

W. b. yeats: a life

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In Dublin, WB Yeats met John O' Leary for the first time, a former Fenian who interested him in Nationalism and translations of Irish writing into English, and by doing so, gave Yeats' fresh and exciting subject matter for his poetry, and a new purpose. This was also the year he met Maud Gonne, tall and beautiful, a well-to-do revolutionary with whom he fell in love. Penniless, he could only offer her his poetic devotion. From the moment he met her, WB Yeats' life was profoundly affected by her famed beauty and unanswered devotion to Irish Nationalism. Born during an age when women were expected to be nothing more than window-dressing for their husbands, when women were expected to leave the rough and tumble world of politics to men, Maud Gonne rose above that prejudice.

Maud Gonne did not return Yeats' passion. She accepted him with delight as a friend, but would not respond to any lovemaking. In many of Yeats' earlier poems we can see his enchantment with Maud Gonne. In the "Rose Collection" the rose had several symbolic meanings; as a title it probably means the "eternal rose of Beauty and peace". It was also used in the ordinary sense of a rose in love poetry and Yeats knew Irish poets had used it to symbolise Ireland. According to York notes the rose symbolised spiritual beauty it symbolised Maud Gonne.

"The White Birds", is a Yeats poem about love and envisions a love affair with Maud Gonne;

"Where time would surely forget us,

And sorrow come near us no more;

Soon far from the rose and the lilly and

Fret of the flames would we be,

Where we only white birds, my beloved,

Buoyed out on the foam of the sea! ii

In "When You Are Old", he is anticipating that he would not be happy in love. It also shows that WB Yeats believed that Maud Gonne would regret not being with him. Yeats' proposed marriage a number of times, but she had no use for Yeats' proposals. She was his unrequited love. Each time she turned him down by saying "No Willie the world would not thank me for marrying you" iii

While he was in love with Maud Gonne he shared her nationalistic aims and she exerted a strong influence on his early poetry. But his love for Maud Gonne made him react to politics more emotionally and that sometimes meant that his reactions were not born out of reason but out of love for Maud Gonne. She continued to be the catalyst for the finest love poetry Yeats' would create.

Yeats labelled himself a socialist, one who despised the middle classes, and his ideal Ireland was divided between a Protestantism of fine artistic tastes and a devout Catholic peasantry, full of instinctive wisdom and preserving a living folklore. The love of Yeats' life, Gonne would keep his mystic, otherworldly figure grounded in the real world, a world that love and heart break would not allow him to escape.

So Yeats entered the lists of Irish nationalist politics in the 1890s as a kind of courtly lover, anxious to prove his worth before a very nationalistic woman's eye. Since he found her unresponsive, after a period his emotions had cooled and then revived. He developed a concept of personal transformation through the agency of failure. He must try to change Ireland or to win his mistresses' favour, and fail, and in failure find apotheosis.

Yeats may also have joined the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood, which traced its origins to the Fenian Brotherhood, the Fenian Brotherhood that had risen in futile rebellion in 1867. He certainly recognised that his literary work contributed generally to the cause of Irish separatism for which the secret, sworn Association stood. Maud Gonne saw Yeats "as a political weapon" in to be used in the great battle, she was only interested in the element in his poetry which was dedicated to Ireland, and had she gotten her way he would have become a writer of versified nationalist propaganda, a sort of fin de siècle Thomas Davis. Her sole purpose in life was concentrated in the attainment of an Irish Nation.

It was Yeats that let Maud Gonne use him as her slave but Yeats was not in favour of violence, however, Maud Gonne made a cult of violence into which she swept him culminating in the Jubilee Riots of 1897 in Dublin. The poem "he wishes for the clothes of heaven" shows how Yeats "dreams" for Ireland, and Maud Gonne's approach of using force, therefore these two different contradicting thoughts could have been the reason for his initial disenchantment. Another poem, which supports this idea, is "Words"

"I had this thought a while ago.

My darling cannot understand.

She doesn't understand him, he doesn't want violence,

Their politics is going in different directions. v

These are varied and transitional; they reveal the poets greater readiness to write about public matters; and they record how his romantic poetry and the hopes it conveyed inspired by and written to Maud Gonne had foundered on her marriage to John Mac Bride in 1903. There is a static quality about the work of this volume *The Green Helmet and Other Poems*, But one that is regretful and poignant. The poetry is being stripped of decoration.

The poem " Upon a house shaken by the land agitation" deals with the effect of the settlement of the Irish land question in the late 19th and early 20th Century, by a series of Acts which culminating in the Wyndham Land Act of 1903 and the Ashbourne Act of 1909. In this poem Yeats reflects upon the affect of a reduction of rents made by the courts upon the Gregory's Coole Park. The Gregory's life is based upon the estate.

The romantic wistfulness, the dreamy, decorative quality of much of his early verse now gave way to a manner at once more terse, astringent and masculine.

The poem " No Second Troy" tells us that after Maud Gonne's marriage and his struggles in the Abbey theatre - Yeats was bitter and distressed, however his verse took on a new strength, no longer the vague twilight suggestions of previous volumes.

In the poem "September 1913" from Responsibilities, Yeats looked about him at the country he had served with such devotion and found nothing but dissolution, seeing with sudden bitter clarity the littleness, the greyness, the meanness, the self-glorification, the prudish savagery and false piety gathering in which he had been involved under the influence of Maud Gonne. The love he had for her and his powerful influence, she used to encourage people in her cause. He came to see how political opinions destroy a woman.

To conclude, Yeats unrequited love for Maud Gonne had made him increasingly unhappy. During the 1890's he had become disenchanted with the Irish nationalists and with the revolutionaries. In 1903 Maud Gonne's marriage put an end to his hopes that one day she would marry him. The love poetry he continued to write still recorded his love for her, but it had become a love which no future. The old love had been replaced by realism, by knowledge of how she had never really understood him or his aims.