

Analyzing W.B. Yeats Selected Poetry Through Feminist Epistemology: A Reassessment

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Abstract: W.B. Yeats stands out as one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century. His symbolic poetry and his political and philosophical ideas are all prominently reflected in his work. During his lifetime, he was deeply influenced by a few remarkable women who made significant contributions to his poetic development and played a pivotal role in shaping his personality. Yeats's poems chosen for this study offer a profound insight into the predicament of women within various socio-cultural and economic contexts. This analysis will explore how Yeats projected female voices through multiple images and symbols in poems such as 'A Prayer for My Daughter,' 'Among School Children,' and 'Leda and the Swan.' While Maud Gonne is widely recognized as a central figure in Yeats's love poems, it's essential to acknowledge that she wasn't the sole woman who influenced the artist's evolution. Others, like Lady Gregory, Olivia Shakespeare, and George Hyde-Lees, the wife of W.B. Yeats, played significant roles in the later phase of his life, particularly in developing his philosophical treatise, "A Vision." In his final poems, Yeats attempted to convey his ultimate understanding of love, emphasizing its perfection in the unbroken relationship between the body and the mind. Works like 'Among School Children,' 'Leda and the Swan,' 'The Second Coming,' 'Sailing to Byzantium,' 'A Man Young and Old,' and many other universally acclaimed poems were inspired by his complex relationships with Maud Gonne and others.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Society, Relationship, Poetry, Myths

1 Introduction

W.B Yeats (Figure 1) is recognized as a major English poet of his era [1]. Critics unequivocally place him in a higher esteem than T.S. Eliot, not solely due to the duration and volume of his poetic career but primarily for the exceptional quality of his poetry. His work bore the influence of Baudelaire, which contributed to his emergence as the preeminent figure in English poetry since the passing of Tennyson. Despite the wide array of topics he explored, encompassing historical myths, folklore, politics, history, love, specific friendships, and distinct events, Yeats consistently delivered poems of exceptional quality. He also crafted his own myths. His writing, whether on subjects drawn from various facets of life, consistently upheld a high standard. His early poetry exudes romanticism, while his later works exhibit realism in theme and treatment. He effectively amalgamated the romanticism epitomized by Blake and Shelley with the metaphysical realism of Mallarmé and Baudelaire [2]. He drew inspiration from Spenser and the Pre-Raphaelites. During his lifetime, he was deeply influenced by a select group of women. These women made significant contributions to his poetic development and played a substantial role in shaping his character. He portrayed women's challenges within various socio-cultural and economic contexts through the chosen poems. This study aims to analyze how Yeats represented female voices through a myriad of images and symbols in poems such as 'A Prayer for My Daughter,' 'Among School Children,' 'Leda and the Swan,' and 'Crazy Jane Talks with The Bishop.'

As is well-known to critics and admirers of his poetry, Maud Gonne occupies a central place in his love poems. He harbored unrequited passion for her, addressing her as the 'most beautiful woman on the earth.' She deeply stirred the poet's soul and infused a vibrant, rainbow-like quality into his poems. However, it's important to note that she wasn't the sole woman influencing the artist's growth. Others, like Lady Gregory, Yeats' fellow dramatist in the Irish Theatre Movement, provided comfort and steadfast cooperation. Olivia Shakespeare, a literature enthusiast and novelist residing in London lent her soothing presence and contributed to the poet's reputation.

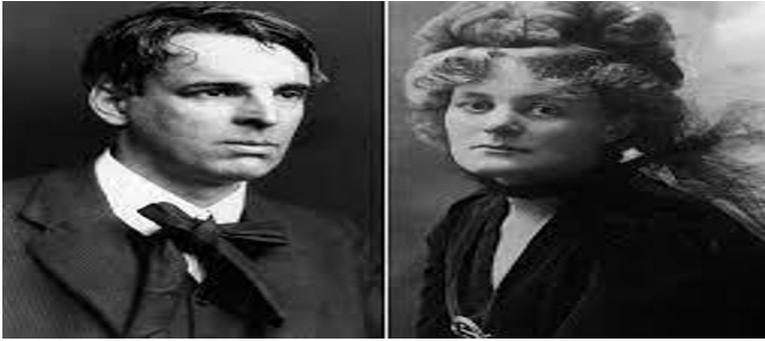


Figure 1. W.B. Yeats (Left) and Maud Gonne (Right)

Additionally, George Hyde-Lees, the wife of W.B. Yeats, played a pivotal role in the later phase of his life, particularly in the development of his philosophical treatise, "A Vision."

In the later phase of his life, Yeats endeavored to convey his final comprehension of love, which revolved around its perfection in the seamless connection between the physical and intellectual aspects. Maud Gonne served as a profound wellspring of inspiration for Yeats, leading him to create a series of timeless poems, such as "Among School Children," "Leda and the Swan," "The Second Coming," "Sailing to Byzantium," "A Man Young and Old," and numerous others.

2 Methodology

2.1 Situation of Women

In the selected poems, he has depicted the challenges faced by women from diverse socio-economic and cultural settings. This analysis will explore portraying female voices through various images and symbols in Yeats' poems, specifically in works like 'A Prayer for My Daughter,' 'Among School Children,' and 'Leda and the Swan.' Yeats's deep affection for women and children is unmistakable throughout his poetry. During his time in the Tower, he corresponded with Maud Gonne, expressing that his poems would inevitably transform into expressions of love regardless of the subject matter. The Petrarchan perspective posits women as inferior to men and associates them with violence, war, conflict, and destruction. However, Yeats rejected such notions and instead portrayed women as superior beings, drawing contrasts between them and the realms of nature and romantic love. Feminists argue that in a patriarchal society, decisions and policymaking are predominantly controlled by men. Throughout history, patriarchal structures have persisted, sustained by the ideological practice of male dominance and female subjugation. The hierarchy of male superiority and female inferiority is a product of patriarchy, which also bestows power upon men while rendering women powerless.

In a male-dominated society, women encounter various forms of discrimination based on their gender, religion, race, social class, age, and more. They are often treated as possessions and objects, reinforcing the concept of a 'ruler' and the 'ruled upon,' with men as rulers and women as the ruled. However, this binary division of genders is not rooted in actual experiential differences. Instead, it illustrates disparities between the fortunate and the less fortunate, the virtuous and the wicked, and the divine and the malevolent, such as God and Lucifer. There is no inherent deficiency in women; the only deficiency lies in the lack of freedom to exercise their free will.

2.2 Analysis of a Prayer for My Daughter

This analysis delves into Yeats' portrayal of women in his selected poems, namely "A Prayer for My Daughter" and "Leda and The Swan." Despite being a male poet, Yeats held a profound affection for children and women. He vehemently opposed the violence that marred the early 20th century. In "A Prayer for My Daughter," (Figure 2) Yeats expresses doubt at the outset of the poem regarding his daughter's prospects in a society scarred by the aftermath of the First World War and the turmoil of the Irish Movement.

The poet is deeply troubled, envisioning a challenging life for his daughter as she grows up. He fervently wishes for her to possess specific virtues that can serve as a protective shield. These positive qualities are meant to guide her path. He desires her to embody virtue and goodness. Yeats' prayer is a reflection of his hopes for his daughter, emphasizing how she should shape her character. He desires her to be blessed with beauty but remain untouched by arrogance and cruelty, which often accompany beauty. Yeats also observes that some women tend to disdain genuine love, leading them to 'never find a friend' and sometimes inviting trouble from misguided individuals. It's easy to see that these lines draw upon Yeats's experiences with Maud Gonne as their foundation.

Maud Gonne (Figure 1) plays a prominent role in Yeats's poetry, with numerous poems directly associated with her and dedicated to her, offering a candid expression of his deep affection. In these Maud Gonne-related poems, Yeats reveals his affectionate regard and his lofty opinion of her. Additionally, there are poems in which Maud Gonne serves as a focal point, whether subject to criticism or admiration. For instance, in "A Prayer for My Daughter," we encounter the following lines:

May she be granted beauty and yet not

Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,
 Or hers before a looking glass, for suck,
 Being made beautiful overmuch,
 Consider beauty a sufficient end
 Lose natural kindness and may be
 The heart-revealing intimacy
 The chooser right, and never find a friend.
 Helen being chosen found life flat and dull
 And later had much trouble form a fool.
 While that great queen, that rose out of the spray
 Being fatherless could have her way
 Yet chose a bandy-legged smith for man.
 It's certain that fine women eat
 A crazy salad with their meat

Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone. (A Prayer For My Daughter, P. 101, 17-32)

According to Yeats, when women possess great beauty, they can lose the capacity to experience true love because they may also lose their innate compassion. It's easy to understand that these lines draw upon Yeats's personal experiences with Maud Gonne as their inspiration. Despite his love for Maud Gonne, Yeats would not want his daughter to follow the same path as this remarkable lady. The poem addresses Anne (Yeats's daughter) as much as it does Maud, explaining the hint of bitterness in the quoted lines.

The association between Maud Gonne and Helen, which Yeats also explores in "A Woman Homer Sang" and "The Second Troy," is similarly evident in the lines mentioned. Helen, born from the union of Zeus (in the form of a swan) and Leda, was the woman for whom the city of Troy was besieged. She was initially married to Menelaus but eloped with Paris to Troy, ultimately leading to the Greek forces, led by Agamemnon, waging a war that destroyed an entire civilization. Yeats alludes to this episode in "A Prayer for My Daughter." Notably, Yeats's reference to Helen is neither reverential nor particularly flattering. It's worth noting that Yeats describes Mac-Bride, the man Maud Gonne had married, rather critically as a boorish individual.

This other man I had dreamed
 A drunken, vainglorious lout,
 He had done most bitter wrong
 To some who are near my heart,
 Yet I number him in the song. (*Easter 1916*, 31-35)

Yeats held the belief that beauty and purity are nurtured by longstanding customs and conventions. Therefore, as his ultimate desire for his daughter, he entreats that she finds a suitable husband from a noble lineage that upholds traditional manners and respect, a place where hostility and conceit are absent. His primary concern is his daughter's ability to navigate the turbulent and chaotic modern world. Thus, he offers a prayer for his daughter to possess specific virtuous qualities that will empower her to confront the harsh realities and uncertain destinies with unwavering self-assurance and independence.

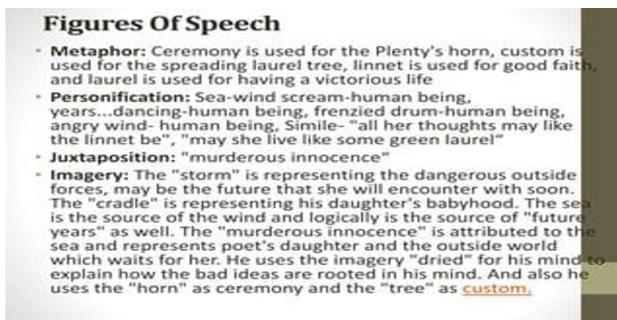


Figure 2. Figures of speech used in a prayer for my daughter

2.3 Analysing Leda And The Swan

In the poem "Leda and the Swan," (Figure 3) the Leda myth serves as a mythological representation of the early Hellenic concept of the fusion of the spiritual and the physical [3]. In this story, Zeus assumes the form of a swan and encounters Leda while she is bathing, resulting in the birth of Clytaemnestra and Helen [4]. The swan embodies both the essence of an animal and serves as a manifestation of Jupiter. The swan's animality symbolizes unbridled sensuality, a notion reinforced by the portrayal of Leda's trembling thighs, which, in turn, foreshadows the tragic fate of Agamemnon. The poem effectively encapsulates the dreadful allure of Helen, celebrated by Homer in his epic, the fiery destruction of Troy, and the profound intensity of Aeschylus's trilogy, all distilled into three vivid and powerful images [5].



Figure 3. Leda and the Swan

The threat of rape serves as a powerful means of intimidating women, a perspective strongly championed by feminists. In the case of Leda, she is depicted as being in a state of fear due to the violent nature of the Swan. Feminists argue vehemently that rape is an abhorrent crime involving violence against women, leading to severe and lasting psychological trauma in its victims. In Barbara Bentley's "Living Next to Leda," Leda is portrayed as having descended into madness. She was used by Zeus to fulfill his own sexual desires, leaving her mentally scarred, prompting the argument that Zeus sexually objectified Leda, treating her as a passive and powerless entity [6]. Leda's rape by a male deity not only marks her as a victim but also illustrates her subjugation as a woman in a patriarchal society. From the feminist perspective, rather than romanticizing or presenting the myth ambiguously, a straightforward approach is taken to condemn it in this retelling, as feminists believe that no aspect of Leda's experience empowers her, as she remains a victim [Hughes, 2016, para. 13]. Yeats' portrayal of the plight of women within a patriarchal society is a reflection of the justifications perpetuated by patriarchal cultures. The male-centered ideas expressed in Yeats's poetry stem from his position as a male member of society. Despite his progressive stance on women's issues, he occasionally grapples with the patriarchal values ingrained in his upbringing. In poems like 'That Crazy Girl,' he portrays women negatively, depicting them as self-centered and selfish, especially when his own love is unrequited.

2.4 Analysing Crazy Jane Talks with The Bishop

"Crazy Jane Talks with The Bishop" stands as the most renowned and widely appreciated poem in the Crazy Jane series. These poems are primarily characterized by their down-to-earth, earthly mood and a strong undercurrent of sexuality. Yeats himself mentioned that he was compelled to write these poems due to his sexual desires during his period of illness. Crazy Jane serves as the voice of the poet, advocating for a perspective where sex is embraced as an integral facet of life on par with other loftier aspects. She essentially functions as a mask for Yeats.

In another Crazy Jane poem, Yeats employs the metaphor of a bull to describe the kind of love that Jane embodies. The overtly sexual connotations of these images are hard to ignore. In Jane's worldview, which Yeats endorses, the ecstasy of animals, or the physical intensity of love, comes closest to a spiritual experience [7]. While this may not align with the path of a Christian mystic, its significance and validity cannot be disregarded. It's worth noting that not all the Crazy Jane poems revolve around themes of love and sexuality. She is conceived as a more holistic and wholesome character, and Yeats uses her to convey a positive life philosophy. Actually, satire and sluttishness are not the outstanding qualities of the series, and even the much-vaunted sexuality of the poetry needs to be accepted in this context if it is not to observe the central meaning. It is more legitimate to regard the essence of Crazy Jane as her derelict dignity in the face of circumstance, a kind of heroic inviolability amid the humiliations of the blind man's ditch. More fundamentally, however, Crazy Jane represents the conviction that the truth can only be possessed in time and that to live the truth consents to live it whole. The validity of experience resides in its completeness, and one can only mutilate that completeness by forgiving it into the categories of either body or spirit. (B. Rajan *op.cit.*, pp.146-147)

Crazy Jane is used to put across serious philosophy in terms close to the ground. There is one Crazy Jane poem in which Yeats views her sexuality somewhat critically—"Crazy Jane Reproved":

I care not what the sailors say:
 All those dreadful thunder-stones,
 All that storm that blots the day
 Can but show that Heaven yawns;
 Great Europa played the fool
 That changed a lover for a bull,
 Fol de rol, fal de rol.
 To round that shell's elaborate whorl,
 Adorning every secret track
 With the delicate mother-of-pearl,
 Made the joints of Heaven crack:
 So roaring ranting journeyman.

Fol de rol, fol de rol. (*Crazy Jane Reproved*, 7-14)

Yeats was driven by the perception that was guided by his relationship with women and occult teaching, where traditional roles of men and women were replaced by the more progressive views of gender [8]. Gender issues have found a significant place in the writings of Yeats, and that has created a critical discourse in English writing. Yeats has valorized the situation of women outside and inside of the household. Patriarchal views are neglected in his poetryvb [9].

2.5 Analyzing Among School Children

In the later part of his life, Yeats started believing that men's capacity for intelligence is corrupted by women's beauty, which has a destructive nature (Figure 4). Yeats turns a woman's beauty potential into a devastating force. Bernard Shaw, too, an illustrious contemporary of Yeats, calls women 'Boa constrictors', which destroys the capacity of men to become a superman (Shawn, 2008). Yeats agrees with those who criticize women's excess attractiveness. The exuberance of beauty has also been criticized in "A Prayer for My Daughter," although not as much as this beauty. Yeats prays, may his daughter not attain too much beauty, lest she should fall victim to some dangers in the future. He worries that her extreme attractiveness will give off a terrifying aura to everybody who sees her. The way Yeats longs for his daughter's beauty and nature to be limited indicates that he confines women to femininity. It may be argued that he is behaving patriarchally. Yeats even robs his daughter of her natural feminine beauty by saying,

'May she be granted beauty and yet not'/'...Being made beautiful overmuch' [10]. Yeats believes that too much beauty in women creates pride, which translates into intellectual hatred. He uses these lines to describe intellectual hatred: 'An intellectual hatred is the worst, /So let her think opinions are accused' [10].

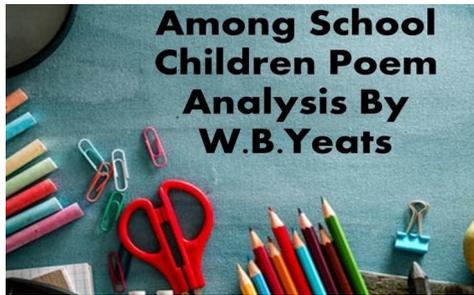


Figure 4. Among School Children

Arrogance and intellectual hatred in them cause them to be opinionated and inexpert in their judgment. Yeats, in the following lines, indirectly blames Maud Gonne for her poor choice of MacBride as a life partner. He says, While that great Queen rose out of the spray, Being fatherless could have her way Yet chose a bandy-legged smith for man [10]. The above lyrics have allusions to mythology and imply that Yeats is mocking Maud Gonne for choosing to wed MacBride. Being fatherless allowed her to "have her way," which may be a description of his implied belief that men are intellectually superior to women. As Albright says in notes on this poem,

'Fatherless: perhaps a sly suggestion that only a father's counsel prevents a daughter from going astray' [10]. Albright's remarks can be understood in the context of an authoritative guy who blocks any intellectual illumination aimed at a woman. To put it another way, we could say that Yeats' own male chauvinism is what causes him to belittle the overwhelming beauty or intellectual strength of women. Yeats held a conventional view that women are less intelligent than males.

Farooq Shah Restrictions of Female Potential in the Selected Poems by W.B. Yeats a house/ Where all's accustomed, ceremonious[11]. He wants his daughter to marry an aristocracy so that she can rely on her wealthy husband. In other words, he limits his daughter's potential and confines her to a woman sitting inside the set parameters of the house. Yeats brings to mind the Victorian aristocratic norms of the 19th century, where a woman is treated like an object.

3 Conclusion

Yeats' poetry bears the distinct mark of his male identity. In contrast to many of his contemporaries, his poetry grapples with women's issues, reflecting his progressive outlook. This has sometimes left readers pondering whether he aligns more with male or female ideology. In reality, he supported women and consistently portrayed a positive image of them in his poetry. He existed within a society marked by sexism, a theme that inevitably seeps into his poetic works. While he exhibits a gentle attitude toward women, his status as a male poet and his progressive beliefs sometimes give rise to contradictions in his poetry. Yeats' verses often oscillate between the celebration and critique of women.

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