

Yeats's Ideals: Women Old and Young

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William Butler Yeats ranks among the most widely admired and intensively studied poets of the 20th century. This paper intends to explore the women who have exerted the most critical influences upon Yeats, namely Gonne, Lady Gregory, and Georgie Hyde-Lees. Even in Yeats's poetry involved with symbolism, it is worth noting that his employment of symbols has used these women as the archetypes, and that the historical context rendered Yeats's representations of them in his poetry all the more interesting.

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I. Introduction

William Butler Yeats is remarked as one of the greatest English poets in the 20th century. His literary career can be mainly divided into three stages, each of which has its own characteristic. In the first period, natural imagery and folklore themes occupy an important place. The second period is characterized by Yeats's Irish nationalism and his role as a national figure. In the last period, Yeats was more metaphysical, and esoteric elements inform his poetry; he was searching for a language of symbols.

Throughout these periods, women around him have played an important role in his poetry. In fact, "Yeats loved, liked, collaborated with, and respected women—most of the time. He encouraged their intellectual and creative work, assumed their professional competence, chose them as allies. His best friends were all women" (Cullingford, 1996, p. 9). This paper intends to explore the women who influenced Yeats most and their images in Yeats's works: Maude Gonne, for whom Yeats had a lasting love, Lady Gregory, a great friend and generous patron, and Georgie Hyde-Lees, who brought domestic stability to Yeats's life. It's worth noting that, even in his poetry with symbolism, his employment of symbols has these women as the archetypes, and that the historical context made Yeats's representations of women all the more interesting.

II. Maud Gonne—Ireland's Joan of Arc

It is true to say that Maud Gonne was the woman that has exerted crucial influences upon Yeats. At the age of 24, Yeats met this woman, an actress at that time and a leader of the Irish Independence Movement. In his *Memoirs*, Yeats wrote "I had never thought to see in a living woman so great beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past." Yeats's affection for her and their friendship were life-long. Even though Maud Gonne refused his proposals, Yeats claimed in his *Memoirs* that "Perhaps I should never marry in

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church, but I would love one woman all my life,” and this woman was Maud Gonne. Despite her refusals of Yeats's love, her images are projected in many of his poems. Yeats took her as the incarnation of beauty. In “No Second Troy,” Maud Gonne is compared to Helen of Troy, and this woman is the ideal one for him:

Why should I blame her that she filled my days
 With misery, or that she would of late
 Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
 Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
 Had they but courage equal to desire?
 What could have made her peaceful with a mind
 That nobleness made simple as fire,
 With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
 That is not natural in an age like this,
 Being high and solitary and most stern?
 Why, what could she have done being what she is?
 Was there anther Troy for her to burn? (“No Second Troy”)

Yeats sees in her a heroine that “transgresses all the stereotypes of femininity: she is violent, courageous, noble, fiery, solitary, and stern; her beauty is a weapon—a ‘tightened bow’—rather than a lure” (Brown, 2001, p. 184).

It is important to take Maud Gonne's identity—a leader of the Irish Independence Movement—into consideration about Yeats's poems regarding her. Largely because of the influences from Maud Gonne, Yeats himself became involved with Irish nationalism and joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood. To Yeats, Maud Gonne is the Ireland's Joan of Arc, and her soul is a “pilgrim soul:”

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
 And loved your beauty with love false or true;
 But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
 And loved the sorrows of your changing face. (“When You Are Old,” lines 5-8)

In this poem, Yeats expresses his everlasting love for her and his love focused more on her soul rather than her physical beauty, and this soul is her soul for the Irish nationalism. One play by Yeats can serve as an example: *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. In Irish mythology, Cathleen ni Houlihan is usually represented as a woman who is a mythical symbol and emblem of Irish nationalism. Because of the influences from Maud Gonne, Yeats was involved with the Irish nationalism and wrote this play. Cathleen ni Houlihan is depicted as an old woman who needs the help from Irish men willing to fight and to free Ireland from British colonization. In fact, the heroine in the play was modeled after Maud Gonne, and she played the role of the heroine when the play was first produced at the Abbey Theatre. Even in his “A Prayer for my Daughter,” Yeats depicted her as “the loveliest woman born / Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn.”

After the failure of the Easter Rising, many leaders fighting for Irish nationalism were executed and Maud Gonne escaped death. Yeats's “Easter 1916” was a memorial of this event—“a terrible beauty is born.” Therefore, it can be stated that Maud Gonne together with her “pilgrim soul” is Ireland's Joan of Arc to Yeats.

III. Lady Gregory—A Patron for Both Yeats and Ireland

Lady Gregory, one of the most important female writers in the Irish literature, became a lifelong friend and also a patron to Yeats when they met in 1896. She sponsored Yeats for many of his works, and her home at Coole

Park was a center for the Irish literary revival. During Yeats's stay at Lady Gregory's home, he was greatly inspired, and the Coole Park was taken into Yeats's system of symbols. He wrote several poems about or set in the house and grounds: "The Wild Swans at Coole," "I walked among the seven woods of Coole," "In the Seven Woods," "Coole Park, 1929" and "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931." Some criticized Yeats of being "ceaselessly victimized by Lady Gregory on the score of your gratitude for her kindness" (Fay, 1958, p. 109), but Lady Gregory's help for Yeats's works could not be denied. In many of Yeats's poems, her images are used throughout as the stereotype. As James L. Pethica points out, Yeats's representation of Lady Gregory at Coole parallels Castiglione's Duchess Montefeltro at Urbino" (Pethica, 2000, p. 472). Castiglione depicted the Duchess as a mediator in the debates of her courtiers, and as an emblem of excellence and dignity. Yeats employed this model "in which a dominant personality and respected woman is the organising principal" (Pethica, 2000, p. 472). And to Yeats, Lady Gregory was this woman of dignity, as can be seen from "Coole Park, 1929":

I mediate upon an aged woman and her house,
A sycamore and lime tree lost in night
Although that western cloud is luminous,
Great works constructed there in nature's spite
For scholars and for poets after us,
Thoughts long knitted into a single thought,
A dance-like glory that those walls begot. ("Coole Park, 1929", lines 1-8)

This works show that Yeats praised Lady Gregory for her achievements by figuring her presence in the poem.

What's more interesting was their collaborations of many literary works, and the establishment of the Abbey Theatre. It was a place for reinventing Irish culture and identity; it was later recognized as the Irish national theatre. Lady Gregory and Yeats shared a desire to work for the country's good; besides, Lady Gregory had a certain impact upon Yeats's politics. As he benefited from Lady Gregory's generosity and witnessed her devotion to the national theatre, Yeats was convinced that even the landed class in Ireland was an essential role in a social order. And this view found its way into many of his poems. Due to the great achievements by Lady Gregory, Yeats himself commented in his *Autobiographies* that "If that influence were lacking, Ireland would be greatly impoverished" (Yeats, 1955, p. 381), and it is safe to state that, without Lady Gregory, not only Ireland but also Yeats himself would have been greatly impoverished.

IV. Georgie Hyde-Lees—The Spirit Communicator

After Maud Gonne's many refusals of his proposals, Yeats finally married Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1916, whom Yeats met through occult circles. As Yeats and Georgie were both interested in the occultism and engaged in the automatic writing, this was usually seen as an occult marriage. It's important to note that this marriage brought stability to Yeats's life, as Richard Ellmann insightfully observes,

Had Yeats died instead of marrying in 1917, he would have been remembered as a remarkable minor poet who achieved a diction more powerful than that of his contemporaries but who, except in a handful of poems, did not have much to say with it. Had he not married but lived on in bachelorhood, he would probably have continued his indefatigable attendance at spiritualist séances and made minor elaborations in his rather confusing theories of the mask and of life after death. (Ellmann, 1979, p. 220)

But his marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees opened up a vast frontier of possibility before him, and “released his energies like a spring” (Ellmann, 1979, p. 221). His automatic writing led his poetry in a new direction, bringing together the separate remnants of his life and thoughts. His poetry focused “more sharply the experiences of the past” (Henn, 1950, p. 63).

According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, automatic writing refers to the “writing produced involuntarily when the subject’s attention is ostensibly directed elsewhere. The phenomenon may occur when the subject is in an alert waking state or in a hypnotic trance, usually during a séance.”¹ As Georgie herself was interested in the occultism and when Yeats met her for the first time, Yeats asked her for the advice about the authenticity of the information in the automatic writings. After their marriage, Yeats believed that she was a spiritually “receptive” person and took her as a medium for the automatic writings. All these experiences through the automatic writings brought changes to Yeats’s life and his works. He was more creative than before when he suffered from the refusals of Maud Gonne. With this marriage came a revival of his artistic creativity. Female images in poems composed during this period assume a dimension rather different from those in his early poems: many female images were symbolized and were endowed with multiple meanings. In his “Leda and the Swan,” the swan which is Zeus in disguise ravishes Leda who symbolizes the female images that are too weak to rebel. The most important work during the late period of Yeats is *A Vision*, a book filled with automatic writings. Georgie was the medium for Yeats, through whom Yeats received ideas. The famous images “gyres” in Yeats’s late poetry was the information Yeats obtained through the automatic writings. Later, the gyres found their way into numerous poems, such as “The Second Coming” and “Sailing to Byzantium.” Though few images of Georgie could be found in his poems, it was through the spirit communication of Georgie that Yeats received and conceived new ideas about the poetical theories and the world. In this sense, Richard Ellmann’s remark seems no less pertinent: “He had always considered himself lucky, and perhaps best of his good fortune was to find himself married not only to an exceptionally intelligent and sympathetic woman, but to the sibyl herself” (Ellmann, 1979, p. 222).

V. Conclusion

Both the friendship and love of women were indispensable elements to Yeats’s works, and he owed his achievement as a world famous to those women friends around him. In Yeats’s poetry, these three women were usually depicted as the ideal images—Maud Gonne as Ireland’s Joan of Arc, Lady Gregory as the patron for his country, and Georgie Hyde-Lees as the “medium” or the spirit communicator from he conceived new ideas and composed his poetry. They are often used as the stereotypes for the female images in his poetry. As “No Second Troy” demonstrates Yeats’s employment of Maud Gonne as the one that transgressed traditional role of women, thus creating a tension between his ideals and the traditional role of women. And some other poems show Yeats inner struggle between traditional his view and traditional gender views. The analyses of these three women intend to provide an approach for further research into Yeats and the “woman questions” in his literary works.

¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. Academic Version. Dec. 5th, 2023. <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9011370>.

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