

ROMANTICIZING MAUD GONNE AND MOTHERLAND IN YEATS'S EARLY POETRY

*Rashmi Chaudhary

**Dr Shilpi Bhattacharya

Paper Received: 23.04.2022 / Paper Accepted: 24.06.2022 / Paper Published: 30.06.2022

Corresponding Author: Rashmi Chaudhary; doi:10.46360/globus.edu.220221022

Abstract

William Butler Yeats (1865-1929) is often considered the last of Romantics for continuing the Romantic tradition. Yeats began as one of the last Romantics and retained this title till the end, modifying and extending his native cultural and literary traditions. Alike other modernist writers, the poet did not draw his images from the industrial and urban life and did not elevate them to the height of poetic passion but used the current living language along the line of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth so as to enable the masses to understand and appreciate his contents and concerns. Yeats received the Romantic tradition of love from the Romantic tradition of 19th century and the Renaissance courtly culture. His early poetry is predominantly characterized by the Renaissance virtues of courtly culture such as courtesy, grace, proportion, decorum, decorated code of conduct. In the early poetry, Maud as a dream woman is imaged with motherland. In the poems about Ireland, Maud is placed on the high pedestal, highlighting her as a symbol and source of proud and timeless beauty. In the Rose Poems, Maud is romanticized and immortalized as muse, goddess or a perfect being and beauty, visualizing her endowed with such attributes as dignity, liveliness and beauty essential for her to be qualified as his great love.

Keywords: Romantic Tradition, Renaissance, Courtly Tradition, Modernism, Pre-Raphaelite.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1929), the Irish poet and playwright is credited with founding and organizing the Celtic Renaissance. Yeats is often considered the last of Romantics for continuing the Romantic tradition, basing his poems on native subjects and settings in the face of cultural invasion on account of times of modernism. The poet began as one of the last Romantics and retained this title till the end, modifying and extending his native cultural and literary traditions. Both as a man and poet, Yeats gave more importance country side, including peasants and landed aristocracy alike than the city dwellers from the bottom to the top. Alike other modernist writers, the poet did not draw his images from the industrial and urban life and did not elevate them to the height of poetic passion but used the current living language along the line of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth so as to enable the masses to understand and appreciate his contents and concerns.

Yeats received the Romantic tradition of love from the Romantic tradition of 19th century and the Renaissance courtly culture. His early poetry is predominantly characterized by the Renaissance virtues of courtly culture such as courtesy, grace, proportion, decorum, decorated code of conduct. In virtue of courtesy as an inseparable part of female beauty is tempered with romantic tone, and Renaissance romanticism and beauty images turn concrete, assuming aspects of character and conduct. It is the Courtly culture of Renaissance that massively helped him in forming and manifesting his romantic ideals and ideas. In the context of Courtly culture, C.S Lewis rightly remarks, "Sentiment is love... The lover is always abject, and displays obedience to his lady's lightest wish, however whimsical....The lover is the lady's man, he addresses his maiden which etymologically respects not my lady but my lord. The whole attitude has been rightly described as a feudalization of love" (2).

In the early poetry, Maud as a dream woman is imaged with motherland. In the poems about Ireland, Maud is placed on the high pedestal, highlighting her as a symbol and source of proud and timeless beauty. In the Rose Poems, Maud is romanticized and immortalized as muse, goddess or

*Research Scholar, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.

**Supervisor, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.

a perfect being and beauty, visualizing her endowed with such attributes as dignity, liveliness and beauty essential for her to be qualified as his great love. Considering her as an embodiment of pride, divine beauty and spiritual love, the poet associates her with the Rose in the way the Greek Goddess Aphrodite of immortality and love is associated. Yeats's poetry is ambivalent as it refers to a woman (Maud Gonne) and Ireland at the same time. Elizabeth Cullingford remarks, "Yeats found his inspiration in his love for Maud, and in his love for his country making them almost impossible to distinguish in reading his poetry (171). It can be remarked that a larger part of Yeats's brand of nationalism was "the result of the search for the one love in the arms of another" (Skelton and Saddlemeyer 22).

Maud is presented as a symbol of both mistress and motherland. In the very preface to "The Rose" Poems, Yeats makes the statement that the poems are "the only pathway where I can hope to see with my own eyes the Eternal Rose of beauty" (Allt and Alspash 846). The rose is treated as symbolic of both Gonne and Ireland, and, similarly, Maud is the symbol of both Ireland and ideal beauty. In "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Times" (1891), Yeats implores the Rose to help him find beauty in all aspects of life:

In dancing silver-sandaled on the sea,
Sing in their high and lonely melody
Come near, that no more blinded by man's fate
I find under the boughs of love and hate.
In all poor foolish things that live a day,
Eternal beauty wandering her way.
(*The Collection of W.B. Yeats's Poems* 23)

In the above extract, Yeats perceives in her persona the attributes of aristocracy, vivacity and loveliness as an essential qualification for his great love. Thus the rose becomes the poet's symbol of spiritual love and supreme beauty.

In the poem "The Rose of the World," the poet elevates Maud to the stature of the classical beauty of Helen of Troy, and then Deirdre, the Irish mythical queen. She is presented as an aloof and unachievable woman in the tradition of courtly love poetry. The poet uses nature symbols like "Rose," "Tree" and "Wind", and mythological characters to display her beauty and power, and Ireland is addressed as a woman with 'long hair and dimmed eyes.' Primarily, both Maud and motherland are compared to goddess and other mythical creatures, flawless and perfect being. Yeats "found his inspiration in his love for Maud, and in his love for his country making them almost impossible to distinguish in reading his poetry" (Cullingford 171).

In the early poetry, Yeats romanticizes Maud and motherland in the way of tradition of courtly love poetry. Despite the repeated refusal of the marriage proposal Yeats always remains steadfast and courteous and honest to her and never abusive and abrasive. Despite the successive denials that he received from her, she continued to be an object of his passion and poetry. Typically, a substantial part of his early poetry deals with romantic love that is largely based on the courtly love tradition. In this phase, Yeats looks to nature to achieve peace, happiness and betterment in life. Thomas Parkinson describes Yeats's early poetry as "praising always the remote and vague, yearning for a life of dream, casual reverie, and innocent inconsequential delight" (Parkinson 53). Yeats's early poetry "was frankly escapist,... and its purpose was not to interpret life but to compensate for it" (Daiches 124). The poet uses nature and cultural symbols to illustrate his love for Ireland and Maud Gonne as these symbols stand for both the motherland and his beloved. The poet uses the occult, legends, folklore as a vehicle to transport the reader to the romantic landscape. Yeats's poems of this period are more dream-like and ornate than his later poems.

In early poetry, Pre-Raphaelite in nature, Maud is imaged as a dream woman and merged with Ireland. While writing about Ireland, Maud is often placed on the pedestal. She is also present in "A Rose of Peace:"

If Michael, leader of God's host
When Heaven and Hell met,
Looked down on you from Heaven's door-post
He would his deeds forget
(*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 28)

Considering Maud an embodiment of divine beauty, the poet associates her with the Rose in the way the Greek Goddess Aphrodite of immortality and love is associated. The Rose is used "to associate with Greek goddess Aphrodite representing immortality and love. Soon after that, the rose began to symbolize beauty and love in general" (Seward 7). Conversely speaking, Alana White observes, "Rose represents love and woman, but at the same time pain and death" (20). In case of Yeats, Maud is not only a symbol and source of joys but also of sorrows. Further, Maud as an eternal beauty is compared to Helen of Troy in "The Rose of World" and even more archangels are urged to bow while positioning Maud right next to God: "Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode/ Before you were, or any hearts to beat" (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 24). Besides, she is also compared with old Greek statues of beautiful women. For the poet, she was an excellent masterpiece "with the face of some Greek statue. Her whole body seemed a master work of long labouring thought" (*Autobiography* 218). Throughout the early phase of his poetry, the poet,

being a poor dreamer, is left with nothing to offer her to impress her except his dreams and desires:

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.
(*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 59)

In the poem "The Rose upon the Rood of Time," the poet uses the Rose to explore a tension between the physical and ideal world. The speaker invites his beloved:

Come near, come near, come near –
Ah, leave me still
A little space for the rose-breath to fill!
Lest I no more hear common things that crave.
(*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 23)

The speaker invites the beloved to come near but the next moment asks her to maintain distance between them. It implies that he is averse to physical proximity and sexual union. The line "Lest I no more hear common things that crave" suggests his aversion to sexual cravings. The rose represents Ireland and its painful history or Maud Gonne and her political life or both Ireland and Maud Gonne. Beginning of the poem with the words: "Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days" can be understood as the stories of Celtic heroes of past times:

Come near, that no more blinded by man's fate,
I find under the boughs of love and hate,
In all poor foolish things that live a day,
Eternal beauty wandering on her way
(*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 23)

The poem "The Rose of the World" illustrates the view that though the earthly beauty is transient like a dream has been responsible for the major tragedies in the human world, including the Trojan War and death of Usna's children. The beloved (Maud Gonne) is compared to Helen of Troy who was held responsible for fierce battle between England and Ireland. The reference to Usna's children likens Maud Gonne to Deirdre, an Irish heroine who was destined to bring suffering on the area of Ulster, because too many men fell in love with her. In this poem, Yeats uses fantasy and various mythologies, particularly Greek and Celtic to express his emotional state caused by unresponsiveness of Maud Gonne. The following extract depicts the temporariness of the mortal life as compared to the eternal, spiritual quality of Beauty, symbolized by the rose:

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.
(*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 28)

The images of "red lips" and "mournful pride" suggest disastrous effect of the vainglorious beauty. The prohibited love between Helen and Paris led to the decade-long Trojan War, causing massacre. The poet uses Irish folklore to mention how female beauty also leads to the demise of children of Usna, Uisneach, who is regarded as the spiritual center of Ireland. The poet uses two legendary heroines to accentuate the bewitching yet 'terrible beauty' as possessed by Maud. The speaker expresses his apprehensions:

We and the laboring world are passing by:
Amid men's souls, that waver and give place
Like the pale waters in their wintry race,
Under the passing stars, foam of the sky,
Lives on this lonely face."
(*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 28)

In "The Rose of Peace," the speaker admires the bewitching beauty of his beloved envisaging the powerful Michael, the archangel in charge of God's war with the Satan. The rose stands for the union of the higher above and lower, the spiritual and the temporal. The rose of peace is the cosmic beauty as signified by the beloved. The ultimate union of the two worlds is defined in the following extract:

If Michael, leader of God's host
When Heaven and Hell are met,
Looked down on you from
He would his deeds forget
(*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 28)

The beauty of Maud Gonne is so commanding that that even Michael, the archangel in charge of God's war with Satan, would leave the battlefield for her. Instead of battling he would devote himself to praising Gonne's beauty peacefully and by doing so he would win over the sinners all over the world:

Brooding no more upon God's wars
In his divine homestead,
He would go weave out of the stars
A chaplet for your head.
(*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 28)

The poet-persona would knead a beautiful garland land of stars for her head to pay tribute to her beauty. The way he idealizes and idolizes her seems to be impossible in the human world.

The poem "The Rose of Battle" conveys the view that female love is superior to battle, as the former brings about peace and harmony whereas the latter breeds hatred and disorder. The poem authenticates the view by providing historical evidence. "Rose of

all Roses, Rose of all the World!" is symbolic of a beautiful dark woman who represents Irish nationalism. Being against any kind of violence, Yeats condemns battle to make better world order. Indirectly, the poem digs at the militant nationalism to which Maud Gonne is deeply attached. In other words, the poet shuns the cult of violence to win over the love of Maud Gonne. The poet seems to refer to the violent ways of love and beauty of the militant nationalist Maud Gonne with whom he remains in love for a long time. In the poem, the rose symbolizes discord and disorder of the physical world as well as individual quest for harmony and unity of the spiritual realm:

Rose of all Roses, Rose of all the world!
 The tall thought-woven sails, that flap unfurled
 Above the tide of hours, trouble the air,"
 And God's bell buoyed to be the water's care.
 (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 28)

The foregoing discussion reveals the fact that Yeats's early poetry is largely based on the Courtly Poetry and the Renaissance virtues of courtly culture such as courtesy, grace, proportion, decorum and decorated code of conduct dominate his early poetry. Courtesy as an inseparable part of female beauty and love is shown romantic in tone and temper. Both lady love and motherland are compared to goddess and other mythical creatures, flawless and perfect being. The rose, symbolic of both Ireland and ideal beauty, is presented as a source of pride and embodiment of eternal beauty. The lover voices apprehensions and fears in connection with his beloved who as he suspects, under the influence of materialism and mercantilism will soon lose beauty and love. On a broader canvas, the political and mercantile system is threatening both Maud Gonne and Irish nationalism, destroying the cultural and natural beauty of Irish landscape to perpetuate their materialist designs.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest by the author in this manuscript.

References

1. Allt, Peter and Alspach, R.K. (editors) (1968). *The Variorum Edition to of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Macmillan.
2. Daiches, David (1950). "W.B. Yeats" - *The Permanence of Yeats*. Edited by James Hall and Martin Steinman. The Macmillans, 118-139.
3. Lewis, C.S. (1938). *The Allegory of Love: A Study of Medieval Tradition*. Oxford UP.
4. Parkinson, Thomas (1971). *W.B. Yeats Self-Critic: A Study of His Early Verse*. University of California Press.
5. Skelton, R. and Saddlemyer, A. (editors) (1965). *The World of W.B. Yeats: Essays in Perspective*. Washington UP.
6. Yeats, W.B. (1953). *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*. Macmillan.
7. --- (2008). *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Wordsworth Editions Ltd.
8. Anna, White M. (1994). *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938*. W. W. Norton Company, Inc.