Love and Death as White Space in the Poetry of William Butler Yeats

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by
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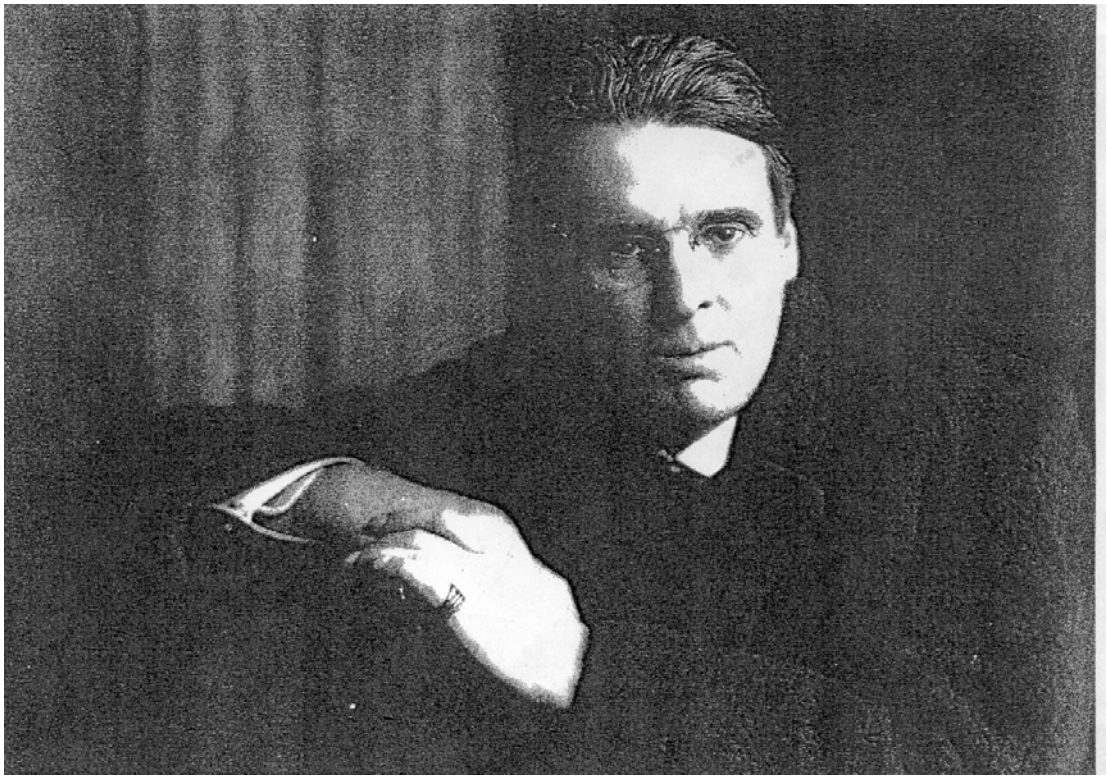
When I taught undergraduate courses in literature, students sometimes asked why they had to read poetry. Instead of answering their question directly, I asked them on one occasion to list some of the things they read routinely, unquestioningly. They mentioned newspapers, letters, comic strips, notices, instructions for assembling appliances, and so on. Then I asked them to pick the texts from their list that they thought would still be read a century or two later. They stared at me for a moment and then said that few of these texts would be read a month later.

I pointed to the collection of Yeats's poems in the hands of one of the students and said that those poems would still be read centuries later, just as we still read Shakespeare's poems and plays. This was just a trick to get the students' attention, but it did make some of us wonder about what it is that keeps renewing the vitality of great literature long after the death of the writer and of the culture that produced the writer.

Each generation has to give its own answer to this question, and today I hope to suggest an answer for our age by looking at the specific details of a few of Yeats's poems and by playing for you a tape of two of his poems in his own voice.



W.B.Y photographed by Lena Connell, *c*. 1910

The Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats started developing his style in the final decades of the nineteenth century, in the London of William Morris, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw. Before the century was over, he was already the most important Symbolist poet. Today he is generally ranked by critics among the two or three greatest poets who wrote in English in the twentieth century.

He lived from 1865 to 1939. These years were marked by some of the most turbulent events in Irish history, and many of Yeats's poems (such as "Easter 1916" or "September 1913") reflect this turbulence. His interest in Irish themes went beyond contemporary events, and his poems and plays are among the most powerful evocations of Irish myth, history, politics, and personal relationships. He was also deeply involved in occult philosophy, Eastern thought and mysticism, and a visionary schema concerning the cycles of history. One of the most complex figures in English literature, he is decidedly among the major poets for whom a single label such as "romantic" or "classical" is inadequate.

Starting out as a writer of dreamy, escapist poems with exotic themes and pre-Raphaelite overtones, he branched out in various directions, and before the nineteenth century was over, his language began to show a sculpted quality created by meticulous revisions. Even at the height of his career, Yeats was seldom able to produce more than six lines of verse in one day. He put so much effort into shaping his lines that he was physically exhausted after producing this maximum of six lines.

Intertwined with Irish themes, a personal obsession shows up repeatedly in Yeats's poems and plays over a period of some fifty years. This obsession involved the image of Maud Gonne. Yeats first met her in 1889, and he felt he had never seen a woman of such "great beauty--a woman with the complexion of apple blossoms, divine stature (she was six feet tall), graceful movement, charm, and vitality".

Maude Gonne ages twenty-three in 1889, the year WBY met her.

Her main purpose in life was the establishment of her concept of Irish nationalism. She, too, was Anglo-Irish, but she violently rejected everything that the Anglo-Irish represented. One of the founders of Inghinnide na hEireann (Daughters of Ireland), she took Yeats with her in 1898 on a lecture tour of England and Scotland to promote Irish nationalist causes. Later Yeats declared that these were the worst months of his life, and he decided that he would not participate in her political schemes again.

In 1900, Queen Victoria visited Dublin to watch 12,000 children on a grandstand from which they were to cheer the passing Queen. At the same time Maud Gonne marched a different group of 40,000 children onto a field where, in the presence of priests, the children swore an undying hatred for England until Irish freedom was won. Yeats wondered how many of the children would later carry bombs and rifles.

Rejection of Maud Gonne's cult of violence on the intellectual and political level did not mean, however, that Yeats had the power to exorcise her image on the emotional level. She had two children by a right-wing French politician named Lucien Millevoye, and after that relationship ended", Yeats begged her to marry him, but she refused. He did enter into what he believed was a "spiritual marriage" with her. She promised that she would never marry anyone else. In 1903, however, she did marry the high-spirited, handsome Major John MacBride, who had served as second-in-command of the Irish Transvaal Brigade in the Boer War. Yeats was devastated, as we can see in this poem:

A Deep-Sworn Vow

1. Others because you did not keep
2. That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine;
3. Yet always when I look death in the face,
4. When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
5. Or when I grow excited with wine,
6. Suddenly I meet your face.

The entire poem, including the title, contains only 46 words, and it bears the hallmark of Yeats's poetic style in terms of its handling of syntax, imagery, and semantic relationships. In the two opening lines, Yeats splits the main clause of the sentence: "Others...have been friends of mine." In this clause he is referring to the other women with whom he happened to develop close relationships because he had been turned down, as well as let down, by Maud. The subordinate clause "...because you did not keep that deep-sworn vow..." splits the main clause in a way that reflects the split in Yeats's feelings caused by the broken vow.

Yeats could have placed the subordinate clause at the beginning of the sentence and said: "Because you did not keep/That deep-sworn vow others have been friends of mine." In that case the sentence would have had left-branching syntax (in which subordinate material appears to the left of the main clause). Alternatively, he could have placed the subordinate clause at the end of the sentence. In that case, the syntax would have been right-branching. His decision to nest the subordinate clause within the main clause creates a rather effective fusion of syntax and sensibility.

Lines 3-5 develop the theme by using a chain of three adverbial clauses that all start with the word "when." The subject is the same in all three clauses: "In; the verb phrase, however, is different in each case: "look death in the face," "clamber to the heights of sleep," "grow excited with wine." The verb phrases may be different, but they have something in common. Each verb phrase describes an action that carries Yeats's mind toward deeper states of awareness, toward his subconscious or unconscious state of being.

The dramatic last line, the shortest line in the poem, actually cuts short his thoughts or reveries as he suddenly meets her face. No matter which level of his subconscious he reaches, there is her face. He may be thinking of death, or he may be drifting into sleep, or he may be stimulated by wine: in all of these altered states of mind the one constant entity that confronts him is her image.

The adverb "suddenly" that starts the last line combines with the earlier adverb "always" of line 3 to create a paradox. "Always" suggests a constant state, while "suddenly" suggests a momentary happening, and in ordinary situations the two adverbs would be semantically opposed to each other, but here the point is that no matter how successfully Yeats's conscious mind represses thoughts of her face, in his subconscious he "always" confronts her face "suddenly".

The poem never uses the word "love," but it does not need to. The word is there is the white space on the paper around the poem and between the lines of the poem. Factual details such as the name of the person being addressed, the specific nature of the vow that was broken, and the gender of the speaker, have all been left out or consigned to the white space. The great poets {such as Tennyson and Browning) who preceded Yeats in the nineteenth century relied far more on descriptive details. Yeats does share with them, however, the practice of using a unified voice or perspective. He does not use multiple voices of the type we see later in T.S. Eliot's Wasteland, nor do we see multiple perspectives in a single frame of the type that Picasso would later make famous.

Maud Gonne outlived Yeats by fourteen years, and so he was never in a position to write about her death, but there were two other women who died before he did, and he wrote an elegy with their names in the title: "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz". The two glamorous women were sisters, granddaughters of Sir Robert Gore-Booth, for whom Lissadell House was built. This mansion in Sligo Bay, mentioned in the elegy, was the first house Yeats visited in which he saw gracious and orderly living presided over by members of the Protestant ascendancy.

Constance, the older of the two sisters, married in 1900 a Polish count, Count Casimir de Markievicz. She was a passionate rebel against the Anglo-Irish landed class into which she was born. Sentenced to death for her part in the Easter 1916 Rising, she was lucky to have her sentence commuted and to be released in 1917. She lived till 1927 and was constantly involved in Irish politics during these last ten years of her life. Eva, who wrote poetry and worked for the women's suffrage movement, was not as violently inclined as her sister. She died in 1926, Constance in 1927. Yeats, as we saw earlier, disapproved of terrorism, and his affection for the two sisters involved complex feelings, distilled in this elegy written in 1927, shortly after Constance's death "in a hospital in a slum quarter in Dublin, at her own wish among the poor, thousands of whom followed her coffin at a public funeral":

The sisters Constance (later Makievicz) and Eva Gore-Booth in the early 1890s, at the time W.B.Y. first saw them.

In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz

1. The light of evening, Lissadell,
2. Great windows open to the south,
3. Two girls in silk kimonos, both
4. Beautiful, one a gazelle.
5. But a raving autumn shears
6. Blossoms from the summer's wreath;
7. The older is condemned to death,
8. Pardoned, drags out lonely years
9. Conspiring among the ignorant.
10. I know not what the younger dreams –
11. Some vague Utopia - and she seems,
12. When withered old and skeleton gaunt,
13. An image of such politics.
14. Many a time I think to seek
15. One or the other out and speak
16. Of that old Georgian mansion, mix
19. Pictures of the mind, recall
20. That table and the talk of youth,
21. Two girls in silk kimonos, both
22. Beautiful, one a gazelle.

23. Dear shadows, now you know it all,
24. All the folly of a fight
25. With a common wrong or right.
26. The innocent and the beautiful
27. Have no enemy but time;
28. Arise and bid me strike a match
29. And strike another till time catch;
30. Should the conflagration climb,
31. Run till all the sages know.
32. We the great gazebo built.
33. They convicted us of guilt;
34. Bid me strike a match and blow.

The tradition of the English elegy reaches back to Old English poetry, and over the centuries various conventions have been followed by the greatest figures in English literature, such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Shelley, and Tennyson. Some of the conventions include invocation of amuse, expression of grief felt in the loss, a procession of mourners carrying the body, declaration of belief in some form of immortality, words of consolation in which the poet submits to the inevitable, and so on.

Yeats wrote some of the most extraordinary elegies in the English language, in which he took the form in new directions, without abandoning the traditional patterns. Instead of invoking a muse, he invokes the spirit of the old mansion where he first met the two sisters. Instead of referring to an actual corpse, he refers to Eva's body as being "withered old and skeleton gaunt," the body that used to be as graceful as a gazelle.

He expresses his disapproval of Constance's politics in blunt language of the type that is normally not used in elegies or in eulogies for the dead. Yeats wants to express his thoughts with full honesty, and at the same time he wants to show the contrast between his intellectual appraisal and his deepest feelings for the two girls. In the first stanza, lines 1-22, he refers to the girls in the third person. By the time he starts the second stanza, the girls are already dead, but he never uses the word "death." The two girls die in the white space between the two stanzas.

In the second stanza, Yeats addresses them in the second person: "Dear shadows now you know it all..." By the time he reaches the end of the poem, he switches to the first person We: "We the great gazebo built..." This movement in the poem from third to second to first person shows how Yeats moved from intellectual distance to emotional identity with the two girls. In the first stanza, there is some harsh language, but in the second stanza Yeats is now the supplicant. In line 29, he pleads with the two dead girls to command him: "Arise and bid me strike a match..."

It does not matter what he thought of them on the intellectual level. Emotionally he is their follower now, and he is willing to join their cause and become a terrorist in their spirit world, where he will set fire to time, the enemy of the innocent and the beautiful. He recalls the great gazebo in Lissadell, and it becomes symbolic of all that he admired and loved in the company of the two sisters when they were young and beautiful and the "raving autumn" of line 5 had not yet sheared

their beauty. In terms of the traditional elegy, Yeats does submit to the inevitable, but his language and technique are powerful enough to enable the elegy as a form to enlarge its domain.

The white space between or around Yeats's stanzas is not only an area in which Yeats's thoughts remain unverbalized but also an area in which the reader is compelled to work creatively. It is the area in which poet and reader collaborate to create invisible form. In the two poems we have examined, white space becomes nonverbal territory for developing separately the themes of love and death, and in a poem he wrote in 1922 the two themes are intertwined.

You will recall that Maud Gonne married Major MacBride in 1903. They separated in 1905. In 1916, Major MacBride was executed by the British for his part in the Easter 1916 Rising, and in the summer of 1916 the widowed Maud was in Normandy, working in a hospital, nursing people wounded in the war. Yeats proposed marriage again, and she turned him down again. The following year he proposed to her daughter Iseult, who had worked for him as a secretary, and she, too, refused him. She used to refer to him as "Uncle Willie".

Maud Gonne photographed by Reutlinger

Iseult Gonne photographed by Reutlinge at the same time.

Later in the same year of 1917, he married George Hyde-Lees, whom he had first met in 1911. He was 52 in the year of his marriage; she was 22. Some of the poems he produced in the remaining 22 years of his life (such as the Byzantium poems) are among the most famous works in the English language. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923.

Mrs. W. B. Yeats 1895-1968. 'Red-Brown hair and a high colour which she sets off by wearing dark green in her clothes and earrings –W.B.Y. to his father. 1917

The poem we will look at next was originally titled "Cuchulain. The Girl and the Fool. Later Yeats changed the title to "The Hero, the Girl, and the Fool." Cuchulain was an almost supernatural mythic hero of Ireland who won spectacular victories against powerful enemies and had tempestuous affairs with beautiful women, some of whom he discarded casually. In one of Yeats's plays, a former mistress of Cuchulain says:

"Women like us. the violent hour passed over .
Are flung into some corner like old nut-shells."

For Yeats, Cuchulain became a lifelong anti-self or mask. Whenever there was a crisis in his life, he ended up writing another poem or play that involved Cuchulain. The 1922 poem shows growing complexities in Yeats's view of the relationships between men and women:

The Hero, the Girl, and the Fool

1. The Girl. I rage at my own image in the glass
2. That is so unlike myself that when you praise it
3. It is as though you praised another, or even
4. Mocked me with praise of my mere opposite,
5. And when I wake towards morn I dread myself,
6. For the heart cries that what deception wins
7. Cruelty must keep; therefore be warned and go
8. If you have seen the image and not the woman.
9. The Hero. I have raged at my own strength because you have loved it.
10. The Girl . If you are no more strength than I am beauty

11. I had better find a convent and turn nun;
12. A nun at least has all men's reverence
13. And needs no cruelty.
The Hero . I have heard one say
14. That men have reverence for their holiness
15. And not themselves.
The Girl. Say on and say
16. That only God has loved us for ourselves,
17. But what care I that long for a man's love?
18. The Fool by the Roadside. When all works that have
19. From cradle run to grave
20. From grave to cradle run instead;
21. When thoughts that a fool
22. Has wound upon a spool
23. Are but loose thread, are but loose thread;
24. When cradle and spool are past
25. And I mere shade at last
26 Coagulate of stuff
27. Transparent like the wind,
28. I think that I may find
29. A faithful love, a faithful love.

The poem is highly dramatic even though no overt action takes place. Dramatic tension is created in the very opening line by the eye-rhyme between the words "rage" and "image". The letters a-g-e in the two words are pronounced differently but in the written form they create the illusion of a rhyme that matches the situation: a girl before her reflection which seems identical to her but really is not. She is not her reflection in the mirror any more than her real self is her external image, the image that she thinks the Hero has loved.

The tension grows in the following lines as she indicates that the praise of her image has been like praise of her "mere opposite" (suggestive of a pun involving "mirror opposite "?). She has begun to “dread" herself because she feels she is deceiving him, and her frustration is so unbearable that she warns him to leave if he cannot see the difference between her image and her real self. There may also be the unspoken fear in her mind that if he does confront "the woman" in her this real self may not be as lovable as the image.

The dramatic irony lies in her ignorance of the parallel conflict going on in the Hero's mind. He feels it is only his strength that has been loved, not his real self.

His terse revelation makes her toy with the escapist solution of becoming a nun, allegedly because a nun can win "men's reverence" without using cruelty. When he points out that a nun gets impersonal reverence for holiness and not the kind of personal masculine response which the Girl craves, her answer is tinged with despair as she voices her dissatisfaction with the traditional religious consolation for the limitations of human love. The poem may be at its saddest here. At the doorstep of maturity two lovers have almost become strangers to each other.

At this point, the Fool by the Roadside plays a role analogous to that of a Greek chorus as he expresses his thoughts from a Hindu-Buddhist perspective. Yeats was deeply influence by Eastern philosophy, and he believed in a theory of reincarnation. The wise quasi-Shakespearean Fool is probably "by the Roadside" because road imagery is used prominently in Hindu-Buddhist literature to describe spiritual journeys.

The Fool believes in a cyclic view of time instead of the linear one commonly accepted in the West, and he seems to be suggesting that the Hero and the Girl may need a different perspective in order to come to terms with their situation. The philosopher Heinrich Zimmer described such a perspective by commenting that in Eastern mythology and life, "only after everything has run its course into total annihilation and then been re-incubated in the boundlessness of the cosmic night, does the universe reappear in perfection, pristine, beautiful, and reborn."

Yeats shows no exchange of ideas between the Fool and the two lovers. There is white space that causes the Hero's and the Girl's lines to overlap (in lines 13 and 15), but the Fool's lines do not overlap at all with the preceding lines.

The Fool's lines are also distinguished from the earlier lines by the amount of repetition in the Fool's lines that endows them with a different kind of rhythm. In the Hero's and the Girl's lines, about 18% of the words are repeated within units of ten words, while in the Fool's speech more than 50% of the words are repeated within units of ten words. Since the Fool is talking about the repetition of cycles of time, it is only fitting that his words and phrases should be marked by rhythmic repetition.

The Fool may be implying that perfect love is not within the reach of the Hero and the Girl because they are unwilling or unable to transcend their past. In order to dramatize the details of such a past, Yeats might conceivably have written a full-length play of several acts. Regardless of what an individual reader's beliefs might be about love or death or reincarnation, all readers probably sense a troubled past in the lives of the, Hero and the Girl that led up to the present situation, and yet no external action takes place in the poem itself. Only great poetry can evoke such a powerful sense of past action in the midst of emotional stasis.

The originality that Yeats shows in his handling of the themes of love and death may be related to a deeper answer to the question raised at the beginning of this paper. Why does one need to read authors like Yeats? The deepest and most permanent anguish of human beings involves the awareness that no matter what one accomplishes, ultimately death annihilates everything. Death is the ultimate victor.

Great art such as Yeats's poetry creates new form that is the equivalent of renewed life, and only this kind of new form has the power to push back the border of Death's white space. The critic Andre Malraux suggested that human beings have always valued new form because intuitively they have known since the days of the cave paintings that it is only through creation of new form that we can summon from within ourselves images powerful enough to deny our own insignificance.

Now here are two of Yeats's early poems in his own voice:

The Song of the Old Mother

I rise in the dawn, and I kneel and blow
Till the seed of the fire flicker and glow;
And then I must scrub and bake and sweep
Till stars are beginning to blink and peep;
And the young lie long and dream in their bed
Of the matching of ribbons for bosom and head,
And their day goes over in idleness,
And they sigh if the wind but lift a tress;
While I must work because I am old,
And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings,
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.
I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.