

## Love Structuring Yeats's Artistic Creation – from Love to Poetry

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### Abstract:

Yeats's lifelong doctrine thoroughly described in *A Vision* is based on the idea that history comes in cycles and patterns. However, with Yeats, this idea of repetitive patterns crosses the boundaries of history and reflects itself in the artist's poetic creation. Yeats's poetic career can be divided into three main stages that also coincide with the evolution of any man: youth and its innocence, maturity and the struggle that comes with it, and the serenity and acceptance of old age. Yet love has always been an important coordinate in the poet's life and Yeats's love life has always been a subject of intense discussions, mostly because of his unrequited love for Maud Gonne, but also because of his fleeting love affairs with various other women, which did not end even when he married Georgie. The present paper intends to explore Yeats's love affairs with the aim of showing the way in which love influenced the poet's creation in that they put an imprint on his poems and to demonstrate that a poet's artistic oeuvre can only be assessed in the context of his personal life with everything it encompasses.

**Keywords:** love, poetry, history, artistic creation, identity

Brenda Maddox, in her *Introduction* (Maddox, xi) to *Yeats's Ghosts*, notes that when asking the writer Sean O'Faolain what Yeats's life had been like, he answered that there was no Yeats and that he had watched him inventing himself. Then Maddox herself puts it that the multitude of Yeats's selves made difficult capturing him between the covers of a book. Brenda Maddox's vision on W. B. Yeats's life is that of a struggle of a great poet in trying to understand “where the images that threatened to master him came from and to ensure that they kept coming” (Maddox, xvi). Moreover the reader has to regard the poet beyond his humanely flaws: “vanity, snobbery, intellectual sloppiness and flirtatiousness coexisting with loyalty to family, friends and country, generosity to young writers.”

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On the other hand, it is important to consider what Andrew Motion (qtd in Maddox, xvi) says in his *Introduction* to Keats: that it is useful for scholars to reconsider the great writers' lives at regular intervals because their stories offer new standpoints and new perspectives to each generation. And this is precisely what we intend to do in the present paper: examine Yeats's love life through the eyes of critics in order to outline the influence of the poet's lovers on his poetic oeuvre.

As a student of Yeats International Summer School, July-August 2008, I attended, among other lectures, Joseph M. Hassett's lecture, *Yeats's Muses*, which later on became his book *W. B. Yeats and the Muses*. In his lecture Hassett asserts that Yeats chose the role of lover, that love helps him preserve his creativity and that he completes himself by loving; that he was at the same time a daemon and a lover; that truth is intense though sexual and intellectual completion. In his *Introduction* he informs his readers that Yeats's relationships with "nine exceptional women profoundly influenced his poetry" (Hassett, 1). Yeats believed in the Muses as a source of inspiration and the departure point for his belief was his predisposition to the Greek notion that poetry was inspired by the Muses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, goddess of memory. Hassett notes that Yeats's concept of muse was formed by "the Gnostic belief in a divine feminine Wisdom symbolized by the moon and the courtly love tradition in which erotic attraction to an idealized woman inspires the poet to create beautiful lyrics" (Hassett, 1). Thus, Yeats, during his life, sought the basic emotion which was to enable him the creation of immortal poems: "he would construct his poetry emotion recollected in tranquillity, but he would look to his experience as a lover rather than to nature, as primary source of emotion" (Hassett, 2). Olivia Shakespear, Florence Farr, Maud Gonne, Dorothy Wellesley and Edith Shackleton Heald, to name some, contributed to Yeats's completion as a master of poetry.

Yeats's love life has always been a subject of intense discussions, mostly because of his unrequited love for Maud Gonne, but also because of his ephemeral love affairs with various other women, which did not end even when he married Georgie. Brenda Maddox [3] tells us that Yeats fell in love easily, but his feelings remained unrequited many times. Of course, he had many affairs based on sexual intimacy, but real emotions from his side were not always part of the equation.

The first woman Yeats fell in love with was Laura Armstrong, a distant cousin whom he met when he was seventeen years old and for whom he wrote some of his earliest poems

and his first play. Of course, Laura did not respond to his feelings, for when he met her, she was already engaged, and besides, the daughter of an army man could not have set her eyes on a young man with aspirations to become a poet. Fortunately, his feelings for her passed quite rapidly, for when he met Maud Gonne he instantly fell in love with her.

Maud Gonne dominated Yeats's love life for almost three decades, but she never responded to his feelings. She was a passionate nationalist who dedicated her life to a cause and to Ireland, therefore there was no space for love in her life (or at least, not for Yeats). She remained his friend for a long time, but between them there was nothing more than a spiritual union and, apparently, one night of passion. He followed her lead many times and he became involved in many political activities because of her, but that did not make her love him. He proposed to her many times, and he was rejected every single time, and yet, his feelings for her did not fade away. She had the ability to make him experience a storm of emotions, and as a result, some of his finest love poems were born.

The next in line in Yeats's love life was Olivia Shakespear with whom he had his first love affair while she was still caught up in an unhappy marriage. After her divorce they had a one year relationship that ended because Olivia realised Yeats could not get over his feelings for Maud. This idea is sustained by a poem Yeats wrote after the two separated, "The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love," where we can see that Yeats had put all his hopes in his relationship with Olivia, and yet, his true feelings stopped him from completely dedicating himself to her:

"Pale brows, still hands and dim hair,  
I had a beautiful friend  
And dreamed that the old despair  
Would end in love in the end:  
She looked in my heart one day  
And saw your image was there;  
She has gone weeping away." (Yeats, 68)

Nevertheless, Olivia's role in Yeats's life was tremendous. She was the one "who initiates the poet into the rites of maturity and frees him from the prison of youth and releases his creative drive" (Haynes, 567). She was his muse, a sort of priestess of the White Goddess

who holds inside her the keys of destruction and creation, who can offer him the peace he needs and restore his confidence, but who cannot erase his feelings for another woman. His early love poems have her as central figure, but most of the times they do not focus on the poet's feelings for her, but rather on her physical features that serve as a sort of inspirational drive and as metaphors of perfection and beauty: "You need but lift a pearl – pale hand / And bind up your long hair and sigh / And all men's hearts must burn and beat."

Yeats saw in Olivia the embodiment of both worldliness and spirituality. The poems he wrote for her or with her in mind are vivid and complex, and the choice of words was so careful that one might get the impression that they are meant to bring back a long forgotten beauty. However, a single word from Maud was enough for him to give up his harmonious life and return to the eternal pursuit of the unattainable. She remained an important part of his life and he praised her in his poems for being such a devoted friend and bringing him so much joy:

"Now must I these three praise  
 Three women that have wrought  
 What joy is in my days:  
 [...] one because her hand  
 Had strength that could unbind  
 What none can understand,  
 What none can have and thrive,  
 Youth's dreamy load, till she  
 So changed me that I live  
 Labouring in ecstasy." (Yeats, 139)

Thirty years later Yeats reflected on his entire love life and brought back Olivia Shakespear as a central character in his love poems. This time, however, he no longer praises her beauty, nor does he use her as a symbol of beauty of perfection, but rather he expresses his regret for having surrendered himself to his obsession for Maud at the expense of his relationship with Olivia. The sequence of poems "A Man Young and Old," in which Olivia reappears, is a sort of autobiographical report of Yeats's love life in which he contrasts the stages of love he experienced from youth to old age (Unterecker, 194). The first four poems of this sequence have Maud Gonne as a central figure. "A Man Young and Old" opens with the poem "First

Love” in which Yeats describes how his love for Maud burst out and her murderous beauty and her “heart of stone” emptied his thoughts:

“She smiled and that transfigured me  
 And left me but a lout,  
 Maundering here, and maundering there,  
 Emptier of thought  
 Than the heavenly circuit of its stars  
 When the moon sails out.” (Yeats, 249)

“Human Dignity,” “The Mermaid,” and “The Death of a Hare” follow the same direction as “First Love.” The poet recalls here the bitter-sweet memories of his love for Maud and tells how he returned to his love over and over again although it caused him so much pain. The fifth poem, “The Empty Cup,” refers to Yeats’s relationship with Olivia Shakespear. He describes himself here as “a crazy man that found a cup,” and yet he feared to drink from it. The cup represents, of course, Olivia’s love for him, while the “moon-accursed” because of which he could not drink from the cup, is Maud herself. The poem ends in a regretful tone, for the poet realized when he wrote this poem that if he had given another chance to his relationship with Olivia he might have truly fallen in love with her and he would have saved himself from the agony of an unrequited love:

“A crazy man that found a cup,  
 When all but dead of thirst,  
 Hardly dared to wet his mouth  
 Imagining, moon-accursed,  
 That another mouthful  
 And his beating heart would burst.  
 October last I found it too  
 But found it dry as bone,  
 And for that reason am I crazed  
 And my sleep is gone.” (Yeats, 251)

“His Memories” brings back the moon goddess from the first four poems (Maud Gonne). The poet recalls here the only passionate night he spent with Maud Gonne and then, in the next poem, “The Friends of his Youth,” he takes up the role of an old man and presents the encounter between barren Madge, a symbol of old age, and shrieking Peter, a remainder of Youth. Peter and Madge are in fact the central characters in all the poems in this sequence and, in the light of their interaction in the poem, they can easily be identified with Yeats and Maud. The next poems are a sort of re-enactment of the love between the two, told from the perspective of an old man who decides that it is best to free himself “from the memory of the ‘delights of youth’ which can only bring pain to the old” (Unterecker, 196):

“Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span;  
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied aged man;  
Delight becomes death-longing if all longing else be vain.” (Yeats, 225)

“A Man Young and Old,” included in *The Tower*, is paralleled by “A Woman Young and Old,” published in *The Winding Stair*. If in the first sequence the poet focuses on a man’s experience of love from youth to old age, the second is a chronological résumé of a woman’s love life from childhood to death. Since all the poems in the second section are almost like statements of a woman’s perspective on love from the moment she discovers masculine beauty to the point she becomes “loveless dust,” our guess is that they are the result of many years of sexual experimentation with different women. The fact that Yeats continued to have affairs with various women even after he married is not a secret to anyone, because in his later years he thought of sex as a means of attaining the Unity of Being (Vopat, 39), and that is exactly what “A Woman Young and Old” proves.

The relationship between love and poetry in Yeats’s writing has become quite obvious by now. However, we may divide his love poems into two categories. First, there are those in which various aspects of love are exposed. In this case, Yeats’s muses were Laura Armstrong, the first girl he fell in love with, Olivia Shakespear, the first woman in his life, Maud Gonne, the woman he loved for almost three decades, Florence Farr, the actress whose delightful voice made him write plays, and even Iseult Gonne, the symbol of youth in Yeats’s mature years, whom he wanted to marry maybe because this way he would have had at least a part of the woman he wanted his entire life. In the poems of the second

category, love is replaced by lust and we may say that Yeats began writing this kind of poems after his marriage to George. Nevertheless, Yeats feared that sexual satisfaction inside a marriage might limit his inspiration, so he started enjoying sexual pleasures outside the marriage. He believed sexual potency was the tool that enabled him to write, and thus in 1934 he underwent the Steinach rejuvenation operation, a sort of vasectomy that was meant to improve his sexual capacity. After that he had sexual affairs with Margot Ruddock, an actress whom he describes as a symbol of creativity in "A Crazy Girl," Ethel Mannin, a popular novelist, with whom he had a brief affair, and Edith Shackleton Heald, a famous journalist who was the last woman in his life. He tried his luck with Dorothy Wellesley as well, an older poetess who he supposedly considered as one of the best writers of the twentieth century, but because she was a lesbian their relationship was nothing more than a passionate friendship (Holdeman, 106). Yeats's behaviour at this point may seem very strange, as well as his treatment of his wife in this equation, and yet we have to acknowledge the effects it had on his writing. They were all part of a process of creating a sexual identity for him and they all served as muses in his latest volumes of poetry, *A Full Moon in March* and *Last Poems*. All these relationships demonstrate Yeats's assertion that his poetry was no rootless flower. Moreover, his love poems constitute proofs "rooted in real, identifiable relationships" (Hassett, 8). As the poet himself states, his life has been in his poems, his oeuvre can only be analysed/ interpreted/ explored within the context of his personal intricate life.

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