

**“WHEN YOU ARE OLD AND GREY [...] TAKE DOWN THIS
BOOK,
AND SLOWLY READ”,
W.B.YEATS’S MUSE AND CURSE**

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ABSTRACT. The most haunting experience of Yeats’s life can be considered his first meeting with Maud Gonne, the woman he was in love with for almost three decades. His constant obsession with her personality, and his admiration of her beauty and courage drove him to propose to her time and again, as if he could never get tired of her refusals. The more she drove him away, the more he kept coming back for more, as if every rejection only managed to reinforce his feeling for her. His unrequited love for her was the subject of many of his poems, in each and every one of them stating his devotion and admiration for her character and beauty. Even though time came when he felt frustrated by her actions, the charm he felt for her never faded away. Her refusal to marry him became a cyclic event in his existence, but he kept on feeding himself from frustration and grief to give birth to an incredible poetic imagery [1].

KEY WORDS: love, literature, poetry, Irish Literary Theatre

On 30 January 1889 Yeats would have the encounter that would change his entire life – he would meet Maud Gonne, a twenty-two- year-old woman with red-golden hair and hazel eyes. She was a young Irish Nationalist with strong convictions who had recently befriended Ellen O’Leary, the sister of John O’Leary, the famous Irish Nationalist who would later be sentenced to prison because of his involvement in the Irish Republican Brotherhood - a secret organisation that fought for an independent Ireland. From the moment she appeared at their door, the Yeatses were fascinated by her. The poet’s sisters were mostly intrigued and they were wondering why she would have left a social life to the detriment of politics, while John Butler Yeats and the young Willie, who was twenty-three years old, were charmed by her engagement in the nationalist struggle for independence.

By the time the two met, the young poet had already published *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, so Maud was already familiar with his work. Yeats’s collection of poetry was an expression of Ireland’s culture and Maud, though she considered that even violence was acceptable as long as her country would gain its independence, confessed to him that she was deeply touched by his work. Her words and also her beauty must have caused a storm into the young’s poet mind because this first encounter made him realise that she was the love of his life,

and although she would never share his feelings, Yeats would always remember their first as an event of mythological import.

“I was 23 years old when the troubling of my life began... she drove up to their house in Bedford Park with an introduction from John O’Leary to my father. I had never thought to see in a living woman so great beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past. A complexion like the blossom of the apples, and yet the face and body had the beauty of lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty because it changes least from youth to age and a stature so great that she seemed of divine race. Her movements were worthy of her form, and I understood at last why the poet of antiquity where we would but speak of face and form, sings, loving some lady, that she paces like a goddess.”

Though Maud Gonne was considered a very beautiful woman, perhaps the most beautiful woman in Ireland, she was arguably a model of beauty. Nevertheless, the poet considered her appearance to be divine, and because she gradually showed him that her intelligence was to be admired too, a long and troubled relationship with her began. In one of his letters to John O’Leary, Yeats named her Diana of the Crossways after Meredith’s novel with the same title, as she was Irish just like the heroine of the novel, the modern incarnation of the huntress goddess. His infatuation with her was so deep that he confessed he would follow her lead no matter what she would tell him to do. He created an idealized image of a strong and beautiful woman and turned it into an object of worshipping that he could transform into myth and symbol for his creation. Thus Maud’s image replaced Laura Armstrong, the woman who influenced him the most in his early years and served as a model for one of his characters in John Sherman. Nevertheless, Maud was not the kind of woman that would fall helplessly in love with him, as her heart already belonged to someone else, and in his relationship with her Yeats would assume the role of John Sherman – the protagonist of his early novel – a wild yet timid dreamer.

Ireland and its problems were the main things that brought Maud and Yeats together. She had come to their house to talk about the British domination over Ireland, issues related to political prisoners and British landowners, but they soon discovered they have much more in common. They both had English roots and their families were both commercially-minded. In both cases, the father was the one to step away from the family tradition. John Butler abandoned a promising career to become an artist and Maud’s father, gave up the family business for a career in the military service. They were both the dominant figures in their family, and their children both lacked maternal affection, Yeats because of his mother’s mental illness, and Maud because of her mother’s premature death.

Maud Gonne, who was only one year younger than Yeats, fell in love with Ireland in her early years, when her father, a British-army officer, was posted in Ireland, in a period when the risk of a new Fenian rebellion was very high. In county Kildare, Maud realised how much she loved animals and birds and in Howth, near Dublin, she listened to stories about the heroes of the 1798 Rising. The local tales would later awaken in her the desire to fight for Ireland’s rights, which is not exactly what one might expect from the daughter of a British army officer. Captain Gonne, who later became Colonel, was widowed when his daughter was only five years-old. From that moment, he took very good care of his daughters’ education. He taught them that they should not be afraid of anything and did his best in raising them to become two beautiful, educated women, the kind that any young man would want as his wife. He hired a governess to help with the girls’ education and when he realised that it was quite difficult to control two lively

little girls, he sent them to London to live with an aunt, an elderly woman, hoping that she would be able to turn them into fine, young ladies with good social behaviour. However, this was quite a difficult task, and since no obvious progress was made, the girls were sent to Europe. Ever since she was ten, Maud spent her time commuting between France, Switzerland and Italy, a fact which made her become a very independent woman who had difficulties in settling down.

When she returned to Ireland, Maud served as a hostess for his father in the social circles. Their connection had always been very special, but when he realised what a fine young lady she had turned into, he became very proud of her and introduced her to many important people of the day. One day, she even caught the attention of the Prince of Wales, but her father quickly took her away to Bayreuth, knowing that if some royal invitation should arrive, she could not refuse it. She was by his father's side at any important social event and sometimes, when her father could not join her, she would just go by herself. At such an occasion, she had come to realise how desperate the situation of the Irish peasants was. When she returned to Dublin, she had already witnessed an oppressed rebellion of the Fenians, but she just was not mature enough to understand the political issues of the times. At a party she heard the host complaining about the Land League, an organisation that fought against British landowners. On this occasion, she also found out that the Irish peasants who refused to pay rent to their landlords were being banned from their own homes and left to die from starvation or imprisoned if they refused to comply with their landlords' requests. She was outraged by what she had heard and decided that something needed to be done for those oppressed by British governing. Her father shared her view and decided to follow a political career so that he could change the way the things work in Ireland, but unfortunately he died in November 1886, leaving two grieving daughters behind.

If for Yeats the lack of maternal affection was quite disturbing, causing difficulties in all his subsequent relationships with women and making him feel insecure, for Maud it was quite the opposite. Because she grew up without a mother who could have taught her that she must pursue a life as the wife of some Victorian man, she turned into an ambitious woman who wanted more than a peaceful life and followed her purpose disregarding any social convention. After her father's death, when she was left to believe that her father's fortune was not that big, she and her sister decided to make a living on their own, despite their guardian's advice to accept being adopted by their aunt Augusta Cook. Living in London, she became interested in theatre and she was offered to perform as a leading actress in a play. She accepted the role although her uncle William completely disapproved with her decision. However, her lung problems made her collapse right before the opening, and so she was forced to abandon her acting career.

While she was recovering from her illness, Maud met Lucien Millevoeye, a journalist and a lawyer who was fifteen years older than her. He was an admirer of General George Boulanger, an ex-minister for war, who was fighting for the cause of Alsace and Lorraine, two French regions which were under German domination. Maud identified Ireland's problems with those of France and joined the movement at Lucien's request. She learned from him that she must follow her ideals and by the time she became old enough to take possession of her father's estate she realised that she was financially secured and she can dedicate all her time to the Irish cause. In Paris she offered her help to the Boulangist party and she was even sent to Russia with some papers that proved France's allegiance to Russia. In her journey, she realized that politics was more suitable for her than the theatre, so when she returned to Ireland she dedicated herself to the Irish cause.

Back in Dublin Maud visited the founder of the Irish Land League, Michael Davitt and expressed her opinions regarding the means that needed to be used in order to escape British rule. According to her, violence was more effective than any other means of fighting against England, but neither Davitt, nor John O’Leary, whom she later met, agreed with her methods. And yet, she was invited at the male club founded by Charles Hubert Oldham – the Contemporary Club – and soon pictures of her would hang all around club walls. There she met all the important figures that would later participate to the Celtic Revival and through them she met Ellen O’Leary, the one responsible for awakening Maud’s interest for poetry, which would later bring her and Yeats together.

Although Yeats and Maud Gonne fought for the same cause, their means were slightly different. While Yeats was attempting to make a change through his literary work, Maud started giving passionate speeches in order to stop the evictions of Irish peasants from their homes. In her opinion, Yeats was merely a boy, although she knew he was one year older than her, and despite his visible admiration for her, she would not pay much attention to him, as her heart already belonged to her mature lover, Lucien Millevoye, to whom she had also bore a son. Thus, while Yeats was hopelessly in love with her and spent his time writing poems for and about her, she gave all her attention to the Irish cause, to Lucien and to their child.

Yeats’s feelings for Maud were troubling from the beginning. It is known that he did not confess his love for a long time, but because they gradually developed a beautiful friendship, Yeats knew about all the men in Maud’s life, except Lucien. Since everybody saw her as an incredibly beautiful woman, there were always suitors fighting for her heart, and although she did not pay much attention to any of them, the young poet felt jealous and sad at the same time, as if he had anticipated that they would never share anything more than friendship. He knew she was not the kind of woman that would accept marrying a young poet who had nothing but his dreams, and his poem “He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven” accurately describes his thoughts:

“Had I the heaven’s embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.”

Despite Maud’s connection to various men who were charmed by her beauty, she always remained faithful to her lover. She enjoyed being his mistress rather than his wife because this position offered her the freedom she needed to keep fighting for the Irish cause. Her actions over the years prove that her country’s situation was more important to her than anything else. She willingly used her beauty to charm powerful men who could offer her some support, and though there were many who never took her seriously, there were also others who offered valuable help. One of them was John Morton, a young barrister who helped her in her attempt to free the Donegal prisoners, although his relationship with her affected his career.

Maud’s involvement in politics was meant to bring her “the status of an Irish Joan of Arc,” [2] but also a lot of troubles. Yeats’s perceived her commitment to politics as his major rival to her heart, but soon he would not be the only one disturbed by her political activism. The authorities

considered her responsible for preventing the eviction in Donegal and she was about to be arrested. However, she left the country very quickly in order to escape prison and continued her work in France. Because she couldn't return and be part of the action, Maud began writing about Ireland's situation. She published many articles in French newspapers and soon all the European countries discovered the problems that Ireland was facing. This might not have been a solution to the desperate situation of Irish people, but it definitely left a stain on Britain's reputation. Soon enough Maud would return to Ireland and continue her political activities even though many of the Nationalist leaders turned their back on her once she was in danger to be taken to prison.

Meanwhile, Yeats was engaged in his occult studies and he would soon discover that Maud shared his interest. She would call on him whenever she needed a friend and he would always be by her side to offer her protection if she needed it. When he had finally found the courage to propose to her she refused to marry him, and yet their friendship continued to gain strength. They took a trip together to Howth, a place of great significance for both of them and here they spent a lot of time talking about his work, her life, and everything they had in common. However, she never told him that she had a child with the man she loved, maybe because she wanted to keep her reputation or maybe because she enjoyed Yeats's attention and unconditional love, which might have diminished if he had known that her heart already belonged to someone else.

Their trip to Howth was suddenly interrupted by a tragic event. Lucien was calling her to Paris because their child was suffering from a terrible illness – meningitis. Unfortunately, when she arrived, the small baby was too seriously ill and he passed away shortly after. Consumed with grief, she started feeling guilty for not spending enough time with her son. The pain she felt amplified when other important people to her died and it probably reached its climax with the death of Parnell, the man she considered to be a true hero.

Tragedy and death had deepened Maud's interest in the occult and strengthened her friendship with Yeats. She knew he believed in reincarnation and she confessed to him that a little boy she had adopted had died, hoping that he would be able to offer her some closure. There was nothing much that Yeats could do for her, but she managed to find her solace in an idea she heard from George Russell according to which a child could reincarnate and return to his parents really soon after he dies. Soon enough, she would join the Order of the Golden Dawn, where Yeats was already a member, and together they would turn their attention to magic and they would engage in all sort of occult, spiritual and magical practices.

Despite having similar purposes, Maud and Yeats's ways to achieve their goals were quite different. She would put herself in the middle of the events, she would spend time among common people, she would raise funds for the evicted people, she would support the political prisoners and she would give long, vivid speeches every time she had the chance. Yeats, on the other hand, believed that he would be able to make a difference through his work. In 1892 he founded the National Literary Society in Dublin and through it he hoped to create and spread an original Irish culture, one that would find its roots in mythology and history, and everything else that belonged to Ireland. Maud often considered him a snob because he wrote about Ireland, but never really met any common people, so she believed he was not entirely aware of the peasantry's desperate situation. Besides, she considered that common people had neither time, nor money to read poetry, so his efforts were directed towards the upper-classes, whereas the lower classes left to suffer in silence.

Their contradictory opinions persisted even though they worked together for their common cause. They used to make a very good team, so many people thought of them as a couple, although Maud had overtly told Yeats that she needed him to be her friend, not her lover. However, the young poet believed that if he would persist in his wooing, she would finally accept him as her husband. Right after she had refused his proposal once more, she became seriously ill and returned to Paris, where she was reunited with her lover, to whom she would bore another child. Again she hid her relationship with Lucien from Yeats and although she told him about her pregnancy, in her biography she said that her daughter, Iseult, was adopted.

Soon after the birth of her daughter, Maud would leave Paris again. Yeats had rented a castle and invited her to spend some time with him in the place he believed to be filled with invisible spirits. There they performed all sorts of rituals that apparently allowed them to communicate with ancient Irish people who could help them in their quest for Irish independence. And yet, despite spending so much time together, Maud was unable to offer Yeats anything more than friendship. Soon enough, Yeats would try to move on to another woman – Olivia Shakespear – with whom he had a love affair that lasted until Maud started giving him hope again.

Though in the real world Maud would never become his wife, they were reunited in a spiritual marriage. One day, when Yeats visited her, she recounted to him what she had dreamed that night. In her dream she was taken away by a spirit and carried to a place where there were many other spirits. Among them she recognized his face and she was told that she had become his wife. Because of her belief in occult and spiritual practices, she did not interpret her dream as a projection of her most intimate thoughts and desires, but rather as a confirmation of the special bond between them. She felt that they did not need to be husband and wife because on a spiritual level they already were, so she kissed him to seal their union. Soon she would feel embarrassed for what she did and she apologized, maybe because she must have realised that for Yeats – who was still deeply in love with her – that episode must have been very confusing. On this occasion she found the courage to tell him about Lucien and the children they had together. Thus Yeats had finally come to realise that he must move on with his life, and yet, the pain he felt was even bigger than before she had told him the truth about her. Nevertheless in his unconsummated love for Maud Gonne, Yeats found the resources to survive and become a mature man and artist. He took his sorrows and pains and transformed them into beautiful poems that would sometime serve as a source of spiritual comfort for the generations yet to come.

Having disclosed the truth about her private life, Maud was now able to continue her romance with Lucien. However, their romance ended soon after she had revealed her affair to Yeats because she discovered that Lucien had been unfaithful to her. Yeats renewed his proposal again, suggesting her that she should give up politics and spend a quiet life by his side, surrounded by artists and literature. Of course she would decline his offer because now, when the man she had loved for thirteen years had left her for another woman, politics was her only refuge.

Soon after she broke up with Lucien, Maud met the Irish Republican John MacBride, whom she married although everybody considered they would not make a good couple because of their contrasting personalities. Marrying him, she had accomplished her goal to become the wife of a politician, but she had also embarked on a dysfunctional relationship that would not bring her any happiness and would break Yeats's heart once again. He had imagined that Maud

would finally accept him now that Lucien was no longer a part of her life, so the news that Maud had married someone else soon after she had rejected his proposal came as a shock. In his grip of sadness he returned to poetry and produced a beautiful poem that closely expresses how he felt at that time:

“Never give all the heart, for love
Will hardly seem worth thinking of
To passionate women if it seem
Certain, and they never dream
That it fades out from kiss to kiss;
For everything that's lovely is
But a brief, dreamy, kind delight.
O never give the heart outright,
For they, for all smooth lips can say,
Have given their hearts up to the play.
And who could play it well enough
If deaf and dumb and blind with love?
He that made this knows all the cost,
For he gave all his heart and lost.” [3]

The only good thing that came out of Maud’s marriage to John MacBride was their son Sean. Soon after his birth, Maud could no longer stand her husband’s physical and verbal violence and she decided to divorce him. However, because she had married him in Catholic Church, she could not get the divorce, but she was granted a separation and the custody of their son. And yet, her misery did not end when she had finally escaped her violent and drunk husband. During her first trip to Dublin after she was separated from her husband, she realised that she had lost the sympathy of the Irish people, which must have made her very unhappy, since she had spent her entire life fighting for her people. Though she still had Yeats and some of her closest friends by her side, she felt betrayed by her own people and decided to spend some time away from Ireland. Thereafter Yeats frequently visited her in France, but he gradually lost any hope that she would ever become his wife.

When World War I broke out Maud had already returned to her usual activities. In Ireland she had helped in the school meals campaign and in France she enlisted in the Red Cross to help the soldiers wounded on the battlefield, while Yeats had abandoned his political activities and focused more on writing. At the time when the 1916 Easter Rising took place, both Maud and Yeats were away from Ireland. The news came as a surprise for both of them, but Yeats was even more surprised than her. He had always hoped to establish a new cultural identity for his country through his work, not through the use of violence, and yet, when the Eastern Rising leading figures were executed, he started wondering whether his methods will ever be effective. He felt sorry for the ones who have lost their lives for their country and yet he realised their sacrifice turned them into martyrs, and soon the Irishmen’s hatred for Ireland would reach a whole new level.

John MacBride was one of the leaders of the Easter Rising so when he died for his country, Maud became the proud widow of one of Ireland’s heroes, a status which pleased her a lot. Despite the problems she had had with her husband while they were together, she now wanted to honour his memory and, above all, she wanted to return to Ireland and be seen as the

widow of one of those people who have sacrificed their lives for their country. Yeats too had changed his opinion about John MacBride and praised him in his poem “Easter 1916”:

“I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.” [4]

Since Maud was now a widow and Yeats was assuming that her Catholicism was the main factor that prevented her from marrying him, he proposed to her again. He was refused, as always, and he now turned to Maud’s daughter, Iseult, who had grown up as beautiful as her mother. She rejected his proposal as well, and he would soon be married to Georgina Hyde-Lees, a wealthy young woman who shared his interest in literature and the occult and would help him with his work through her automatic writing. Meanwhile, Maud was experiencing many difficulties. She had been taken to a military prison at the request of the chief secretary for Ireland to arrest all known Nationalist Leaders [5], her sister Kathleen had died, her half-sister’s husband had been put in prison without a trial for the third time and her health had deteriorated so much that she wouldn’t have survived if she hadn’t been allowed to receive proper medical care at a sanatorium in England. However, she would soon discharge herself and return to Dublin with both of her children, although she wasn’t allowed to do that. Yeats and Georgina, who was seven months pregnant at that time, were living in Maud’s house, but when she arrived at their door Yeats wouldn’t let her in, fearing that the police might come after her and such a situation would hurt his wife.

During the following years Maud and her son Sean involved in many political activities that would often put them in jail. Yeats, on the other hand, became a Senator of the Irish Free State, which in Maud’s opinion was a compromise solution to Ireland’s problems. Though she did not speak to him for ten years, he was the one who put her out of jail. Their political differences kept them apart for the rest of their lives and they only met on few occasions. The last time they visited each other, they reminisced about the past and Yeats left her with the impression that he still regrets they were never together. Though he enjoyed the life he had with his beautiful wife and their two children, Maud was the woman he appreciated and loved the most. She was his source of happiness and misery at the same time, his inspiration, his devoted friend, his “spiritual wife”, and maybe his soul mate. She was the one for whom he wrote many of his most brilliant poems, and though there may be many poems that express the range of emotions that Yeats felt for Maud Gonne, there is one that sums up all his feeling:

“When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,

And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.” [6]

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