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**Abstract**

W. B. Yeats was born on 13 June, 1865 in Sandymount, Dublin, Ireland, to the portrait-painter John Butler Yeats and Susan Mary Yeats (née Pollexfen). Although Yeats lived much of his adult life in the cities of Dublin and London, the rural west of Ireland was crucial to him as a poet. His imagination ranged widely over Ireland in the course of his creative life. Three places, in particular, came to dominate the poet's mind: Sligo in his twenties and thirties, Coole Park in Galway in his late thirties and forties, and Thoor Ballylee in his fifties and sixties. It is not too much to say that Coole Park functioned as the source and the location of Irish literature, as a sense of ethnic identity, and as the intellectual and imaginative centre for three decades from the turn of the century not only to Yeats but also to many others. This paper attempts to discuss thematic possibilities of the house and demesne in Yeats' poetry with specific emphasis on Coole Park.

Key words: *house, landscape, aristocracy, tradition, order, past, present*

## Introduction

Yeats' great friendship with Lady Gregory (1852-1932) dates back to 1896, when she asked him to visit Coole Park the following summer. Since 1897, Lady Gregory's old plain Georgian house, Coole Park, has become almost a second home to Yeats. Their friendship remained for more than three decades until her death in May, 1932. For Yeats, Coole Park was a place to rest the spirit and inspire the imagination. The Gregory family lived on the estate from 1768, when Richard Gregory, a chairman of the East India Company, bought 600 acres of land in Galway. He built an undistinguished house of local stone, started a fine collection of books and pictures, and extended the estate by purchasing an additional 1,000 acres. On her marriage to Sir William Gregory, a former governor of Ceylon, in 1880, Lady Gregory became the mistress of Coole, although a large part of the estate had been sold by Sir William to pay off debts. When he died in 1892, the estate was passed to their son Robert Gregory on the condition that Lady Gregory should continue to live there.

Lady Gregory's home was set in the barren flat country to the southeast of Galway approached by way of a tunnel of dense, shady and mysterious trees. A. Norman Jeffares describes the surroundings of the house: "Before the house lay a field, wide and sloping, to the left a dignified stable yard with grey stone buildings, to the right walled gardens, and behind at a little distance, the swan-inhabited lake which Yeats was shortly to make so well known."[1] The exterior scene of the house was blessed with dignity and spaciousness, while the interior full of the objects from the foreign countries where the Gregories had traveled and served, held a sophisticated and mellow charm. Needless to say, the atmosphere of the place put Yeats' mind at rest.

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## I

Yeats was suffering from nervous exhaustion when he

stayed at Coole Park for the first time in 1897 at the age of 32. Besides the peaceful surroundings of Coole Park, the physical presence of Lady Gregory was another important factor to the poet. Intellectual, emotional, kind, considerate, and practical as she was, Lady Gregory was willing to bring good health to Yeats, who looked so ill in trouble and despair. There is no doubt that Yeats discovered something noble not only in the house but also in the people with whom he got associated there such as Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde, A. E., William Sharp and others. Yeats recalls his mental state during his first visit to Coole in *Autobiographies*:

> I was involved in a miserable love affair, that had but for one belief interruption absorbed my thoughts for years past, and would for some years yet. My devotion might as well have been offered to an image in a milliners' window, or to a statue in a museum, but romantic doctrine had reached its extreme development...My health was giving way, my nerves had been wrecked. Finding that I could not work, and thinking the open air salutary, Lady Gregory brought me from cottage to cottage collecting folk-lore.[2]

Yeats' friendship with Maud Gonne was tantalizing at that time. Denis Donoghue explains Yeats' encounter with her: "Yeats first met Maud Gonne, if his account of the event is accurate, on 30 January 1889. Maud always maintained that they had already met at John O'Leary's house in Dublin. Neither of them can be praised for historical accuracy."[3] He quotes Yeats' version as follows:

> I was twenty-three years old when the troubling of my life began. I had heard from time to time in letters from Miss O'Leary, John O'Leary's sister, of a beautiful girl who had left the society of the Viceregal Court for Dublin nationalism. In after years I persuaded myself that I felt premonitory excitement at the first reading of her name. Presently she drove up to our 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 apples, and yet face and body had the beauty of lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty be-cause it changes least from youth to age, and a stature so great that she seemed of a divine race. (emphasis added)[4]

Stunned by her beauty, Yeats fell in love with Maud. Yeats first proposed marriage to her in 1891. Many of his unsuccessful proposals to Maud lasted until 1916. In the meantime, he continued to write a wonderful series of love poems concerning Maud.

From 1897 Lady Gregory and Yeats spent much time collecting folklore in the countryside around Coole and further afield, finding that the people they met retained many vivid stories and memories of the sidh,[5] herbal lore, magic, superstition, and changelings.[6] His stay at Coole brought Yeats physical nurture and comfort. He appreciated kindness of Lady Gregory and tried to reciprocate her tender care by editing Irish folklore and writing as much as he could. It is noteworthy that Yeats discovered another extreme of society, the peasant, while collecting folklore. Lady Gregory came from Ascendancy stock and she shared many of the political views of the Anglo-Irish landlord class. She was as content to live off her rent-roll as any other owner of a Great House, but she was also an avid cultural nationalist, gathering folk tales in Galway much as Yeats had done in Sligo. It was at Coole that Yeats experienced the first of those semitrance thoughts which seemed part of a state between sleeping and waking. Moreover, he began to formulate his theories in praise of the extremes of society, the noble and the peasant. He was in continuous act of imaginative shaping and unshaping of the images of people and places. Apart from the physical well-being which came with this regularized life there was the beauty of Coole. He thought the lake the most beautiful place in the world, and the Galway plains were places of enchantment, where dwelt a people of imaginative possessions.

## Ⅱ

*The Wind among the Reeds,* his most elaborate verse, was published in 1899, followed by *In the Seven Woods* in 1904, and *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* in 1912. In 1899 Yeats founded the Irish Literary Theatre with Lady Gregory, George Moore and Edward Martyn, when his the-

atrical activity started in name and reality. *The Countess Cathleen* was produced in 1902. Through his discovery of the two classes of people, aristocracy and peasantry, and his new career as a dramatist after his experience of the unrequited love with Maud Gonne, the nature of Yeats' poetry changed dramatically around the turn of the century. He no longer relied on the elaborate mythology which he had created for himself out of the Romantic poets, the Celtic legends, folklore and a smattering of symbolism. Yeats' changed attitude came into being in a peculiarly negative fashion, a particularly personal way. The rarefied atmosphere of his love poetry written to Maud Gonne could not last forever. There was no longer just *The Wind among the Reeds,* but a notion of blame and a hint of disillusion began to emerge in the poems of *In the Seven Woods.* A more personal, more real note is conspicuous in the description of his love.

In "The Folly of Being Comforted" (1902) the strain of his hopeless passion vibrates through the poem in answer to the note of realism with which it opens:

> One that is ever kind said yesterday:
> 'Your well-beloved's hair has threads of grey,
> And little shadows come about her eyes;
> Time can but make it easier to be wise
> Though now it seems impossible, and so
> All that you need is patience.' (1-6)

"One that is ever kind," possibly suggesting Lady Gregory, insists that beauty does not last long, it is transient, time will heal brokenhearted feeling, and one comes to see the reality of ageing as one grows older. Yeats responds to this idea with "No." He uses very colloquial expression in this poem. The theme of love here is the very Yeats' own, whereas "The White Birds," one of his earlier poems, deals with his love for Maud Gonne more in a general sense. The first line of "The White Birds" reads: "I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!" (1). The "white birds" are associated with sorrow of love rather than passion of love. That sorrow is not so much personal one as general one.

"Adam's Curse" is an even more direct record of an actual happening in his life. The poem tells how the beloved, her sister and the poet had sat and talked of poetry one evening at the summer's end. The poet told of the difficulty of making verse; the friend murmured that it is also toil for women to be beautiful; and the poet replied :

> I said, 'It's certain there is no fine thing
> Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
> There have been lovers who thought love should be
> So much compounded of high courtesy
> That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
> Precedents out of beautiful old looks;
> Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.' (22-8)

"Adam's fall" implies that Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden for disobedience and afterwards had to live by their labour. Yeats thought that true love was a discipline that needed wisdom. In other words, each divines the secret of the other, and refusing to believe in the mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or beloved sees an image to copy in daily life, for love also creates the Mask. "Adam's Curse" ends with the following line:

> That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
> As weary-hearted as that hollow moon. (38-9)

The final conclusion is one of battled despair. The moon, recognized as the symbol of love when first mentioned, has become hollow. Yeats came to view the war between the sexes as an image of the antinomies existing everywhere in life.

## Ⅲ

The part played by Coole Park in the creation of his new belief in aristocracy was noteworthy. In "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation" he referred to a number of values attributed to Coole Park.

> How should the world be luckier if this house,
> Where passion and precision have been one
> Time out of mind, became too ruinous
> To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun? (1-4)

"This house" is, of course, Lady Gregory's home. The last line of the above refers to a belief that only an eagle can

stare into the sun without blinking. Yeats uses the eagle as a symbol for an active objective person. He also brings the idea of a proper emblem of aristocracy out of the eagle, by saying, "Where wings have memory of wings" (6). The final text of this poem shows that Yeats found peace, and quietude, and, above all an order in life. Yeats wrote about Lady Gregory's home:

> This house has enriched my soul out of measure because here life moves within restraint through gracious forms. Here there has been no compelled labour, no poverty thwarted impulse.[7]

Coole Park became Yeats' centre of image-making and his place. He loved order, old-established house, old families, everything which linked the present with the past.

In 1918 Lady Gregory had a serious blow in losing her only son Robert, a major in the Royal Flying Corps, who was shot down and killed over northern Italy. Robert Gregory was born in England in 1881 and educated at Harrow. After attending Oxford University, he studied art at the Slade School in London and with the painter Jacques Emile Blanche in Paris. Before completing his studies, he collaborated with Yeats with designs for *The Hour-Glass* (1903) and *The Shadowy Waters* (1904). After his marriage in 1907, Gregory lived much of his life at Coole Park with his own family. He was a promising painter and an able sportsman, excelling at cricket, boxing, rifle shooting, and horse riding. Yeats found something noble in Gregory and regarded him as an ideal figure because of his generous nature, keen intelligence, and deep love of Ireland. As a tribute to his talents, Yeats wrote a series of poems in which he deeply admired Gregory. The elegy of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is all the more touching for the following lines:

> I know that I shall meet my fate
> Somewhere among the clouds above;
> Those that I fight I do not hate,
> Those that I guard I do not love;
> My country is Kiltartan Cross,
> My countrymen Kiltartan's poor, (1-6)

Yeats opened the poem, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," by recalling those respectful figures that were dead like Lionel Johnson (1867-1902), a learned scholar in theology, John Millington Synge (1871-1909), a director and foremost dramatist of the Abbey Theatre, who shaped his works from the "passionate and simple" life of western Ireland, George Pollexfen (1839-1910), Yeats' maternal uncle, and Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), a poet and soldier, Yeats' ideal of Renaissance man, who died heroically in battle and was celebrated by Spenser in a famous elegy. In the sixth stanza, he wrote:

> I am accustomed to their lack of breath,
> But not that my dear friend's dear son,
> Our Sidney and our perfect man,
> Could share in that discourtesy of death. (5-8)

Calling Gregory "Our Sidney," Yeats saw him as a "perfect man" to embody all Renaissance virtues. The line "Soldier, scholar, horseman, he," recurs three times in the poem. He put all these three qualities of perfection into Gregory.

## Ⅳ

"The Wild Swans at Coole" written in 1916 is one of the most representative poems dealing with Coole Park. In this poem Yeats looks back on his first visit to Coole when he was grieving over Maud Gonne's refusal to return his love. Nineteen years later, he is still grieving, but a new element had joined in his grief. The swans symbolize the constancy which seemed less strong in his love for Maud Gonne. The second stanza of this poem opens:

> The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
> Since I first made my count; (7-8)

He remembers the love which had so troubled him in 1897 when he first came to Coole. He has been to France and been a little relieved at Maud's refusal of his last offer of marriage, but the swans are still unwearied:

> Unwearied still, lover by lover,
> They paddle in the cold
> Companionable streams or climb the air;
> Their hearts have not grown old;

Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still. (emphasis added) (19-24)

Yeats is shocked to realize that he has grown old, while the swans have not. The shifting of the tense of verbs is effectively used to epitomize the events of the past, present and future. The odd numbers in this poem as in "The nineteenth autumn" and "nine-and-fifty swans" are suggesting that the poem was written in a mood of intense depression and melancholy.

Strangely enough, there is a peculiar notion of his description of nature. In other words, there is no colour-related expression but only movement in nature with sound. Yeats' sense toward nature is different from that of English counterparts. Dorothy Wellesley, an English poetess, for example, shows her frustration through her correspondence with Yeats that he does not share appreciation of nature such as flowers with her. Kathleen Raine writes in her "Introduction" to *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* about the difference between the two:

> She [Dorothy Wellesley] was distressed, too, at his indifference to 'nature' in poetry, flowers and animals especially, so dear to English poets. She had little appreciation, on the other hand, of the importance, for him, of esoteric religious themes and those myths which are the clothing of metaphysical thought. A man of Yeats's many-sided greatness cannot reveal the whole of himself to any single person, and certainly Dorothy Wellesley's picture of her revered magician (so she once saw him in a dream) is not the whole Yeats. It is evident from a reading of the collection of his letters edited by Alan Wade and published in 1954, that he would reveal a certain side of himself to one or another friend, corresponding with one on political, with another on theatrical, another on esoteric subjects. He was, in this respect, a sensitive friend, never overriding his correspondent.[8]

This remark does not necessarily mean that Yeats lacks appreciation of nature, but his way of observing it is different from Wellesley's. One mustn't forget that Yeats, as a boy, paid many lengthy summer visits to his maternal grandparents, the Pollexfens, in Sligo, which left the first important influence in his life. From his grandparents, from his uncles and aunts and cousins came recollections of people of vivid character. It is obvious that those first years in Sligo and the subsequent visits when he was a growing boy colour all those lovely first poems. Lennox Robinson gives an account as to how deeply Yeats widened his knowledge about nature in Sligo:

> As a boy, he [Yeats] collected butterflies and insects,... He knew that 'cormorants shiver on the rocks', how long the grass grows on the weirs, how a heavy creel of his fish makes the wheels of a cart to creak and how the nets are laid out to dry or to be mended on the pebbly shore. He knew...how the little straws turn round and round in the frosty air.[9]

In 1917 Yeats purchased Thoor Ballylee near Coole Park. The tower began to emerge more in his poetry. It was used as a summer house for the Yeats family. The poem "A Prayer for my Daughter," for example, was set in this tower. It was written in 1919 right after Anne Yeats was born. Later in dramatic poems like "Coole Park, 1929" and "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," Yeats expressed much less optimistic view of Lady Gregory and her house. In the former poem he meditates upon "a swallow's flight" and "an aged woman and her house." He recalls again some figures with whom he got associated at Coole Park as in "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" : Douglas Hyde, John Synge, and two nephews of Lady Gregory. He compares those lovely people to swallows : "They came like swallows and like swallows went." (17) He foresees destiny of Lady Gregory by saying, "When all those rooms and passages are gone, / When nettles wave upon a shapeless mound / And saplings root among the broken stone" (26-8). The final stanza of the latter poem reads:

We were the last romantics—chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;
But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood. (41-8)

Symbolically it ends with a vision of decay of European culture. It is not only an elegy but also a farewell to civilization itself. Yeats paid the last summer visit with Lady Gregory at Coole in 1931. She passed away the following year. In a sense Lady Gregory was a mother-like figure for Yeats after the loss of his own mother in 1900, and her house was just like his second home.

Interestingly, it was not until 1932 that Yeats, at the age of 67, was able to buy a pleasant house for himself on the outskirts of Dublin—exactly the opposite side of the city from Sandymount, his birthplace. It had spacious grounds and gardens and a croquet-lawn, and till the last summer he delighted in playing croquet to the tune of rules of his own invention. He was proud of at last being a possessor of landed property, as there was no Yeats place—his father wandered all his life from one house to another in London or Dublin, and finally died in New York.

## Concluding Remarks

Jon Stallworthy in his *Between the Lines—W. B. Yeats's Poetry in the Making* states that he can think of no other English poet who has written so much, and so successfully, about so many individual people than Yeats. It implies that the initial impulse for his creative work came from his personal emotion commonly generated by a relationship with someone else. A love-poet will, of course, write about his beloved, but in Yeats, more than most poets, kinship and friendship stirred his poetic mind. In the poem "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" he wrote:

> Think where man's glory most begins and ends,
> And say my glory was I had such friends. (54-5)

Maud Gonne, Lady Gregory, Anne Gregory, Major Robert Gregory, Hugh Lane, Mabel Beardsley, Dorothy Wellesley: for and concerning these people Yeats wrote much of his finest poetry. He romanticized them, of course, cast their images in verbal bronze, giving them the larger-than-life-size stature of mythological figures. This he did because his vision was essentially dramatic. His early interest in the heroic mythology of Ireland, and his long association with the Abbey Theatre had given him an eye for the dramatic figure, gesture, and situation. Hence his love for the proud past, his despair at the ignoble and materialist present, and—sometimes—his hope for a future that would rediscover the traditional values. Almost everything he wrote, poetry, essay, and play, was dedicated to the task of restoring these ancient heroic values.

Yeats was intensely aware of people. I was fortunate enough to visit Miss Anne Yeats and Yeats' library twice in 1991, when she told me an interesting episode about her father. One day when she was a teen-ager, she painted her fingernails bright red, as she wanted to draw attention from her father. Against her great expectations, he said nothing about it. A few days later, however, he mentioned to her that he had noticed her painted nails. His observation of people was very precise, and yet he saw them for what they were and was delighted in what they saw, irrespective of whether it was ugly or beautiful, ludicrous or sublime. He saw what he wanted to see in people and gave a romantic view on them rather than a realistic one. Yeats was honest with himself to the end of his life, revealing his inner emotions through his works. There is no doubt that his friendship with Lady Gregory for more than three decades from his early thirties played an important role in his creative activity.

## Notes

Line references for quotations from Yeats' poems from the following source are given in parenthesis after the citation.

W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Arena, 1990).

1. A. Norman Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet* (London: Routledge, 1962) p. 117.
2. W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1961) p. 399.
3. Denis Donoghue, *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society* (U of California P, 1986) p. 220.
4. Donoghue, p. 220.
5. "Sidh" means a fairy rath (or fort) where the fairies are said to live.
6. A "changeling" is a child who was substituted for another child when they were both very young babies. In stories changelings were often taken or left by fairies.
7. W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs,* ed. Denis Donoghue (London:

Macmillan, 1972) p. 226.

8. Kathleen Raine, "Introduction" to *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (London: Oxford UP, 1940) p. xiii.
9. Lennox Robinson, "Personality," *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats 1865-1939*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares & K. G. W. Cross (London: Macmillan, 1965) p. 22.

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