

Figuring the 'her' of w. b. yeats' "her praise"



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One of the most sensational aspects of W. B. Yeats' life is his unsuccessful romancing of Maud Gonne. It is widely acknowledged that she served as muse and inspiration for many of Yeats' poems, and 'Her Praise' seems to be an example of such work. This poem, however, is slightly misleading because Yeats never identifies 'Her,' but rather focuses intensely on the speaker's own pride and excitement. Through analysis of Yeats' use of analogy, repetition, setting, and verb tense, it is evident that 'Her' is indeed Maud Gonne, and the speaker is Yeats himself. Therefore, this work is a celebration of Maud Gonne and her work as an activist in particular.

Noticeably absent in the poem is any description of 'Her' or an explanation as to why she is deserving of the speaker's praise. Clearly, this is not the traditional ode or sonnet where the object of affection is illustrated in precise detail. The speaker instead continues with a description of his own pride in Her as he walks through the house, likening it to that of a man with a recently published book or a young girl wearing a new dress (Yeats ll. 3-4). This theme of possession is reinforced by the poem's title - 'Her Praise' - which seems to suggest that the unnamed female actually owns praise as a tangible object. These two instances, coupled with the lack of a description, lead the reader to infer that the speaker is not an ardent admirer of her beauty and character but rather of her achievements or significant work. Though she may indeed be beautiful, those features do not carry the same weight as her actions in the speaker's eyes. However, the speaker is dismayed to find that others within the house do not hold Her in such high regard despite his efforts to shepherd the topic of conversation 'Until her praise should be the uppermost theme' (l. 6).

Unsatisfied with the less than enthusiastic response, the speaker decides to find other like-minded individuals elsewhere. Here Yeats repeats the first line as the tenth line, thereby separating the single stanza of eighteen lines into two sections of nine lines. The reiteration of this particular line demonstrates the speaker's desire and determination to hear only Her praised. Along with the repetition, the separation marks a physical shift in the poem's setting. The beginning nine lines are confined to the home and to those found within, none of whom offer any fulfilment to the speaker. Following the shift, the remaining lines are imagined in an outdoor setting where the speaker plans to walk until he specifically comes across a beggar (ll. 12-13). In lines ten through eighteen Yeats engages another shift, this time in the poem itself as he makes a change in verb tense.

The first half is predominantly written in the past tense: 'published' (l. 3), 'dressed' (l. 4), 'turned' (l. 5), and 'spoke' (l. 7). The second half, however, transitions to the future tense as the speaker declares he 'will talk no more' of anything besides Her with this beggar who 'will know her name / And be well pleased remembering it' (ll. 15-16). Such an expectation is interesting because the speaker's familiarity with Her would also be assumed of others within his social circle; however, it is obvious from the first section of the poem that this is not the case. Yet the speaker is absolutely certain that a single, chance beggar will harbor that familiarity and interest. With the revelation that the speaker is praising her deeds rather than Her, his certainty implies that her work directly and positively affected the poor without leaving much of an impression on the more fortunate.

Although the speaker does not explicitly name Her, there are several clues to her identity: his praise for her actions, the distinction between the inside and the outside of the home, the contrast between the kinds of people he finds in both areas, and each group's sentiments for Her. All of these can be read as references to Maud Gonne, and the speaker can be assumed as Yeats himself. The choice to center the poem around the house itself, as well as Yeats' assertion that a beggar will know Her, calls to mind Gonne's involvement with The Land War in the late 1800s. The evictions won her over to the Irish cause, which she continued to advocate for until her death.

Works Cited

Yeats, W. B. ' Her Praise.' Selected Poems, ed. Timothy Webb, Penguin Books, 2000. p. 98.