

Representation of Women in W. B. Yeats' Poetry: A Biographical Study

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Abstract – *The artistic career of W.B. Yeats, one of the main exponents of modern British Poetry came under the powerful spell of a few women of his time, who not only made important contribution to Yeats' poetic development but moulded his personality as well. The present article proposes to be a biographical study of some of these influences upon Yeats, based on a few well-known biographies of the poet, and a few related critical studies. Instead of broadening its perspective into the socio-political frame of the poet's time the paper chooses to confine itself to the ebb and flow of fathomless sorrow and the pinnacle of joy experienced by a hyper-sensitive mind.*

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WOMEN IN W. B. YEATS' POETRY

"Serious Friendship was central to Yeats' existence, especially friendship with women"- writes R.F. Foster, the author of *The Apprentice Mage* (Foster 436), one of the most accepted biographies of the poet, W.B. Yeats. In "Autobiographies" (in the chapter named 'Estrangements') Yeats himself observed, in courses of his reminiscences of Lady Gregory, "Friendship is all the house I have" (Autobiographies, 478). In spite of a proud, indifferent exterior, even a bit dictatorial at times, the sensitive, impressionable soul of the poet sought assured anchorages in the tender female soul. The hankering was fulfilled at times, and at times not, leaving trails of undying remorse.

As well-known to the critics and admirers of Yeats' poetry, the poet's unrequited passion for the "most beautiful woman on the earth", Maud Gonne forms the core of his love poems. This Irish political activist caused deep stirrings in the poet's soul, added a rainbow colouring to the creations of the heart. Maud Gonne, however, is not the only woman influencing the growth of the artist. There were a few more like Lady Gregory, Yeats' fellow-dramatist of the Irish Theatre Movement with her comforting and steady co-operation, Olivia Shakespear, a lover of literature and a novelist herself, living in London, with her unobtrusive yet soothing presence to help grow the poet's reputation, Miss Horniman, the rich English Woman with her peremptorial temper, 'a raving lunatic', as referred to by Lady Gregory, playing in her own possessive way an indispensable, constructive role in the expression of the poet's

dramatic ambition through the gift of a theatre and finally, George- Hyde-Lees, the wife of W.B. Yeats, playing an important role in the later phase of his life, particularly in the formation of his philosophical treatise, "A vision". Within the limited focus of the essay it would not be possible to throw light on all the personalities contributing to the burgeoning of the artistic potential of W.B. Yeats, though all of them were very strong influences. Attention would only be drawn to the "three women" to whom the poet himself had assigned precise places of honour in his poem "Friends" (1914)

"Now must I these three praise

Three women that have wrought

What joy is in my days"

(Jeffares,61)

The three women are- Maud Gonne, Olivia Shakespear and Lady Gregory, each of them having an unique place in the poet's soul.

To start with, Maud Gonne is the most celebrated beauty in Yeats' poetic world. From the second book of verse *The Rose* (1893) to the Last poem (1936-39) Gonne is given mythological and legendary association through the symbolical embodiment of the rose, Helen of Troy, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Pallas Athene and Deirdre. This Anglo-Irish woman of rare glamour and brilliance dazzled the poet at their first meeting on Jan 20, 1889, when she came to meet John Butler Yeats,

the father of W.B. Yeats, in his Dublin residence. The spell of the moment oozes through the letter that Yeats wrote to Eileen Terry at the time, giving vent to his overflowing sense of ecstasy.

"Did I tell you how I admire Miss Gonne, she will make many political converts : If she said that the world was flat or the moon an old caubean tossed up in the sky... people would be proud to be of her party" (quoted in A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats).

Among the political converts of Maud Gonne, it can be stated beyond doubt. The poet himself was one, who for the time being, forgot everything else and followed Maud's political dictates almost blindly. The fervent zeal of the nationalist activist set on fire the imagination of the young poet who threw in his lot with the Irish Nationalist Movement. It shows itself in the protests organized on the occasion of the Jubilee visit of Queen Victoria in 1897 in Dublin and in the lecture tour in England and Scotland to promote the 1898 Wolfe Tone Association and Irish Nationalist celebrations. Yeats observes in "Autobiographies" about Gonne's incredible capacity to enflame the hearts of patriotic Irish men and women.

"There was an element in her beauty that moved minds full of old Gaelic Stories and poems for she looked as if she lived in an ancient civilization where all superiorities whether of the mind or the body were a part of public ceremonial, were in some way the crowd's creation." (Autobiographies, 364)

In the debut production of the Irish Literary theatre in 1902, Yeats, one of the founding leaders and the playwright of the theatre, cast Maud Gonne in the title role of his play "Cathleen Ni Houlihan". The queenly grandeur of Maud Gonne enacting the role of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the idealized image of Mother Ireland, enthralled the audience on the first night. For Yeats, the playwright, it was a dream-come-true performance as observed by Flannery in "The Idea of a Theatre" - - "To Yeats she made Cathleen seem a divine being fallen into our mortal infirmity." (Flannery, 202)

However, there were moments of instinctive repulsion from the political fanaticism of Maud Gonne. The sensitive poet shrank from the extremities of violence that the uneven confrontation of the colonizer and the colonized led to. Gonne had, by this time, condescended to Yeats' enthusiastic proposal to be the vice-president of the Irish Theatre Society. She along with Griffith of United Irish Man group raised zealous nationalist objections to some of the decisions of Irish Dramatic Society, particularly regarding the production of Synge's "In the shadow of the glen" in 1903. Yeats did not hesitate to put aside vehemently all the objections coming from Gonne and remained true to the artist's perceptions. Love, however blind it was, was not allowed to interfere in the business of the theatre movement.

Maud Gonne, however, remained at the centre of Yeats' heart's concern. His lover's self got repeatedly jarred by the indifference of the lady. Though Gonne steadily refused to marry him she kept writing to Yeats and kept the yearning awake in him. The tremendous mental turmoil resulted in continual ill health for Yeats. The poems of 'Wind Among the Reeds' bear testimony to a mind getting lost in an wild sea of depression- "a poetry where one sinks down and down without finding bottom", to quote the language of Richard Ellmann in *The Man and the Mask*.(162)

There was something magnetic about Maud's personality, about her elegant, proud movements, her buoyant convictions that simply would not allow Yeats to turn away from her. The picturesque description of Maud Gonne in a poem "Beautiful Lofty Things" towards the end of Yeats' poetic career is a revelation of this state of mind-

"Maud Gonne at Howth station, waiting a train

Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head

All the Olympians, a thing never known again."

(Jeffares,184)

The thirteen-year-long courtship suffered an unexpected blow in 1903 on the day Yeats got the telegram from Gonne announcing her marriage with John MacBride, moments before he was to go up to the stage to deliver a speech before an eager audience. The effect was devastating. The old enchantment, the heart-wrenching lamentation can be felt too strongly in a beautiful short lyric 'O do not love too long' of the next volume "In the seven Woods" (1904)

"All through the years of our youth

Neither could have known

Their own thought from the others'

We were so much at one.

But O, in a minute she changed-

O! do not love too long

or you will grow out of fashion like an old song." (Jeffares,40)

The sexual wantonness that was noticed in Yeats in 1903 could be interpreted as a kind of escape from the tormenting consciousness. The desires that had been suppressed so long asserted themselves with unusual force. The change in his outlook found candid expressions in the sexual

themes of plays like "The shadowy Water", "On Baile's Strand" and "The king's Threshold". Richard Ellmann has expressed Yeats' state of mind at the time in a beautiful language: "Asceticism has been his sacrifice to Maud Gonne, she had rejected it, so he thought he would put on wantonness instead." (Ellmann, 182)

In 1909, there was a kind of reconciliation with Maud Gonne who had, in the meantime, separated from the husband. Back in the 1890s, Gonne had joined hands with Yeats in his attempt to foster a set of occult rituals and together they devised twelve Irish initiation rituals together. Now Gonne wanted Yeats to join her mystical invocations of Mother Ireland. She agreed to be united with Yeats in a bond of spiritual marriage, nothing more, nothing less. Yeats' diary notes at the time captured his sense of bewilderment,

"What end will it have- I fear for her and for myself- she has all myself- I was never more deeply in love, but my desires, always strong, must go elsewhere if I would escape their poison" (Foster, 407)

In 1970, in a mood of nostalgic celebration, Yeats paid tribute to Gonne's great beauty in three short lyrics of the volume called 'The Green Helmet and other poems', 'Woods', 'A Woman Homer Sang', 'No Second Troy'. As A. Norman Jeffares comments, "Maud is not to be blamed, Yeats feels, for she is, like Helen, beyond praise or comment".

"What could have made her peaceful with a mind

That nobleness made simple as a fire.

Why what could she have done, being what she is / Was there another Troy for her to burn?" (Jeffares, 44)

A haunting sense of total nullity of achievement finds an outlet in the poem 'Friends' mentioned before.

"And what of her that took

All till my youth was gone

With scarce a pitying look?" (61)

The rage evaporates soon as the poet is flooded with an overwhelming sense of sweetness-

"While up from my heart's root

So great a sweetness flows

I shake from head to foot." (61)

It was difficult for Yeats to forget Maud Gonne. Once more, he would try to melt the ice. After the death of John MacBride in 1916, Yeats went to Gonne in

Paris and proposed to her on condition that she gave up politics. Gonne refused, and the dejected lover sought an escape route in another infatuation with Iseult Gonne, Maud's daughter. Refused again, Yeats finally turned to George-Hyde-Lees, proposed to her, and on being accepted, married her.

Maud Gonne could never give Yeats what he had hoped for and the lure for the unattainable kept the poet restive and piquant. It could be the fact that Yeats failed to detect in the beginning the hard mettle inside the dogmatic, opinionated, political self of Gonne. The realization came later and Yeats confided this to Synge in a letter.

"Women, because the main event of their lives has been a giving themselves and giving birth, give all to an opinion as if it were a terrible stone doll" (qtd. in "A Preface to Yeats", 123)

The stone image seems to be the abiding impression of Maud Gonne left in the poet who remembers her once again in "A Man Young and Old".

"--- I thought her body bore

A heart of flesh and blood

But since I laid a hand there on and found a heart of stone...

I have attempted many things and not a thing is done." (Jeffares, 133)

The lines echoed the feelings expressed by the poet in "Autobiographies" where Yeats had summed up the history of his soul's entanglement with Gonne through these words. ... "My devotion might as well have been offered to an image in a Milliner's windows, or to a statue in a museum".

(Autobiographies, 399)

Finally, the observations of Sean O'Casey, a younger Irish Dramatist who met Maud Gonne in her sixties in 1926 reveal an artist's instinctive understanding of the truth underlying the relationship.

"She never seemed to have understood Yeats the poet. Indeed she could not, having little of the poet in herself, so that she never felt the lure of melody"

(Qtd in "A preface to Yeats")

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Olivia Shakespear is the least publicly celebrated figure in Yeats' poetry and in his Autobiographies. However, for a span of forty years, she remained the confidante of Yeats, with whom he could discuss literature and ideas. Unfortunately, many of

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Yeats' letter written to Olivia, which she had kept for years were destroyed by Yeats when Ezra Pound, Olivia's son-in-law, sent them back to the poet after Olivia's death. Allan Wade, the editor of Yeats' letters has commented,

"By this accident we have probably lost much valuable information. To Mrs. Shakespear he was able to write of all his interests without restraint, details about his work, his health, his other friends, his political ideas, his occult experiences and beliefs, small domestic happenings, jokes and gossip all find their place in the letters addressed to her, letters which are, perhaps, the most vivid and varied in the whole collection."

"I write to you", he says, as to my own past (Wade, 13) Olivia, the young wife of an aged solicitor of London, was the cousin of Lionel Johnson who had introduced Olivia to Yeats in 1894.

Depressed by the steady refusal of Maud Gonne to marry him Yeats found solace in the comforting company of Olivia whom he used to address as Diana Vernon. The strong element of sensuality found in the poems written around her as "He bids his beloved be at peace" and "The Travail of passion" point to the physicality in their relationship, though the feeling of grossness is conspicuously absent.

"Beloved, let your eyes half close and your heart beat Over my heart, and your hair fall over my breast Drowning love's lonely hour in deep twilight of rest." (Jeffares,29)

As Richard Ellmann has pointed out in the "Man and the Mask".

"He began to court her (Diana Vernon) in 1895 while he was till in love with Maud Gonne, and he hoped to shelter himself from pursuing cares and responsibilities and from his helpless passions in her arms. The style was suitably escapist."

(Ellmann,150)

Whatever it is, Olivia's tender company touched the softest chord in the otherwise aggressive personality of the poet as revealed through their letters, When Olivia Shakespeare died three and a half month before Yeats own death, Yeats wrote in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley:

"Olivia Shakespear had died suddenly. For more than forty years she has been the center of my life in London. For the moment I cannot bear the thought of London.

I shall find her memory everywhere." (Wade, 916)

In the chapter called "Estrangement" of "Autobiographies" mentioned in the very beginning of the present essay Yeats acknowledged his debt to Lady Gregory:

"She has been to me mother, friend, sister and brother.

I cannot realize the world without her-- she brought to my wavering thoughts steadfast nobility."("Autobiographies",478)

For Yeats Lady Gregory was an image of aristocratic courtesy, nourished in the time-honoured tradition of a great house. There was a natural elegance and excellence in whatever she did-- in her care for the big old household at Coole which proved a haven for Yeats and other Irish writers with its grand hospitality, in her alert attention to her tenants, in her ungrudging labour towards the day-to-day business of the Abbey Theatre. In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" Yeats pays her tribute to the excellent blend of pride and humility in Lady Gregory.

"And I am in despair that time may bring

Approved patterns of women or of men

But not that self-same excellence again."

(Jeffares,191)

The words of Yeats got echoed in the words of Sean O' Casey- a young Irish dramatist who met Lady Gregory in the early 1930, who was then over seventy.

"She looked like an old, elegant nun of a new order, a blend of lord Jesus Christ and of puck, an order that Ireland had never known before, and wasn't likely to know again for a long time to come."

(Qtd in 'A Preface to Yeats', 127)

Yeats first met Lady Gregory in 1896 when he was staying with Edward Martyn at Tillyra Castle, Galway and invited him to spend a few days at Coole. She was then aged 44, Yeats 31. Next years, she took a flat at Queen Anne's Mansions Westminster, when Yeats called on her and discussed his plans for starting an Irish Theatre. The distraught state of affairs in which Yeats was passing his days at the time aroused her alarm and Lady Gregory grew rather protective towards the young poet. For twenty summers, from 1897 until Yeats rebuilt his tower at Ballylee, Yeats spent his relaxed, indolent but very fruitful hours at Coole Park, the estate of the

Gregory's. His health made remarkable improvement in Lady Gregory's restorative custody. To divert his mind from the tormenting thoughts Gregory inculcated in Yeats an interest in the common people, in their folk rituals, and their age old beliefs and above all, in the myths and stories orally transmitted among them. Her tender maternal care followed Yeats even when he was in London on official business.

"How extraordinarily good you are- wine and all manner of biscuits and bottled fruit have just come. Nobody has ever shown me such kindness. Everybody tells how well I am looking, and I am better than I have been for years, in truth. The days at Coole passed like a dream, a dream of peace." (Wade,516)

The two poems written around the Coole Park — "Coole Park 1929" and "Coole Park and Ballylee 1931" reflect the poet's sincere regards for the ancient house of Lady Gregory and the traditional values embedded in it, 'A dance - like glory that those walls begot "

'The New Faces ', a poem written at the news of Lady Gregory' s illness is more personal in its tone, voicing the poet's agony at the thought of his impending estrangement from a dear friend and the loss of a noble refuge

"If you, that have grown old, were the first dead

Neither Catalpa tree nor scented lime

Should hear my living feet, nor would I tread

Where we wrought that shall break the teeth of time."

However, she was not merely a patron to Yeats, she was a co-fighter with Yeats in their struggle to secure a respected platform for the Irish Nationalist Theatre Movement. Together they planned and organized the theatre societies which eventually became the Abbey Theatre they made devoted and untiring effort to make the dream of a National Theatre for Ireland come true through the establishment of the Abbey Theatre in Dec 1904. As one of the directors of the theatre along with Yeats she worked for Abbey from 1904-1929 and continued to support the theatre until her death in 1932. In his Nobel acceptance speech (A lecture delivered to the Royal Academy of Sweden : Autobiographies, 559) Yeats acknowledged the immense contribution of many known and unknown persons to the Irish Dramatic movement. Among the known persons, he gratefully remembered the services rendered by Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge:

"I have said enough to make you understand why, when I received from the hands of your king the great honour your Academy has conferred upon me, I felt that a young man's ghost should have stood

upon one side of me and at the other a living woman sinking into the infirmity of age."

("Autobiographies", 571)

In spite of the controversies that are raised at times regarding the authorship of the plays in which Yeats and Lady Gregory have collaborated, the two friends had deep respect for each others' work. Lady Gregory would never think of writing plays if Yeats had not involved her into that business by way of asking her suggestion for this or that Lady Gregory, in her turn, held the poetic plays of Yeats in high esteem and she always took care that the poetic plays of Yeats had a great production. In *Our Irish Theatre* Lady Gregory comments:

"The plays that I have cared for most although and for love of which I took up this work are those verse ones by Mr. Yeats, "The Countess Cathleen", with which we began", "The Shadowy Water" and "The King's Threshold" and the rest."

("Our Irish Theatre", 78)

It was this mutual understanding, the spirit of self-less devotion to the work of the fellow dramatist that sustained the decades long friendship between the two great personalities.

John Untrecker has summed up beautifully the contribution of the three women to the flowering of Yeats' poetic genius: "Maud Gonne offered Yeats subject matter for poetry- the interesting life he had hoped for and Olivia Shakespear offered him repose. But Augusta Gregory gave him time and place for work".(Qtd in "A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats",23). In each case, the commitments of friendship inspired a set of personal poems the bulk of which, as we have pointed out earlier, are attributed to Maud Gonne.

If not anything they helped create the poet that he was, a unique blend of diverse, often contradictory feelings which can be attributed to the influences of the great women of the time having diverse sympathies. The richness of his poetry, inherently dramatic, owes not the least, to these influences.

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