



## Yeats and Gonne: The Emotional Defeat

Prof. Dr. Faisal Abdul-Wahhab. Hayder<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tikrit University, Iraq

[faisal\\_hayder@tu.edu.iq](mailto:faisal_hayder@tu.edu.iq)

[faseel29@gmail.com](mailto:faseel29@gmail.com)



**Abstract.** William Butler Yeats had love relationships with many women throughout his career; however, few significantly influenced his work. Maud Gonne and her predecessor, Laura Armstrong, played the roles of actress and Muse simultaneously. Armstrong influenced Yeats's drama, while Gonne influenced his drama and poetry. Both women were promoted as "myth" and "symbol," but Gonne, seen as the last symbol of a woman, simply overwhelmed his mythology and symbolism. As a nationalist figure, Gonne was more appropriate as someone who would represent comprehensive symbols of a Goddess, Ireland, and the female stereotype of "Eternal Beauty." Some of Yeats's poetry suggests a notion of political defeat influenced by the long history of tragedies in Ireland, and this sad taint seems to have linked to his relationship with Gonne to become a kind of emotional defeat. This paper explores this theme in Yeats' poetry, especially that found in certain of his unpublished poems, namely "To a Sister of the Cross and the Rose," "A Dream of a Life Before This One," and certain published poems: "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," "He Wished His Beloved were Dead," "A Dream of Death," "The Secret Rose," "The Withering of the Boughs," "The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love," "He Remembers Forgotten Beauty," and "The Rose of Battle".

**Keywords:** emotional defeat, mysticism, Irish cause, battles, beauty, vision.





**ملخص.** أقام وليام بتلر بيتس علاقات حب مع العديد من النساء طوال حياته المهنية. ومع ذلك، أثر القليل منهن بشكل كبير على عمله. وقد لعبت ماود كون وسابقتها، لورا أرمسترونج، كممثلتين وملهمتين له في وقت واحد. وأثرت أرمسترونج في دراما بيتس، بينما أثرت كون في الدراما والشعر. وارتقت هاتان المرأتان لتصبحان أسطورة ورمزا، لكن كون، التي يُنظر إليها على أنها آخر رمز للمرأة، طغت ببساطة على أساطيره ورمزيته. كانت كون كشخصية قومية أكثر ملاءمة لتمثل رموزًا شاملة للإلهة، وأيرلندا، والقوالب النمطية الأنثوية لـ "الجمال السرمدى". تشير بعض أشعار بيتس إلى فكرة الاندحار السياسي التي تأثرت بالتاريخ الطويل للمآسي في أيرلندا، ويبدو أن هذه الصبغة الحزينة قد ارتبطت بعلاقته بكون لتصبح نوعًا من الاندحار العاطفي. تسير هذه الورقة أغوار هذا الموضوع في شعر بيتس، لا سيما في بعض قصائده غير المنشورة، وهي "إلى أخت الصليب والوردة" و "حلم ما قبل الحياة" وبعض القصائد المنشورة: "أمنيته لأزياء السماء"، "أمنيته بموت الحبيب"، "حلم الموت"، "الوردة الخفية"، "ذبول الأغصان"، "حداد الحبيب على ضياع العشق" " تذكر الجمال المنسي" و "وردة المعركة".

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاندحار العاطفي، التصوف، القضية الأيرلندية، المعارك، الجمال، الرؤيا.

Yeats sympathises with the cause of defeat and prefers defeat to victory because he is a person who is sensitive to the atmosphere of tragedy and often finds himself emotionally in its very deepness. He stated, "I prefer that the defeated cause should be more vividly described than that which has the advertisement of victory. No battle has been finally won or lost."<sup>1</sup> He imagined military battles and depicted them in his poetry and emotional battles with women. The two existed together and affected each other to the extent that Yeats believed that emotional defeat resulted from a military defeat or the reverse .

The title of the unpublished poem, "To a Sister of the Cross and the Rose," suggests that the relationship between the rose and the cross exemplified in Rosicrucianism is a mystical marriage between the two. The sister in this poem is Maud Gonne, his mystical symbol that he found forever longing to have: "No daughter of the Iron Times/The Holy Future summons you" (UM\*<sup>1</sup> 94, ll, 1-2). "The Holy Future" suggests a hopeful progress

for Maud for both mystical order and the Irish national cause.

Yeats expounds on how frustrated passions transform into visions first and then into poetry and that "passions, when we know that they cannot find

<sup>1</sup> • UM :( Under the Moon): George Bornstein (ed.), Under the Moon: The Unpublished Early Poetry by William Butler Yeats (New York: Scribner, 1995).



fulfilment, become vision; and a vision, whether we wake or sleep, prolongs its power by rhythm and pattern."<sup>2</sup> He is disappointed by Maud Gonne's rejection of his proposals; however, he can transcend this failure by merging his emotions with the public cause:

In this sad heart consuming slow  
Cast all common hopes away,  
For I have seen the enchanted day  
And heard the morning bugles blow.  
(UM 94, 11, 5-8)

He casts "all common hopes away" to get to the extraordinary hope, the spiritual marriage between him and his beloved, as exemplified by the dual symbols of the "rose" and the "cross." His vision of an "enchanted day" expresses all his hopes which he believes can only be achieved by either magic or a miracle.

"A Dream of a Life Before This One," also an unpublished poem, refers to a dream that Gonne told Yeats about where the two "had been brother and sister somewhere on the edge of the Arabian desert, and sold together into slavery."<sup>3</sup> Through this dream, Gonne wants to make Yeats understand right from the beginning of their relationship that they are merely brother and sister. R. F. Foster adds that this dream presupposes that their meeting has occurred in a previous life, and "this revelation of a spiritual association in another existence seemed to seal their love, but it was [also] accompanied by a clear message from her about the Platonic nature of their relationship."<sup>4</sup> After hearing of this dream, Yeats immediately proposed to her for the first time and the answer, as he recounts it, was "she asked for my friendship."<sup>5</sup>

Another dream, on December 7, 1898, confirms her spiritual view of their relationship. Maud now tells Yeats "that they had been married by a 'great spirit' whom she identified as Lugh."<sup>6</sup> In this dream, Foster adds that Maud saw herself dressed in white, and then she kissed Yeats in reality, so "a commitment had been made."<sup>7</sup> Actually, this innocent kiss was an apology rather than a commitment. She made her affair with the French journalist Lucien Millevoye a pretext for refusing one of Yeats's proposals. Maud's pretext, however, did not prevent her from marrying John MacBride later.

Her relationship with Yeats tortured Gonne because she needed him as a friend and cooperative intellectual nationalist, but not a lover, as he imagines her to be and deludes himself. She told him "to see her no more," but neither



she nor he could do so. Moreover, even when Yeats slept with Maud in 1908,<sup>8</sup> she would still not accept his proposal. This event asserts her idea as a friend, not a lover; consequently, Yeats took his refuge in spirituality .

In "The Secret Rose," the poet's "defeated dreams" make him call for the catastrophic end of the world by the great wind of the rose:

FAR-OFF, most secret, and inviolate Rose,  
Enfold me in my hour of hours; where those  
Who sought thee in the Holy Sepulchre,  
Or in the wine-vat, dwell beyond the stir

And tumult of defeated dreams; and deep  
Among pale eyelids, heavy with the sleep  
Men have named beauty.....

.....I, too, await  
The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.  
When shall the stars be blown about the sky,  
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?  
Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,  
Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?  
(CP<sup>2</sup> 64, ll, 1-7, 26 – 31)

This same apocalyptic vision is always envisaged when the poet's and his beloved's emotional problems become aggravated. His vision is a self-defence mechanism or a designed fortification to protect him or guard his failures and frustration .

In "The Withering of the Boughs," nature is presented as being sympathetic to his defeated dreams as in the lines: "No boughs have withered because of the wintry wind;/The boughs have withered because I have told them my dreams" (CP 74, ll, 7-8). Implicitly, the poet is accusing his beloved of going against nature. The solution for his defeat is either to imagine her as dead or to be distanced from him as a Goddess, although, in his second choice, his first meeting with her, he depicts and enhances this background as one based on

<sup>2</sup> CP: (The Collected Poems) William Butler Yeats The Collected Poems 1889-1939, available from [http://ebooks.gutenberg.us/DjVu\_Collection/DJEDS/YEATS/POEMS/Download.pdf] accessed 10/2/2012.



divinity.<sup>9</sup> For the first choice, he dreamed of her once, "in a museum of dead creatures, and the dream caused him days of depression."<sup>10</sup> The image of the dead creatures in a museum seems to comprise Maud Gonne herself. In "A Dream of Death," the rose is nailed to the cross, and her eternal beauty lies under the boards. Her beauty is captured by his desire to be her own only, in a vision, or to be immortalised by severing this beauty from real life and writing her epitaph:

I DREAMED that one had died in a strange place  
Near no accustomed hand,  
And they had nailed the boards above her face,  
The peasants of that land,  
Wondering to lay her in that solitude,  
And raised above her mound  
A cross they had made out of two bits of wood,  
And planted cypress round;  
And left her to the indifferent stars above  
Until I carved these words:  
She was more beautiful than thy first love,  
But now lies under boards.  
(CP 37, ll, 1-12)

Metaphorically, he feels that she has buried herself in the Irish national cause, and by this intense devotion, she has chosen to distance herself from him. This conclusion thus undermines the typical symbolism of the rose; Maud Gonne identified with Ireland from Yeats's perspective or at least in this poem. He, therefore, personalises Gonne's national interest and reduces it to a matter of individual love when he then compares her beauty with his first love — Laura Armstrong. Eternal beauty is stripped of its spirituality and becomes simply commonplace and selfish love .

The same subject reoccurs in "He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead," namely, his desire for possession renders him wish his beloved to be captured in a grave so that she cannot leave him and he does not have to watch her "rise and hasten away" (CP 67, l, 7). The call for duty distances her and evokes pangs of jealousy for the poet from her friends and admirers. His appeal to her to forgive him might be ascribed to his relationship with Olivia Shakespear, although he was more entangled with her than with Olivia. Maud Gonne played



the role of a disruptive agent or an obstacle in his life to prevent any fulfilment of his sexual desires with Olivia:

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.  
(CP 55, ll, 2-7)

In "The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love," Yeats blames Maud Gonne for the failure of his relationship with Olivia. The polarities of sexual and spiritual love are identified in these two beloveds to bring about and define his emotional defeat. The union between the body and soul cannot be achieved as long as such polarities persist. His relationship with Eva Gore-Booth was also impeded by the disruptive Gonne, as he could not constrain himself from pressing secrets gathered with Gonne to Gore-Booth.11

In "He Gives His Beloved Certain Rhymes," Yeats constructs the verse to glorify "the battles of old times:"  
FASTEN your hair with a golden pin,  
And bind up every wandering tress;  
I bade my heart build these poor rhymes  
It worked at them, day out, day in,  
Building a sorrowful loveliness  
Out of the battles of old times.  
(CP 58, ll, 1-6)

This poem's idea of courtly love is evident, wherein the beloved turns into a Goddess. This Goddess is identified with Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of Beauty or Venus. The sea foam suggests these are Goddesses, as it was believed that they were born from seafoam. The same image is also seen in "The White Birds" and again confirms the same meaning. In "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," the unrealistic Maud Gonne turns out to be authentic in the second part of the poem when the poet entreats her to walk "softly" on his dreams:

But I, being poor, have only my dreams;



I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.  
(CP 67, ll, 6-8)

In reality, her feet are walking harshly on his dreams, as she does not fulfil his love desires. In "He Remembers Forgotten Beauty," the "white Beauty" is connected to Celtic mythology, and as in "A Poet to His Beloved," the "white woman" is regarded as a Celtic Goddess. A tone of defeat overwhelms the first part of the poem, linking a defeat in love to the defeat of the kings and their armies:

WHEN my arms wrap you round I press  
My heart upon the loveliness  
That has long faded from the world;  
The jewelled crowns that kings have hurled  
In shadowy pools, when armies fled;  
(CP 57, ll, 1-5)

This linkage between love and war or the battles of Ireland, in particular, enhances the symbolism of the beloved in Yeats' poetry as being Ireland herself. Yeats dramatises his frustrating personal experience with Maud Gonne to reflect the downfall of his country's battles or the reverse. In "Shadowy Waters," Forgael says:

But it was all deceit, and flattery  
To win a woman in her own despite,  
For love is war, and there is hatred in it;  
(CP 440, ll, 533-536)

In "The Poet Pleads With the Elemental Powers," the image of the stolen rose and the sleeping of her guardian Dragon casts a political shadow that relates to the Irish cause or the Celtic tradition in general, "His heavy rings uncoiled from glimmering deep to deep:/When will he wake from sleep?" (CP 66, ll, 5-6). The poet's question about the waking of the Dragon insinuates Yeats's calling for an Irish revival in politics, culture, and greater spirituality in Ireland.

In "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time," the rose is proud as it is a symbol of Ireland, a country proud of her ancient tragic heroes; a few are mentioned,



including Cuchulain and Fergus. The pride of the rose can be interpreted as an autobiographical reference to the women with whom Yeats has dealt personally. Most of the women he knew in his life, including Maud Gonne and Laura Armstrong, were superior to him in economic status. The poet asks the rose to come near him as he sings "the ancient ways," which relate to ancient Ireland and her history as symbolised by the two mentioned figures. Yeats imagines Maud Gonne as "Mother Ireland with the crown of stars upon her head."<sup>12</sup> This personification of the image of "Eternal Beauty" as feminine suggests Maud Gonne. Yeats always depicts her in his poetry as a state that lies between Sky and Earth or a state that vacillates between them based on his mood and current situation .

In "The Rose of the World," the beauty is not eternal but fleeting and mournful, as beauty relates to female figures of beauty who led others to tragedy. The first is Helen of Troy, whose beauty was the reason behind the destruction of that Greek city; the second is Deirdre, who caused the death of "Usna's children:"

WHO dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?  
For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,  
Mournful that no new wonder may betide,  
Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,  
And Usna's children died.  
(CP 31, ll, 1-5)

Maud Gonne, as a symbol of beauty for the poet, holds a destructive beauty that would prove true in terms of the psychological state of the poet after her recurrent refusals of his proposals. After one of these refusals, Yeats feels "like a very battered ship with the masts broken off at the stump," as he describes himself in his letter to Lady Gregory.<sup>13</sup> In a statement describing their first meeting, he ascribes Maud's "great beauty" to "some legendary past."<sup>14</sup> He was not satisfied by her public role in the political scene because he idealised her as a goddess, not a practical woman of ideas:

Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode:  
Before you were, or any hearts to beat,  
Weary and kind one lingered by His seat;  
He made the world to be a grassy road  
Before her wandering feet.





(CP 31, ll, 11-15)

The poem "The Rose of Battle" also echoes the impossibility of attaining peace on earth and thus true love. However, it seems to be a call for peace rather than war. Edward Larrissy notes that the previous title of the poem was "They Went Forth to the Battle, But They Always Fell" this title was initially taken from one of the Ossian poems by James Macpherson.<sup>15</sup> The tone of Macpherson's poem is the disappointment that ensues from recurrent Celtic defeats in their battles against their enemies. This tone also affects Yeats's poem, mainly when he says: "Turn if you may from battles never done" (CP 32, l. 7). Compared with Oisín's direct urging of his people for rebellion as a mystical task, the tone has changed. The first line of the poem is influenced by James C. Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen," who says:

You'll pray for me, my flower of flowers,  
My Dark Rosaleen  
My fond Rosaleen  
You will think of me through daylight's hours,  
My virgin flower, my flower of flowers,  
My Dark Rosaleen! <sup>16</sup>

"Flower of Flowers" in Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" also references Yeats's poem "ROSE of all Roses, Rose of all the World!" (CP 32, l. 1). However, Mangan's poem inspired the Irish poets to employ the rose to symbolise Ireland. In his book, *The Book of Yeats's Poems*, Hazard Adams reads the battles in this poem spiritually, i.e., "and all spiritual ones are searches for the rose, which has descended only to entice its followers to defeat on the sea, symbolising the human condition."<sup>17</sup> "God's battles," which were to cease because of the coming rose in "The Rose of Peace," are launched here by the rose, which is the "Old Night," that whispers her divine wisdom in the ears of the lovers .

The spiritual battle, therefore, is not separated from the actual wars which were launched for the sake of Ireland though they were doomed to defeat by God:

You, too, have come where the dim tides are hurled  
Upon the wharves of sorrow, and heard ring  
The bell that calls us on; the sweet farthing.  
Beauty grown sad with its eternity



Made you of us, and of the dim grey sea.  
Our long ships loose thought-woven sails and wait,  
For God has bid them share an equal fate;  
And when at last, defeated in His wars,  
They have gone down under the same white stars,  
We shall no longer hear the little cry  
Of our sad hearts, that may not live nor die.  
(CP 33, ll, 26-36)

Defeat makes "Beauty grown sad with its eternity" (CP 33, l. 29) and this "timeless mystical beauty," in the words of John Unterecker, will make "Ireland's heart begin to beat" in Yeats's poem, "To Ireland in the Coming Times."<sup>18</sup> In "The Rose of Battle," Yeats identifies Ireland's battle, symbolised by the rose, with God's wars against evil and suggests that God is sharing with her "an equal fate." The sorrow from recurrent defeats acquires an "experienced revelation for those warriors."<sup>19</sup> However, in "The Sorrow of Love," that beauty is mournful and disastrous for both the world and the poet as well:

A girl arose that had red mournful lips  
And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,  
Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships  
And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;  
(CP 35, ll, 5-8)

The traditional religious idea that woman is the cause of man's fall is hidden within this poem, as in "Adam's Curse." The notion of a dangerous beauty may raise an essential question regarding Yeats's concept of women's role in history and modern life. The historical and political concerns found in "The Sorrow of Love" become personal, spiritual and aesthetical in "When You are Old." The physical love that relates to others is contrasted with the spiritual love that relates to the poet. Yeats's personification of love as an escaping lover reflects his inner self, full of the horror of that terrible destiny. The same dilemma is portrayed in "The Lover Pleads With His Friend for Old Friends:"

Time's bitter flood will rise,  
Your Beauty perish and be lost



For all eyes but these eyes.  
(CP 65, ll, 6-8)

The poet's jealousy of his beloved's new friends, attracted by her beauty, drives his impossible promise. He reminds her of her immortal beauty, excluding his eyes, cannot be seen. His promises in these two poems that he would love "the sorrows of [her] changing face" (CP 36, l, 8) and his eyes would still love her even though her beauty would prove untrue, as seen in his poem "Fallen Majesty:"

Although crowds gathered once if she but showed her face,  
And even old men's eyes grew dim, this hand alone,  
Like some last courtier at a gypsy camping-place  
Babbling of fallen majesty, records what's gone.  
These lineaments, a heart that laughter has made sweet,  
These, these remain, but I record what-s gone. A crowd  
Will gather, and not know it walks the very street  
Whereon a thing once walked that seemed a burning cloud.  
(CP 119, ll, 1-8)

The beautiful queen crashes under the feet of Time, and the poet's promises vanish with that fall. Yeats uses her name "Gonne" as a pun to denote her departure as a Muse from his poetry and replaced by her daughter, Isuelt, the rising beauty. However, in his poem, "Friends," Yeats still remembers his old beloved with great affection, one that is deep-rooted in his soul:

And what of her that took  
All till my youth was gone  
With scarce a pitying look?  
How could I praise that one?  
When day begins to break  
I count my good and bad,  
Being wakeful for her sake,  
Remembering what she had,  
What eagle look still shows,  
While up from my heart's root  
So great a sweetness flows  
I shake from head to foot.  
(CP 120, ll, 18-29)



The "pitying look" is an elegy for Yeats, the passing of an unhappy youth, and Gonne for her recurrent setbacks with men —Millevoye, Macbride, and Yeats himself. In his retrospective view, Yeats reconsiders Maud in his poem "A Prayer to My Daughter." The poet addresses his daughter, Anne, but he re-evaluates the whole experience with Maud in terms of love and femininity. Implicitly, he criticises her for "intellectual hatred," an "opinionated mind," beauty stripped of its kindness, and the wrong choice for marriage. When he proposed to her just before she chose John Macbride as a husband, she told him he would not be happy if he married her. She knew his ideas were irrelevant to her and would not let him "make" her.<sup>20</sup> If she had married him, she would have lost her independence due to his strange ideas about women:

Women because the main event of their lives has been  
a giving of themselves give themselves to an opinion as  
if it were a stone doll... women should have their play  
with dolls finished in childhood for, if they play with  
ideas again it is amid hatred and malice. 21

Nevertheless, her marriage choice proved incorrect and unhelpful for her happiness. Maud Gonne is identified or even aligned with other listed women by Yeats in his poem, "Under the Moon," as "betrayed or defeated in love." 22 Those women are, as Untreckerer explains: "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr in the Mabinogion; Guinevere, Arthur's queen; Niamh, whom Oisín had pursued; Laban, Fand's sister; Fand herself, wife of the sea god, Manannan Mac Lir; and the hawk-beloved wood-woman." 23

Yeats sometimes blames himself for giving all his heart to Maud, as he depicts in his poem, "Never Give all the Heart": "He that made this knows all the cost,/For he gave all his heart and lost" (CP 74, ll, 13-14). He should know how to act and perform his role in the love play to protect himself from the barren loss he feels at the end of his long journey with his beloved. Yeats always condemns time for being against beauty; however, in "Adam's Curse," time seems to be allied with the poet against his beloved:

A moon, worn as if it had been a shell  
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell  
About the stars and broke in days and years.  
(CP 76, ll, 32-34)



As a symbol for his beloved, the moon loses her beauty due to the reaction of time, as "the last embers of daylight die." The end of the poem indicates the end of their love story, and the players become "as weary-hearted as that hollow moon:"

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:  
That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
To love you in the old high way of love;  
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown  
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.  
(CP 76, ll, 35-39)

To conclude, Yeats' mystification of Maud Gonne can be viewed as a reaction and ultimate resort to taking from her recurrent refusals of his marriage proposals. This mystification is not a false mysticism, but it entails failure or frustration. Yeats' poverty at the beginning of his practical life left room for the adoption of the courtly love style in his liaison with Maud; nevertheless, it was one of the implicit reasons behind her rejection of him. He identifies his defeat in love with the battles of Ireland, both of which were doomed to failure, he believes. In his poetry, he also aligns his beloved, Maud Gonne, with legendary defeated women; however, some hold a dangerous beauty that can also cause destruction and tragedy. His irrelevant ideas about women distanced him from Gonne and were another implicit reason for her to reject his recurrent proposals. Nevertheless, Yeats was able to create immortal poetry from that emotional defeat, as Maud Gonne hinted so often.

### Notes

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