addressing them to apply the moral of what the their lives.

He is gone, he is gone, but come in everybody in the world and look at me.

I hear the wind ablow,
I hear the grass agrow,
And all that I know, I know.

But I will not speak, I will run away. (p.342).

Finally considering the moral of the play, Taylor assumes, that the peculiar weakness of **the Hour-Glass** is its lack of relevance to the modern predicament.[22] But one tends to agree with John Rees Moore who says that "wise Man is the inheritor and erstwhile embodiment of that sceptical rationalism Yeats thought of as bringing ruination on modern man."[23]

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