

The Last Romantics:
Lady Gregory and the Poetry of W.B. Yeats



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THE LAST ROMANTICS

*We were the last romantics – chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The Book of the People...*
- W.B. Yeats, "Coole and Ballylee, 1931"

Introduction

Beginning in 1896, W.B. Yeats spent more than twenty summers at Coole Park with Lady Gregory. There they collaborated on plays, gathered folklore, and he wrote poetry. She was an invaluable aid to him in recovering from a near-breakdown caused by a serious nervous condition. Afterwards, Coole Park remained for him a place of respite and of peace. Lady Gregory rescued him from failing health and brought him to Coole – a place of wellbeing and productivity. He wrote of his first stay at Coole Park: "My life was giving way, my nerves had been wrecked. Finding that I could not work and thinking open air salutary, Lady Gregory brought me from cottage to cottage collecting folk tales."¹ As many scholars have noted, her influence on his life is very important. However, her impact on the styles and themes of his poetry is notable as well and has received less critical commentary.

¹ Salvadori, Corinna. *Yeats and Castiglione: poet and courtier*. (Dublin: A. Figgis, 1965), 25.

Yeats wrote many poems about Lady Gregory and her home at Coole Park. In these, he praises her as a model of nobility and culture. He speaks of Coole as a place of refuge and grace, invaluable as an example of the best of Ireland. Yeats was profoundly affected by Lady Gregory and her home and shows this clearly by writing so extensively about them. Yeats and Lady Gregory also collaborated on prose collections of folklore and on plays for the Abbey Theater. The work that these collaborations produced is demonstrably a combination of both minds. Lady Gregory wrote most of the dialogue for the plays and was responsible for the examples of peasant speech in the folklore collections. Thus Yeats's work shows the influence of Lady Gregory both in the content of his poems and in the style and substance of his prose works. As a figure of primary importance in Yeats's life, Lady Gregory could be expected to have an important influence on his poetry. Her thematic influence is most importantly as a figure of stability and tradition, a representation of Yeats's ideal of nobility. However, she affected Yeats's style through her own efforts to capture the sound of peasant speech. His poetry strives to preserve the power and purity of common language in order to communicate it with all Irish people. Thus a woman depicted as a symbol of nobility and refinement guided Yeats's poetry in the opposite direction, toward the language of the common people.

I. Coole Park

Lady Gregory fought throughout her life to preserve Coole Park, at first for her son Robert, and then after his death, for her grandson. The estate at Coole is in Gort County Galway in the west of Ireland and is now a wildlife park and visitor center. The house itself was torn down in 1941 after Lady Gregory sold it to the Irish government. She lived in the house until her death in 1932. Yeats explains her love for the estate in terms very much in line with his own view of what it represented. He attributes her love for the place to her "own strange feudal, almost medieval youth" that gave her a "sense of feudal responsibility. . . ."² For Yeats, the history of Coole Park is so pervasive that it affects even Lady Gregory's love for her home. Generations of noble landowners had owned the estate and their genteel way of life and views of the world permeated Yeats's ideas about Coole itself. His opinion of her is closely linked to the house in which he spent the majority of his time with her. She was many things to this poet. He wrote of her that, "She has been to me mother, friend, sister, and brother."³ The complexities of their relationship come to light even in this short sentence, as he unites male and female, companion and mentor, and parent and child relationships into his own friendship with Lady Gregory.

The first, and perhaps the clearest, role which she played in his life was that of establishing domestic order. In Coole Park, she provided him a place

² Kline, Gloria. *The Last Courtly Lover: Yeats and the idea of woman*. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983), 108.

³ Kline, 109.

where he could work in peace and with an ordered daily schedule. His ideas about the life of the nobility and the peace which he found at Coole were largely due to Lady Gregory's diligent efforts to provide him with a helpful working environment. She and her home represented for him order, peace, and poetic achievement. In some ways, Coole Park became synonymous with Lady Gregory herself in Yeats's mind and in his work.

Lady Gregory and her home are notably integrated in Yeats's poem "Coole Park, 1929." Yeats introduces her in this poem as "an aged woman," emphasizing her approaching death and unifying her with her doomed house.⁴ He also introduces the dying nature of both Lady Gregory's home and her social class. He opens with two images: "I meditate upon a swallow's flight,/ Upon an aged woman and her house...."⁵ As in "The Second Coming," in which Yeats writes, "the falcon cannot hear the falconer," birds often depict the chaos he sees in modern Ireland.⁶ Lady Gregory and her house form a single anchoring image and, in doing so, provide stark contrast to the falcon. Yeats describes the work which he and others accomplished at Coole as "That dance-like glory that those walls begot."⁷ Here he personifies the house as capable of producing children by begetting the products of the authors' work. The ability to produce offspring is a strictly feminine ability and reinforces the unity between the house and its

⁴ Finneran, Richard J. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, Revised Second Edition*. (New York: Scribener Paperback Poetry, 1996), 242.

⁵ *Collected Poems*, 242.

⁶ *Collected Poems*, 187.

⁷ *Collected Poems*, 242.

mistress. Lady Gregory made Coole Park a place of poetic achievement by inviting literary guests and scholars and allowing them to visit her estate to work and find refuge. By saying that the walls were responsible for poetic success, Yeats unites Lady Gregory and her house again. The poem concludes by reminding the reader that the two are nearly synonymous. Yeats writes,

Here, traveler, scholar, poet, take your stand
When all those rooms and passages are gone,
And dedicate. . .
A moment's memory to that laurelled head.⁸

The house is impermanent, especially in the troubled political atmosphere of Ireland in 1929, and Lady Gregory also has limited time left. However, Yeats must hope that his own poems will become permanent in the collective memory of the Irish people. If he can capture the good qualities of Coole and of Lady Gregory in his work, then perhaps some of it would survive even after the great house itself had been demolished.

Coole Park represents the nobility for which Yeats had such great respect and he sees the chaos of modern Ireland encroaching on the peace and stability he has found at Coole. For Yeats, poetry is a way of ensuring that Coole will survive in some form or another. Coole Park provided many things for Yeats. It gave him a place of rest and quiet away from the hustle of city crowds. In doing so, it also gave him respite from popular demands and a place in which to write poetry which was free from public influence. A.G. Stock writes that "Coole Park

⁸ Collected Poems, 242.

showed him, first of all, that a privileged aristocracy which took its freedom for granted could shelter the artist against the vulgarity of popular demands."⁹ Yeats wrote of his time there that he was able to create poetry, "without thought to anything but the beauty of the utility" of his work.¹⁰ The house was a key ingredient in formulating Yeats's ideal of the aristocracy. David Pierce explains that in Coole Park, Yeats found a symbol which was "at once dignified, secure, and in decline."¹¹ He saw peace, comfortable living, and gentility there that he could not find in the world outside Coole Park. He wrote of the house in "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation." In the poem he states that at Coole, "... passion and precision have been one/Time out of mind,"¹² where he establishes the reverence he holds for the Protestant Ascendancy which built the house and for the years "time out of mind" during which the nobility have held their position.¹³ He also stresses the influence which this long tradition has on his work, saying, "And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow/Where wings have memory of wings."¹⁴

Each new generation of Gregorys at Coole can remember their noble ancestors and take strength from that. Only in a place so saturated with history

⁹ Stock, A.G. *W.B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), 102.

¹⁰ Salvadori, 25.

¹¹ Pierce, David. *Yeats's Worlds: Ireland, England and the Poetic Imagination*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 235.

¹² *Collected Poems*, 95.

¹³ *Collected Poems*, 95.

¹⁴ *Collected Poems*, 95.

and custom could Yeats's thoughts successfully take flight. The remembered history of Coole and those who lived there provide inspiration to Yeats's own "eagle thoughts" and his poetry. In this poem, Yeats calls his poetry written at Coole, "...a written speech/ Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease."¹⁵ Thus the reader's image of Coole becomes a place where the history of nobility continues creating inspiration for Yeats's writing.

Yeats compares Lady Gregory to the Duchess in the ideal of the court created by Castiglione in *The Book of the Courtier*.¹⁶ In his journal, when Lady Gregory was dangerously ill, he wrote that he "heard Castiglione's phrase ringing in my memory, 'Never be it spoken without tears, the Dutchess, too, is dead.'"¹⁷ Lady Gregory also nursed Yeats through bouts of illness while he was at Coole Park and in doing so, more closely allied herself in the poet's mind to the Duchess, who likewise nurses Castiglione in the book. Corinna Salvadori writes that, "Yeats associated Lady Gregory in his mind with Elisabetta Gonzaga, Duchess of Urbino."¹⁸ *The Book of the Courtier* was the blueprint for the ideal nobleman and depicted the perfect court. Castiglione outlines the characteristics of the ideal courtier through discussions held in the Palace of Urbino by the Duchess, Lady Elisabetta Gonzaga. The unity in Yeats's vision of Lady Gregory and Coole Park may have established this parallel. Thus Yeats serves both the

¹⁵ Collected Poems, 95.

¹⁶ Salvadori, 28.

¹⁷ Salvadori, 28.

¹⁸ Salvadori, 26.

lady and the court because they are combined and allied in his mind. Coole Park fits the role of the Irish Urbino remarkably. The vast library and the many portraits in the house itself parallel the palace of Urbino.¹⁹ Yeats describes the house in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," emphasizing the courtly aspects of the house:

Beloved books that famous hands have bound,
Old marble heads, old pictures everywhere;
Great rooms where traveled men and children found
Content or joy...²⁰

Lady Gregory also invited famous and talented people to Coole, creating an atmosphere similar to that of Castiglione's work in which the educated and intelligent members of the court debate different aspects of courtly life. Corinna Salvadori writes that, "It was brilliant company and many of them are as famous as those who gathered around the Duchess Elizabetha. It is interesting to note that in his own elegiac poems Yeats lists his friends and gives a thought to each one, just as Castiglione does in his prefatory to *The Book of the Courtier*."²¹

The last important similarity between Coole and Urbino is the fact that both were in their prime at the end of an era. By the time Castiglione's book was published, Italy had abandoned the courtly ideal which he describes in favor of the power politics of the Medicis.²² Coole, too, was among the last of the estates of the Protestant Ascendancy to survive. The great houses were symbols of

¹⁹ Salvadori, 22-23.

²⁰ Collected Poems, 243.

²¹ Salvadori, 28.

²² Masterplots, 722.

everything that the leaders of the Irish rebellion sought to destroy. The house was saved from destruction only by the respect that Lady Gregory commanded from the common people who lived on her estate. When she died, the house was destroyed. Thus, both Coole and the Dutchess's court were the last of a dying kind. The parallel between Coole and Urbino helps the reader to understand Yeats's ideas about his own role at Coole. By using this comparison himself, Yeats stresses the importance of Coole as a continuation of the long history of courts and court poets. He also re-emphasizes the unity of Lady Gregory and her home. Yeats saw that the days when Coole Park could serve as an island of peace were numbered and sought to preserve it in his poetry as Castiglione did for Urbino. And just as Castiglione sought to preserve the noble traditions that he was part of by recording them, Yeats also seeks to capture Coole in his poems and in doing so to keep the good he finds there for the Irish people in the future.

Another technique that Yeats uses to unite Lady Gregory and her home is gyre imagery. Yeats's vast catalogue of poetry includes several types of gyres and revolving cycles of time. Lady Gregory, as a major influence on his work, holds her own significant place in those gyres. Yeats conveys the importance of her role in his work by placing her inside the gyres. The center of the gyre in much of Yeats's work demonstrates the failure of modern culture to provide an anchor for poetic achievement. In "The Second Coming" Yeats presents a picture

of the world in direct contrast to that which he found with Lady Gregory.²³ He explains that,

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold. . . ²⁴

Lady Gregory forms a center that can hold. In the next poem in the volume, "A Prayer for My Daughter," Yeats portrays Gregory as the ideal that he wants his daughter to become. She would be a solid center around which to fly. He says,

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
That all her thoughts may like the linnets be,
. . . Rooted in one dear perpetual place.²⁵

Thus she is the anchor around that keeps thoughts intact. In "Coole Park, 1929" Yeats reiterates this imagery in language even more similar to "The Second Coming." He describes Coole Park and Lady Gregory herself saying,

They came like swallows and like swallows went,
And yet a woman's powerful character
Could keep a swallow to its first intent.²⁶

The bird imagery continues here from the previously mentioned poems. A. G. Stock writes that Yeats, "sees her as a central personality, harmonizing, like the axis of one of his symbolic gyres, a group of creative minds in a design that makes each one greater than itself. . ." ²⁷ Later in the poem, he compares Lady

²³ Bloom, Harold. *William Butler Yeats*. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 381.

²⁴ *Collected Poems*, 187.

²⁵ *Collected Poems*, 188.

²⁶ *Collected Poems*, 242.

²⁷ Stock, 194.

Gregory to the gyre's center, a "compass-point" around which the guests at Coole Park could revolve and produce successful work. Coole and Lady Gregory are united in this image as both the physical place around which the poets can gather as well as the personality that holds them there. They represent a powerful refuge from the chaos of the modern Ireland which surrounded Yeats.

Lady Gregory's position as the central figure of Coole Park is not without its costs. Yeats's depiction of Lady Gregory presents her as the perfect hostess and idealized female character. With this role comes sexual conservatism. Lady Gregory sacrifices her own identity to ensure the survival of her estate for the future generation. Yeats makes this same statement again in "Prayer for My Daughter." He links female sexual development with the survival of the Anglo-Irish by merging women and the estate.²⁸ In the last stanza Yeats's daughter disappears into the ceremonious world of the Anglo-Irish, thus acknowledging that, as Allison says, "only by surrendering her individuality can the daughter serve the communal goods of custom and ceremony."²⁹ The cost of the Anglo-Irish community's success is the repression of individual women.

However, it is important to note that Yeats does not make this claim about women's social roles in all cases. There are some important examples which contradict this statement. In "Father and Child," Yeats's daughter asserts power over her father and the culture that he speaks for. The phrase in the poem that

²⁸ Allison, Jonathan, ed. *Yeats's Political Identities: Selected Essays*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 117.

²⁹ Allison, 117.

reads, "such lovely hair and his eyes are cold as the March wind," is a direct quote from his daughter defending an unsuitable childhood friend.³⁰ Not only does the character of the daughter defy her father, but her language demonstrates her triumph. Her father's reasons are poetically unconvincing, including words like "good," "bad," and "worst." Here, his daughter's evocative language triumphs over her father's dull words, thus denying his authority. There appear to be no cultural repercussions of her actions. Here, Yeats makes it clear that he does not consistently argue for the regulation and repression of women. Thus, when looking at Yeats's depiction of Lady Gregory, the reader has little reason to suspect that Yeats saw her strictly as a woman who could be used for the good of her society and discarded. By establishing that other female figures defy society and are the better for it, Yeats ensures that Lady Gregory could do the same. Thus, his depiction of her is a reflection of her character, rather than of his. Her own choices led her to be united with Coole Park in Yeats's eyes, rather than his inability to see women as independent from their roles in society.

Coole Park was also only a few miles from what Yeats would call his Tower, Ballylee. This proximity is important when examining the symbolism of both places. Yeats wrote of Ballylee in "Blood and the Moon" that

. . . this tower is my symbol; I declare

³⁰ Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler. *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry*. (Cambridge; New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 205.

This winding, gyring, spiring, treadmill of a stair is my
ancestral stair. . . ³¹

Thus by his own admission, the Ballylee tower was representative of Yeats's life and work. Standing tall, independent, proud and alone, it makes a magnificent symbol. But interpretation runs deeper than the tower itself. Lady Gregory negotiated the sale of the tower land to Yeats in 1916.³² Thus she was responsible for his obtaining the land and indirectly for everything that he produced because of it. It had once been a part of the Coole estate. David Pierce explains that, "Coole was only a few miles from Ballylee, its physical proximity a symbol of the cultural continuity [Yeats] sought for himself among the Anglo-Irish."³³ The connection between the two lands was important to Yeats in maintaining the unity that he sought in his years at Coole. In his poem "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," Yeats makes the connection between the two places unmistakable. He writes that,

Under my window-ledge the waters race
... Then darkening through "dark" Raftery's "cellar" drop
... Rise in a rocky place
In Coole demesne, and there to finish up
... What's water but the generated soul?³⁴

The river runs through the tower property and stops its flow in Coole Park. By comparing water to the generated soul, Yeats conveys to his reader that the most

³¹ Collected Poems, 237.

³² Khofeldt, Mary Lou. *Lady Gregory, A Biography*. (New York: Atheneum, 1984), 271.

³³ Pierce, 239.

³⁴ Collected Poems, 243.

important product of his life, his poetry, all runs towards Coole Park. And importantly, it does not return there by an unknown route, it travels through Raftery's "cellar." Raftery was the most famous traveling poet in Ireland. His work was performed orally by him and by others during his life and was recorded haphazardly. His skill as a poet and performer made him a mythic figure during his own time and his legend permeated the tales of the Irish peasantry during the end of the 19th century. He died approximately sixty years before Lady Gregory began her work collecting folk tales, but his legend was so pervasive that many people asserted that Raftery still lived.³⁵ Raftery was the symbol of Irish folk traditions and a favorite of Lady Gregory's. She writes extensively about him in *Poets and Dreamers* and he came to represent the tradition of peasant wisdom and the wandering bard of which he was so great a part. He represents the book of the people that Gregory had worked so hard to preserve through her writing and which Yeats, too, had incorporated into his work. Thus, through folklore and language, Yeats's poetry finds its ultimate destination in Coole Park itself and in the lady of that house. Coole Park here represents the social structure which Yeats sees as his ideal. The Anglo-Irish upper class and the idealized peasants are mutually interdependent in Yeats's view, each depending on the other to survive. Coole Park supports and protects the people, while their vitality and creativity give it life and inspiration.

³⁵ Gregory, Lady Augusta. "Visions and Beliefs," in *Selected Writings*. McDiarmid, Lucy and Maureen Waters, ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 98.

However, Yeats sees that this ideal cannot survive for long. He describes the way he sees men living in modern society as, "Man shifts about – all that great glory spent – / Like some poor Arab tribesman in his tent."³⁶ The great houses are disappearing and mankind is living a more transient life, thus destroying the ideals and benefits that the noble class had conferred on society. Yeats writes that the "high horse" is now "riderless." Among others, he refers to Robert Gregory here, Lady Gregory's son who has been killed in the war. These examples demonstrate that Yeats does not see the tradition of Coole Park continuing into the future. Instead he says, "The Anglo-Irish were the best Irish, but I can see very little future for them as the present belongs to that half-crazy Gaeldom which is growing dominant about us."³⁷ As a last resort, he seeks to preserve the nobility of the place and its owner through his poetry.

Lady Gregory, as A.G. Stock puts it, "embodied civilization" for Yeats.³⁸ However, he does not think that society will be able to recreate a replacement for her when she no longer fills that place. He writes in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" that he does not expect to see her equaled:

And I am in despair that time may bring
Approved patterns of women or of men
But not that self same excellence again.³⁹

³⁶ Collected Poems, 243.

³⁷Foster, R.F. *W.B. Yeats: A Life*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 438.

³⁸ Stock, 225.

³⁹ Collected Poems, 319.

The reasons behind this despair can be traced to the unity in Yeats's mind of Lady Gregory and her estate. He sees the anachronistic nature of Coole Park in the world of Parnell's Ireland, and he attributes much of Lady Gregory's "excellence" to her position as one of the disappearing nobility. Therefore he does not think that the developing Ireland, which will not have that noble class, will be able to produce someone to equal Lady Gregory.

For Yeats, Coole Park was more than a personal symbol. It represented the cultural unity that he wanted Ireland to achieve on a national level.⁴⁰ In "Coole Park, 1929," Yeats names other men who have worked at Coole—Synge, Hyde, Shawe-Taylor, and Hugh Lane.⁴¹ He does this so that the poem conveys more than his own personal appreciation for Lady Gregory and her home. With the inclusion of the others, Coole is now of national importance, valued by great men and producing historic work. However, Yeats sees that Coole will not last. In "Coole and Ballylee, 1929," Yeats calls Lady Gregory the "last inheritor."⁴² He foresees that the generations to come will not benefit from Coole Park the way he has. Thus, he seeks to preserve it in his poetry. By ensuring that the great minds who worked at Coole are also remembered, the importance of the estate itself is emphasized. Yeats again works to preserve what he values in his poetry because he knows it will not last long in Ireland.

⁴⁰Kelly, John "Friendship is All the House I Have." In *Lady Gregor: Fifty Years After*. Ann Saddlemeyer and Colin Smythe, ed. (Totowa, N.J. : Barnes & Noble, 1987), 256.

⁴¹ *Collected Poems*, 242.

⁴² Kelly, 253.

However, because of Yeats's fear that Lady Gregory and her home belonged to a vanishing world, he found inestimable benefits there. Coole Park and Lady Gregory's hospitality were a refuge for Yeats. It was a place of quiet and peace where he could work among beautiful surroundings and without the clamor of modern life in his ears. Yeats's poem, "A Prayer for My Daughter" expresses two important aspects of his feelings towards Coole and Lady Gregory. He describes the refuge that Coole provided and the admirable qualities of the nobility which Lady Gregory possesses. The poem begins in the midst of a thunderstorm and Yeats, in his tower at Ballylee, looks to see what protects him from its power. He writes,

There is no obstacle
But Gregory's wood and one bare hill
Whereby the haystack- and roof-leveling wind,
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed. . . ⁴³

Thus, even after he has left Coole Park, it protects him and those that he loves, here specifically his daughter, from the forces of the world. However, the protection is meager. Perhaps through the weakness of this protection, Yeats alludes to the precarious place that Coole Park holds in the Ireland of his day and the imminent destruction of the house that Yeats predicts. Just as it was a place of refuge for him while he lived and worked there, Coole remains as a bulwark protecting Yeats.

⁴³ Collected Poems, 188.

Another poem in which Yeats portrays Coole as a place of refuge is "In the Seven Woods." In this poem he describes the contrast between the world outside of Coole Park and the peace he finds in the Seven Woods, which were a part of the Gregory estate. He says,

... I have forgot awhile
Tara uprooted, and new commonness
On the throne and crying about the streets. . . ⁴⁴

The modern Ireland that Yeats knows is disorderly and has no respect for traditions. The new commonness refers to Edward VII and Alexandra, and Tara was the seat of the ancient kings of Ireland. The name means *place with a view* in Irish and this meaning is important to the poem.⁴⁵ If Tara is the symbol of Ireland's past glory and also a place from which the future can be viewed, then its destruction is even more fatal to Irish society. It means more than merely a loss of history. It also indicates the failure of modern Ireland to possess foresight or wisdom, since without the view from Tara, vision will be limited. Yeats also describes modern Ireland as having "paper flowers strung from post to post. . ."⁴⁶ These flowers decorated Dublin for the coronation of Edward VII.⁴⁷ This image is in stark contrast to the firm roots that the natural trees of Coole stand on. Modern Ireland is all show and no substance – paper flowers hung on man-made poles. Yeats fears and despises this aspect of his own generation because of

⁴⁴ Collected Poems, 77.

⁴⁵ Jeffares, A. Norman. *A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984), 73.

⁴⁶ Collected Poems, 77.

⁴⁷ Jeffares, 73.

the value he places on the ways of life of the nobility. He sees life at Coole Park as an ideal and writes against those who would see it destroyed. However, he knows that Coole will not provide lasting respite from modern chaos. He says that he may only rest there for "awhile," assuming that Coole will not survive for long. However, if his poetry succeeds, Yeats will preserve Coole for Ireland and the rest of humanity. The ideals which he perceives at Coole will survive after their physical realities have been destroyed.

In many of his poems, Yeats searches for a place of escape. In "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," he describes an early vision of this when he writes, "I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow. . ."⁴⁸ He looks for a place of quiet where the din of modern Ireland will not overpower what he hears in "the deep heart's core" – his poetry. And again, later in his career, Yeats paints another picture of an imaginary sanctuary where poetry was possible. In "Byzantium," he describes a place where, "At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit/ Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit. . ." and there are "images that yet/ Fresh images beget. . ." Thus throughout his career Yeats seeks escape in imagined places. Coole Park represents a real place where he could find what he sought – freedom from the pressures of the outside world and an atmosphere which allowed him to write successfully. He found more than just a place to work at Coole however; he found the language and many of the symbols with which to write his poetry as well.

⁴⁸ Collected Poems, 39

II. The Noble and the Beggarman: Yeats's Ideals of Noble and Peasant Classes

By sheltering Yeats from the hectic world of modern Ireland, which had proved so artistically unsuccessful, Coole Park and Lady Gregory made the noble class which they represent an integral part of Yeats's ideals of art. By showing Yeats that the nobility could rescue him and his art in this way, Lady Gregory ensured that Yeats's art would thenceforth be linked with the aristocracy which made it possible.⁴⁹ The ideals that he saw in life at Coole are present in many of Yeats's works. He created an image of nobility possessing courage, courtesy, and pure old bloodlines with great histories. He saw the peasant class as models for physical strength and wild recklessness.⁵⁰ Yeats did not concentrate on the middle classes of Ireland, but focused on these two groups. He writes,

Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose."⁵¹

Without religious convictions, Yeats needed to establish principles for his life and he thus creates myths of the two ideal types of men: the noble and the beggar man.⁵² The two are not opposites, but rather complement each other. Each provides Ireland with what the other lacks, and the two of them create a

⁴⁹ Stock, 102.

⁵⁰ Salvadori, 30.

⁵¹ Yeats, William Butler. *Essays and Introductions*. (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1961)

⁵² Salvadori, 30.

perfect whole. Thus Yeats builds order into the chaos of modern Ireland.

However, he sees that the upper class is crumbling even as he forms his ideals, and seeks to preserve their virtues in his poetry.

Yeats's ideal of the nobility can be found in his depiction of Coole Park and of Robert Gregory. At the close of "A Prayer for My Daughter," Yeats again refers to Coole. He says of his daughter,

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
. . . How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.⁵³

Thus Coole Park, with the traditions of the nobility and Lady Gregory's hospitality, has become something that he sees as essential to a happy life.

Ceremony and custom are two aspects of the life of the nobility that are unique to them. Yeats writes in his essay, *Poetry and Tradition*:

In life courtesy and self-possession, and in the arts style, are the sensible impressions of the free mind, for both arise out of a deliberate shaping of all things and from never being swept away, whatever the emotion, into confusion and dullness.⁵⁴

Yeats also expresses his ideas about the ideal noble class through his depictions of Robert Gregory. He describes in "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" the

⁵³ Collected Poems, 188.

⁵⁴ Yeats, William Butler. *Essays and Introductions*. (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1961), 251.

perfections that the young man exhibited as the prime example of his kind, the ideal noble class:

Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,
As 'twere life's epitome.
What made us dream that he could comb gray hair?⁵⁵

Robert Gregory takes on mythic proportions as Yeats describes him as such a perfect man that even age could never spoil him. This is yet another example of Yeats's awareness that the future of the Anglo-Irish upper class was not secure. Their greatest exemplar, Robert Gregory, had died and with him the future of his class. Lady Gregory forms the central figure, as mistress of Coole and Robert's mother, to represent the nobility. Yeats's praise of her can therefore be extended to include that which she represented, the ideal noble class.

Yeats's nobility is valued because it symbolizes dedication to tradition. Deborah Fleming explains that, "Yeats's 'aristocracy' is a mental or cultural elite in which wealth and power are not valued for their own sake but for the nation's cultural unity."⁵⁶ The symbols that Yeats uses to represent the protestant ascendancy are not those of leisure but, instead, are books, art and sculpture.⁵⁷ These symbols depict a class of Irish citizens essential to achieving communication between the upper and lower classes. In Yeats's poem, "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation," Coole Park is a symbol that guides the nation towards the realization of cultural unity.

⁵⁵ Collected Poems, 132.

⁵⁶ Fleming, 72.

⁵⁷ Fleming, 71.

Coole Park produced Yeats's view of the nobility and from it also comes his ideal of the peasant class. As part of Lady Gregory's efforts to help Yeats's recovery from his nervous condition in 1897, she took him with her as she collected folktales for her own research. Yeats came into contact with the people who lived on her estate. Her myth collections were the source of his own essays on that subject⁵⁸ and thus formed the primary source of his exposure to the peasant class. In "Under Ben Bulbin," he describes the common grave digger as an ideal of the vibrant peasant. He writes, "Though grave-diggers' toil is long,/Sharp their spades, their muscles strong."⁵⁹ He does not mention any of the pain of the peasant life, but rather writes only of their strength and of the tradition that they uphold. They are not insignificant, and Yeats confirms this when he continues the poem saying, "They but thrust their buried men/Back in the human mind again."⁶⁰ Their work is important because it allows the ongoing cycle of human life to continue.

This ideal peasantry contributed significantly in another way as well. Both Lady Gregory and Yeats use the phrase "book of the people" to refer to the language and oral traditions of the peasant class in Ireland. Lady Gregory gathered folk tales door to door throughout her estate and in other regions to create her book of the people. Lady Gregory's research into peasant mythology brought her closer to the common people than most of her peers. She gathered

⁵⁸ Kline, 104.

⁵⁹ *Collected Poems*, 325.

⁶⁰ *Collected Poems*, 325.

the work of the poet Raftery and studied him and his legends. Perhaps this is one reason that Yeats sees her as stable enough to hold the center of the gyre. Her unity with the common people gives her strength in the turmoil of politics in modern Ireland that reliance on nobility alone would not. Her estate was spared much of the wrath of the people in the civil wars of the early 20th century Ireland because of Lady Gregory's relationship with them. Thus, Yeats probably thought that Coole Park was more stable than other similar properties and was right in his belief. Close association with the common people gave Gregory respect among them and greater security than most of her peers.

Yeats used his poetry to create his own book of the people in which he included his own knowledge of the peasant class.⁶¹ T.R. Henn writes that Yeats's "collaboration with Lady Gregory, particularly over *Poets and Dreamers*, had shown him something of the resources of the peasant vocabulary, translated though this might be through Lady Gregory's 'Kiltartanese.'"⁶² In two poems particularly, Yeats conveys the importance of the book of the people. In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," Yeats restates this theme with clarity. He explains, "All that we did, all that we said or sang/Must come from contact with the soil. . ."⁶³ In retrospect, Yeats decides that everything good that he and his contemporaries wrote, came ultimately from the book of the people and what it

⁶¹ Henn, Thomas Rice. *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1952), 77.

⁶² Henn, 77.

⁶³ *Collected Poems*, 319.

represents. He refers specifically here to Lady Gregory and her research into folk mythology and John M. Synge's attempts to capture the sound of peasant speech. In "Under Ben Bulbin," he instructs the coming generations of Irish poets to include the book of the people. He says,

Sing whatever is well made,
Scorn the sort now growing up,
. . . Sing the peasantry. . . ⁶⁴

Thus Yeats conveys that the peasant tradition is essential to capturing the truth of even the modern Ireland. Pete Ure writes that for Yeats, "poetry must draw upon popular culture, the speech and the language. . ." ⁶⁵ As the position of the nobility, whom Yeats so admires, weakens, he must turn to what is left—the peasants. In order to communicate with them, however, Yeats adopts stylistic and thematic elements into his work that he thinks are close to the people.

However, he does not mean to write his poems to the peasants themselves. Most of those people were illiterate and would not have been likely to read his poems at all. Instead, he does appeal to what is common in every man. He means to write poetry that is accessible by everyone, rather than being written for the upper class only. In fact, he intended his work to be read by the very class of people that he disliked the most—the urban middle class.

Yeats has no kind words for the middle class of Ireland. He believed that the cultural strength of the nation could be improved by infusing the people with

⁶⁴ Collected Poems, 325.

⁶⁵ Ure, Peter. *Yeats and Anglo Irish Literature: Critical Essays*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1974), 45.

the strength of the peasant class. He describes the middle class saying that they have an, "attitude of mind more than an accident of birth."⁶⁶ Yeats criticizes the middle class for being timid and associates their preoccupation with utilitarianism with England.⁶⁷ He writes in *Poetry and Tradition* that the middle class are:

. . . a new class, which had begun to rise into power under the shadow of Parnell, would change the nature of the Irish movement, which, needing no longer great sacrifices, nor bringing any great risk to individuals, could do without exceptional men, and those activities of mind that are founded on the exceptional moment.⁶⁸

His poem, "At Galway Races," makes his distinction clear. He asserts that the peasants are brave, describing them as, "Hearers and hearteners of the work/Aye, horsemen of companions."⁶⁹ The middle class however, has nothing to contribute to the nation except their "timid breath." Thus, the absence of the middle class Irishman in Yeats's poetry is not accidental. Rather, his prejudice against their class makes this choice deliberate.

Yeats's idealized views of both the noble and peasant classes come under severe disapproval from many critics. W. J. McCormack describes Yeats's ideas as incorrect. He writes:

To see Ireland, or even part of Ireland, as "primitive" was a task greatly eased by the success of Protestant Ascendancy. For a start,

⁶⁶ "Irish Language and Irish Literature" quoted in Fleming, Deborah. *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism*. (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2001), 71.

⁶⁷ Fleming, 71.

⁶⁸ Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 259

⁶⁹ Fleming, 71.

the middle classes were evidently dismissed from the discussion by the polarized sectarianism of nineteenth-century Ireland. Second, the antique dignities and guilts which the myth of Protestant Ascendancy laid upon the landowning class rendered the invocation of medieval and feudal sources all the more plausible — one of Yeats's more ridiculous fictions was that in which he converted Augusta Persse's (Lady Gregory's) evangelical upbringing into a feudal apprenticeship.⁷⁰

However, Yeats's intent was never to accurately depict political or social realities of the Ireland that he lived in. Rather, he tried to recreate archetypal and ideal images that would allow his work to shape modern society.⁷¹ He desired the middle class to learn what traditional Irish culture had to offer in order to preserve it. Thus, Yeats writes to the middle class, among others, about the nobility and the peasants. Yeats created his myths of the "noble and the beggarman" so that his readers might understand the power of the ideal and come to appreciate national culture. In order to do this, however, Yeats needed more than images and symbols. He needed a language which would allow him to speak to people other than the nobility themselves. And it is this language which Lady Gregory herself is able to help Yeats discover.

⁷⁰ Fleming, 73.

⁷¹ Fleming, 74.

III. More than Dialogue: Lady Gregory's Influence on Yeats's Language

Lady Gregory's influence on Yeats's poetry also extends to the style of his poetry as well as the content. Her collections of myths, gathered from her estate, were an important source of Yeats's essays on myth.⁷² Also, collaborating with Lady Gregory on *Poets and Dreamers* showed Yeats some of the resources of the peasant vocabulary.⁷³ Lady Gregory was very successful in transposing the language of the peasants, her Kiltartan dialect, into dialogue for the stage. She wrote plays for the Abbey and often collaborated with Yeats to make the dialogue of his plays more natural. Henry Glassie writes of Lady Gregory in *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, saying:

The dynamic of storytelling involves more than dramatic alteration from one mode to the other. Suppose you had a story on paper. The written texts of Lady Gregory would serve you better than many purporting to be transcriptions from tape, for she did not eliminate all the repetitive opening words of lines in an effort to make prose out of stories. Those words, though less important in performance than silence and tone, are the conspicuous clues to the poetry of the tale.⁷⁴

In her diaries, Lady Gregory says that, "I began by writing bits of dialogue, when wanted."⁷⁵ However, her skills in this area soon had her working at more significant tasks. She explains that, "Mr. Yeats used to dictate parts of *Diarmud and Grania* to me, and I would suggest a sentence here and there. Then I as well

⁷² Kline, 104.

⁷³ Kline, 104.

⁷⁴ Glassie

⁷⁵ Saddlemyer, Ann. *In Defense of Lady Gregory, Playwright*. (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1966), 17.

as another [Douglas Hyde], helped fill in the spaces in *Where There is Nothing*.”⁷⁶ Yeats and Lady Gregory collaborated on *Kathleen ni Houlihan* as well, with Lady Gregory writing the dialogue to turn Yeats’s dream into country speech. Yeats attributes the success of that play largely to Lady Gregory’s influence. He wrote to her, “I have never made one [play] in sympathy with my audience except *Kathleen ni Houlihan* and that was you and a dream.”⁷⁷ Thus, the link between Lady Gregory’s Kiltartan speech and Yeats’s prose work and his plays is easily established. From this evidence, Lady Gregory seems more in touch with the peasant class than is Yeats. He wants to emulate her in this quality because he thinks that it is vital to ensuring the continuation of his art, which so deeply depends on communicating with the reader. Yeats adopts this style in order to communicate more successfully with the common people because he saw the aristocracy as a dying breed. His motivation for this stylistic development does not change when Yeats shifts from prose to poetry. However, the language in which he chooses to write both must be examined as well.

In any discussion of language and Irish poets, the Irish language must play an important role. Yeats never learned or wrote in Irish. Despite his desire to communicate with the Irish people and to create uniquely Irish literature, he thought that the Irish language was not the proper medium for this. Yeats did

⁷⁶ Saddlemyer, 17.

⁷⁷ Saddlemyer, Ann. “Augusta Gregory, Irish Nationalist: ‘After all, what is wanted but a hag and a voice?’” in Ronsley, Joseph, ed. *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*. (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier UP, 1977), 30.

not reject Gaelic completely. With Lady Gregory's help, he used the Irish rhythms and idioms in his works for the Abbey Theater to create a language that embodied the Irish spirit.⁷⁸ His main goal was to create, through art, the language of the people. Ironically, Irish was not the language of the people at this point in at time.⁷⁹ Cara McClintock writes that Yeats "sought to incorporate Gaelic rhythms and idioms into his writings, to create a bold new form of language that was artistic in nature, international in scope, and Irish in spirit."⁸⁰

Yeats felt that the Irish language was too politicized to allow successful works of art to be written in it. He writes in several essays that plays performed in Gaelic were merely propaganda. He says that, "Politics had made them sterile. They could not work seriously on their art...Even the highest political motives will not make an artist."⁸¹ Yeats turns to the Irish myths and to the language that Lady Gregory was working on to communicate his nationalism rather than the Gaelic language. He believed that English was the superior medium and explains this saying, "English has been the language in which the Irish cause has been debated and we have to struggle with traditional phrases and traditional points

⁷⁸ McClintock, Cara B. 'It will be very difficult to find a definition': Yeats, Language, and the Early Abbey Theatre" in Fleming, Deborah. *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism*. (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2001), 205.

⁷⁹ McClintock, 205.

⁸⁰ McClintock, 206.

⁸¹ Memoirs, 144 quoted in McClintock, 209.

of view.”⁸² Thus English was the more difficult language in which to write true Irish art and Yeats chose it for his medium for this reason.

Yeats had been confronted with the peasant vocabulary while researching myths with Lady Gregory on her estate. However, he was incapable of creating dialogue using that language with any success. He remarks about his plays that, “I have sometimes asked her [Lady Gregory’s] help because I could not write dialect. . . .”⁸³ Thus, Yeats saw his own deficiencies in this area and searched for a different way to utilize the language of the people. His knowledge of folktales and myths, while substantial, would also never have surpassed hers, and Yeats would have been aware of this discrepancy. He saw her dramatic success through dialogue and through myth and perhaps he looked for a different path to connect with the Irish people. If he did, an ample opportunity presented itself in Yeats’s own take on the “book of the people.” Through his poetry, the language of the people could reach the people in a way that only Yeats could accomplish.

A look at an early attempt by Yeats to write for the people will fully illustrate the difference between his work before Gregory’s influence and after. In November 1892, Yeats published the “Fiddler of Dooney.”⁸⁴ The poem is written in ballad form – the traditional poetic style of the common people. He

⁸² McClintock, 215.

⁸³ Henn, Thomas Rice. *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1952), 80.

⁸⁴ *Collected Poems*, 74.

chooses poetic form rather than language to approach the people. He also mentions concrete Irish place names and specific localities including Kilvarnet, Mocharabuiee, and Sligo. Kilvarnet is from the Irish word *Cill Bhearnais* meaning *the church in the gap* and Mocharabuiee is from *Machra buidhe* or *Yellow Plain*.⁸⁵ Even Dooney itself comes from the Irish words *Dun Aodh* which label the place as Hugh's Port.⁸⁶ Thus by choosing Irish names with multi-layered meanings, Yeats is attempting to connect with the people. Only the lower classes who lived around that area would know what those place names meant. Tim Robinson, in his essay on the importance of place names "Listening to the Landscape," explains that, "each language has its own core of native strength and sweetness, and perhaps in the case of Irish this is to be identified with its immediacy to experience, and in particular with its closeness to the land."⁸⁷ Yeats is searching for this same "strength and sweetness" in his poetry, though he is writing in English, and he uses the Irish place names to attempt to connect with this vital element. However, it must be noted that Yeats did not expect the common people themselves to read this poem. It is an attempt on his part, to preserve the knowledge and importance of these place names. He wanted those who did read his work to realize what the peasants already knew. In this example, Yeats uses the form of the poem and the specific place names to attempt to communicate

⁸⁵ Jeffares, A. Norman. *A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984), 71.

⁸⁶ Jeffares, 71.

⁸⁷ Robinson, Tim. "Listening to the Landscape." *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara and Other Writings*. (Dublin: Lilliput, 1996) 154.

with the common element in everyone. As he matured, his tactics changed drastically under the influence of Lady Gregory. Language was his primary vehicle in the later poems and it is through his style that he formed a connection between his poetry and the common element.

A tenuous connection can be made between the language of Yeats's poems and the Kiltartan dialect that Lady Gregory worked so hard to perfect. Kiltartan dialect is an effort to translate Irish grammatical construction and syntax into English words.⁸⁸ Written in a formula specific to itself, the dialect often resembles the King James Bible.⁸⁹ Lady Gregory was known for using infinitive phrases like "to go" and "to be going" often in her dialect as well as many adverbs and adverbial phrases such as "only" and "so."⁹⁰ These elements make up the substance and identifiable characteristics of Lady Gregory's Kiltartan dialect.

In two types of Yeats's poems, those in which characters speak and those connected with Lady Gregory, her language comes through the strongest. The poems, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" are both connected to Lady Gregory, one through her son and the other through her estate, and both exhibit some of the Kiltartan characteristics. In "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," Yeats says that, "I had thought. . . to bring to

⁸⁸ Saddlemeyer, *In Defense*, 18.

⁸⁹ Saddlemeyer, *In Defense*, 18.

⁹⁰ Saddlemeyer, *In Defense*, 18.

mind/ All those that manhood tried, or childhood loved. . ."⁹¹ Here the Kiltartan infinitive is repeated. Also in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," Yeats uses the adverb "so" repeatedly. He writes,

Another emblem there! . . .
 . . . is so lovely that it sets to right
 What knowledge or its lack had set awry,
 So arrogantly pure. . .⁹²

The subject matter of these poems are closely connected to Lady Gregory and the language reflects this association as well.

Two other Yeats poems, which convey dialogue within the poetry, also exhibit Kiltartan characteristics. In "Cuchulain Comforted," Yeats uses both the infinitive and the adverbial phrase "only" when writing the spoken words of the characters in the poem. He writes, "Mainly because of what we only know. . ." and, ". . . That done, the man/ Took up the nearest and began to sew."⁹³

Also in "Man and the Echo" Yeats used the infinitive when he writes, "*Man*. That were to shirk/ The spiritual intellect's great work. . ."⁹⁴In these examples, Yeats writes dialogue within his poetry and uses the technique with which Lady Gregory had such success in her plays. These examples from Yeats's poetry form a suggestion that when using dialogue or when writing about things connected with Lady Gregory, his style was influenced by hers.

⁹¹ Collected Poems, 132.

⁹² Collected Poems, 243.

⁹³ Collected Poems, 332.

⁹⁴ Collected Poems, 345.

IV. A Coarser Voice: The Crazy Jane Poems

A more suggestive example of Gregory's influence on Yeats's poetic style can be found in the Crazy Jane poems. These poems represent an attempt on Yeats's part to capture the speech he heard while traveling with Lady Gregory on her estate. He describes the inspiration for the poems as a woman named "Cracked Mary" who was, as he says, "a local satirist and a terrible one."⁹⁵ This woman lived near Lady Gregory and Yeats described her as having "amazing power of audacious speech."⁹⁶ Yeats describes his intention in writing in a letter to his wife in 1931 saying: "I want to exorcise that slut, Crazy Jane, whose language has become unendurable."⁹⁷ Thus, the important thing about this woman was her language and it was this that moved Yeats to write about her. The poem was written to capture her speech and thereby give voice to the people whom she represented – the common people.

After *The Tower*, the "Crazy Jane" poems were the first work that Yeats completed. They served as a jumping off place for his new work in *The Winding Stair*. This inspiration came from Coole Park and Lady Gregory since Cracked Mary was part of the estate. She was a figure of freedom. Through her outrageous opinions and statements, Jane represents freedom from censorship and freedom to explore new directions with his work. Thus, from Coole Park comes the gateway into Yeats's later work in which he explores folk language.

⁹⁵ Jeffares, 307.

⁹⁶ Jeffares, 307.

⁹⁷ Jeffares, 307.

The early drafts of several of the Crazy Jane poems included more folk language than remains in the published versions. For example, the earliest notes for "Crazy Jane and the Bishop" include the following phrases: "Slack of jaw & dreepy eyed" and "worm rotted, weath word toad stool."⁹⁸ These lines are important examples of earthy, lower class language that Yeats was working on. He did not leave these lines in the final version. Perhaps he thought he had gone too far from Lady Gregory's influence, or his own taste for refined language forbade these harsh lines from remaining in the final piece. However the effort does demonstrate a desire on Yeats's behalf to include a non-idealized peasant in his poetic landscape. This represents a change in his attitude from earlier works in which the ideals of peasant and aristocrat were his primary focus.

Yeats captures the sound of Cracked Mary in the "Crazy Jane" poems by using earthy and grotesque language. No idealized peasantry speaks through this voice. Rather, the sound is that of a hard life and a dirty existence. He writes in "Crazy Jane and the Bishop" with details from farm life, with which the peasants would have been well acquainted. He says, "The Bishop has a skin, God knows,/ Wrinkled like the skin of a goose."⁹⁹ This example demonstrates Yeats's willingness to abandon poetic images in favor of capturing the essence of

⁹⁸ Collected Poems, 255.

⁹⁹ Collected Poems, 255.

the speech of the lower classes. He also writes in "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop": "But love has pitched his mansion in/ The place of excrement."¹⁰⁰ Here Yeats is even more explicit with his use of earthy language. Here is the world without Coole Park. The mansion has been defiled. He sees this as the inevitable result of the path of Irish history. The upper classes cannot maintain their position in society for long, and without their refining influence the Irish culture will be destroyed. His poetry speaks to the lower classes, perhaps, as an effort to communicate the lost cultural riches of the upper classes to those who are left. If Yeats could successfully communicate with the peasants, then he could make them see what they are destroying as the great houses like Coole become part of their past. By writing for the common people, Yeats can make the refinement and gentility of the upper classes survive into the future.

This world that Yeats feared, without Coole Park, was in fact closing about him as he wrote the "Crazy Jane" poems. Lady Gregory's health was failing in 1929 when the poems were begun and she died in 1932, the year they were published. The time frame alone would indicate that Yeats considered Lady Gregory in the writing of these poems, at least in a subtle way. Cracked Mary was based at Coole and the proximity in age and location would also lead the reader to assume that Crazy Jane has some relationship with Lady Gregory. In Brown's biography, *The Life of W.B. Yeats*, the discussion of the Crazy Jane poems and Lady Gregory's death are on adjacent pages. This evidence also indicates

¹⁰⁰ *Collected Poems*, 259.

some relationship. Crazy Jane appears to be a mirror image of Lady Gregory. She is the same age and gender, but of the opposite class. Moreover, Lady Gregory had made serious forays into the study of peasant speech and worked to incorporate it into her own plays. Thus, Crazy Jane and Lady Gregory are associated with peasant language.

Crazy Jane is often compared to Queen Maeve. Maeve was a Celtic goddess who represented the earth. She had a never ending stream of sequential lovers who represented men who controlled the land. Crazy Jane, too, has Jack the Journeyman for a lover. Elizabeth Cullingford explains that, "Jane's multiplicity of lovers and unquenchable sexual appetites associate her with the promiscuous Queen Maeve."¹⁰¹ Thus Crazy Jane, through the figure of Queen Maeve, becomes linked to the land. This parallels Lady Gregory's relationship with Coole Park. Both women are tied to the land and gain important symbolic meaning from their relationship with it. Not only was Gregory the proprietor of the estate, in much of Yeats's poetry, she is synonymous with it.

The central image connecting Lady Gregory to the land is that of the central, stable tree. She is the "compass point" around which the swallows fly.¹⁰² Lady Gregory is symbolized as a tree in several of Yeats's poems. In "A Prayer for My Daughter," he is protected by "Gregory's wood" and desires his daughter

¹⁰¹ Hohne, Karen and Helen Wussow, ed. *A Dialogue of Voices: feminist literary theory and Bakhtin*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 31.

¹⁰² *Collected Poems*, 188.

to emulate Lady Gregory and become, "a flourishing hidden tree."¹⁰³ Also in "Coole Park, 1929," Yeats compares her to sycamore. These and other examples firmly establish the tree as a symbol for Lady Gregory and her place in Yeats's world. The opening of the "Crazy Jane" sequence connects the speaker with Lady Gregory. The poem reads, "Bring me to the blasted oak..."¹⁰⁴ The poem ends with repetition of this image: "Jack had my virginity/ And bids me to the oak... / And there is shelter under it."¹⁰⁵ By beginning and ending with an image so closely associated with Lady Gregory, Yeats establishes the connection between the two women.

Another way in which Lady Gregory and the Crazy Jane poems are connected is through the poet Raftery. In many ways, Raftery is to Lady Gregory as Crazy Jane is to Yeats. Both Raftery and Cracked Mary depend on their words for power. Raftery's poems were part of the old oral tradition of the Celtic bards.¹⁰⁶ His life's work was his songs and they were the only source of his income and social significance. However, his power was greater than that. He affected other people's actions through his words as well. Lady Gregory tells the story of Raftery forcing a shoemaker to make shoes for a little girl by threatening him with a satire.¹⁰⁷ Thus Raftery's words not only secured his own position, but

¹⁰³ Collected Poems, 188.

¹⁰⁴ Collected Poems, 255.

¹⁰⁵ Collected Poems, 255.

¹⁰⁶ Gregory, Lady Augusta. "Visions and Beliefs," in *Selected Writings*.

McDiarmid, Lucy and Maureen Waters, ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 99.

¹⁰⁷ Gregory, 100.

influenced others as well. Some of the legends surrounding Raftery also attributed his words with supernatural power to bless or curse people when he wished. In her turn, Crazy Jane is significant to Yeats because of her words. Her words are what attracts him as he describes her language as "unendurable" and her "amazing power of audacious speech."¹⁰⁸ Both Lady Gregory and Yeats are drawn to Raftery and Crazy Jane, respectively, by their words.

Interestingly, even the form of the poetry associated with Raftery and Crazy Jane links them together. Raftery, as one of the last of the bardic tradition, composed mostly ballads and songs. The ballad was associated with the common people and is necessarily connected to Raftery and the poetic traditions of the lower classes. The "Crazy Jane" series is written in ballad form.¹⁰⁹ Though the language is brutal and harsh, the form is intact. Yeats even went so far as to call these pieces "Words for Music Perhaps." In doing so, he solidifies the link between Crazy Jane and Raftery, peasant ballads and the bardic tradition.

The "Crazy Jane" poems and Raftery's work have another similarity. Both use brutal and earthy language to convey the reality of peasant life. Raftery's poems include phrases like, "Her breast is the color of white sugar, or like bleached bone on the card-table."¹¹⁰ Another strikingly harsh example from Raftery's work that parallels the language in the Crazy Jane poems is, ". . . when it's sooner on a bullock's liver you'd put a poor girl thinking than on the lily or

¹⁰⁸ Jaffares, 307.

¹⁰⁹ Hohne, 28.

¹¹⁰ Henn, 77.

the rose?"¹¹¹ Raftery uses animal imagery here to convey the brutal nature of the peasant life. Yeats uses this same technique in "Crazy Jane and the Bishop." The poem reads, "The Bishop has a skin. . . /Wrinkled like the skin of a goose," and later includes the phrase, "heron's haunch."¹¹² Thus Yeats puts the words of the peasants into the Crazy Jane poems the same way that Gregory writes down Raftery's words and conveys them to her readers.

The connection between Crazy Jane and Raftery can perhaps bring some of Yeats's reasons for writing this series to light. Lady Gregory wrote about Raftery in order to preserve what she valued in the peasant culture. Yeats writes about Crazy Jane, not necessarily to preserve her language, but to utilize it to convey his message about the decline of the nobility and the importance and vitality of peasant speech. Lady Gregory's essays about Raftery precede the Crazy Jane poems by thirty years. Yeats undoubtedly had her words in mind when he wrote about Cracked Mary. Thus the poems are highly influenced by Lady Gregory herself and her writings about Raftery. This is perhaps even an effort on Yeats's part to rival Lady Gregory in her ability to understand the people's language and to capture it in her work. Both seek to preserve the language which they value so greatly for those who cannot experience it firsthand.

¹¹¹ Henn 77

¹¹² Collected Poems, 255.

V. Another Bard: John Millington Synge

In 1905, while describing his revision of *The Shadowy Waters*, Yeats writes, "It is full of homely phrases and of the idiom of daily speech. . . I believe more strongly every day that the element of strength in poetic language is common idiom, just as the element of strength in poetic construction is common passion."¹¹³ And in 1937, Yeats wrote a "General Introduction for My Work," in which he says that he wants to "cry as all men cried, to laugh as all men laugh."¹¹⁴ In other words, he wants to adopt a more common speech for his work in order to communicate universal themes to his readers. This effort to capture the imagery of the peasant class was influenced largely by John M. Synge. Lady Gregory was part of this connection, and influences Yeats through Synge as well as through her own work. She was a firm supporter of Synge's Aran project from the inception of the idea and his first stop back from the islands was to visit Coole Park to discuss the writing of the work.¹¹⁵ Thus Lady Gregory's impact on his work is apparent. Also, when reviewing the final product, she urged him to put more folklore into it in order to get a better sense of the people among whom he had lived. He complied with her suggestion, adding the fourth and final section of the book.¹¹⁶ Synge continued to follow this advice when writing his plays, in which he had great success communicating the sense and sound of the

¹¹³ Fleming, 13.

¹¹⁴ Fleming, 13.

¹¹⁵ McCormack, W.J. *Fool of the Family: A Life of J.M. Synge*. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 197.

¹¹⁶ McCormack, 216.

people's speech. Lady Gregory was instrumental in leading him down this path. In a letter to Yeats, Synge describes the Kiltartan Dialect as, "the dialect he had been trying to master."¹¹⁷ Thus Synge affects Yeats as an extension of Lady Gregory's influence.

Both Yeats and Synge work to capture the language of the common people in their writings. They see peasant speech is useful for many of the same reasons. One of the common goals of many writers of the Irish revival, including Yeats and Synge, was to reacquaint the general Irish population with their lost culture and in doing so to restore national unity through literature.¹¹⁸ Thus, Yeats and Synge both thought that by including aspects of the common language in their work, they could create unity among different classes of Irish people and thereby create a common culture with the historical power of the peasant folk tales. They both seek to do this through characters who would convey the native Irish people both to themselves and to the more worldly urban population.¹¹⁹ Peasants were a link with the past because of their semi-primitive lifestyle and their traditional culture. Deborah Fleming explains that, "Both viewed the peasants as a link with the past and the traditional culture; their ultimate goal, of course was to find a culture that would provide images for literature."¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Marc C. Conner, "Synge and Gregory." Unpublished lecture. October 2003.

¹¹⁸ Flemming, 17.

¹¹⁹ Flemming, 31.

¹²⁰ Flemming, 31.

According to Fleming, in his book about Yeats and Synge, *A Man Who Does not Exist*, peasants, as embodied by these two authors, represent the "collective memory of the nation" and the timeless memory of the world.¹²¹ The life of the common people, free from materialism and the problems of modernity, allowed them to live close to nature. Many of them were illiterate, but their songs, and by extension their language, gave them knowledge superior to more formal learning. The images found in this peasant speech are the only ones powerful enough to achieve unity of culture for the Irish nation. This conclusion is not unique to Synge or Yeats. Willaim Wordsworth, in his famous "Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*," writes:

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the hear find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated. . . .¹²²

Therefore, Synge and Yeats were not breaking new ground by emphasizing the importance of the peasant speech, but rather simply applying established ideas to the Irish condition. Daniel Corkery's analysis of Synge's writing indicates the importance of the common language to his work. He writes that, "every new book. . . no matter what its theme. . . is referable to their life, and its literary traits

¹²¹ Fleming, 67.

¹²² Wordsworth, William. "Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*." *St. Mary's English Anthology*. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1959), 673.

to the traits already established in the literature."¹²³ Thus, the national literature is written for all classes of society and Yeats and Synge use the common elements to appeal to what all Irish people share.

Synge and Yeats use peasant speakers to deliver this language to their audience. Synge wrote that,

in all the circumstances of this tramp life there is a certain wildness that gives it romance and a peculiar value for those who look at life in Ireland with an eye that is aware of the arts also. In all the healthy movements of art, variations from the ordinary types of manhood are made interesting for the ordinary man, and in this way only the higher arts are universal.¹²⁴

However, both Yeats and Synge had difficulty being accepted by the peasants. Differences in education, religion, and their alliance to the protestant ascendancy prevented both of these authors from being readily included in peasant life and conversation.¹²⁵ Thus, they use peasant characters to speak the language which they have adopted in an attempt to be more readily accepted than work that comes across in the author's own voice. Through these peasant characters, Yeats and Synge attempt to convey the universal emotion found in the common life. Synge uses the characters in many of his plays to work towards this same end. And in this same style, Yeats uses the character of Crazy Jane to represent peasant morality and lust for life.

¹²³ Flemming, 17.

¹²⁴ Synge, *The Vagrants of Wicklow* 208 quoted in Fleming, 158.

¹²⁵ Fleming, 14.

Synge managed to get his own book of the people into both his poetry and plays. Synge followed the style of the blind poet Raftery who utilizes the brutal aspects of peasant life by incorporating them into the language of his poems in order to convey the peasant speech. Yeats describes Synge's work saying that he saw in Synge what he calls, "a hunger for harsh facts, for ugly surprising things, for all that defies our hope."¹²⁶ Synge's language affects some of Yeats's late poetry. Yeats himself acknowledges that he learned much from Synge. In the preface to Synge's *Poems and Translations* he writes that, "... I did not see, until Synge began to write, that we must renounce the deliberate creation of a kind of Holy City in the imagination, and express the individual. The Irish people were not educated enough to accept images more profound..."¹²⁷ He means that in order to capture the language of the common people, a poet needs harsher, plainer language. He wrote of Synge:

Mr. Synge alone has written of the peasant as he is to all the ages; of the folk-imagination as it has been shaped by centuries of life among fields or on fishing-grounds. His people talk a highly colored musical language, and one never hears from them a thought that is of to-day and not of yesterday.¹²⁸

Yeats saw in Synge's work aspects that he wanted to include in his own.

Yeats incorporates some of these ideas into his own poetry. The most striking example of this is "The Circus Animals' Desertion." In that poem, Yeats

¹²⁶ Henn, 76.

¹²⁷ Henn, 76.

¹²⁸ Yeats in *Explorations* 183 quoted in Fleming, 158.

adopts the brutal language of Synge. This poem also conveys Yeats's pessimism about the future. He writes:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain...
Maybe at last being but a broken man
I must be satisfied...¹²⁹

As a poet approaching old age, he is broken and has no more inspiration or themes to write on. He can merely repeat those which he has already posed. Yeats believes that nothing good will come from the future of Ireland, and all its glories are passing. In this poem, Yeats describes the origin of his poetry. He has covered this theme before in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," in which he stated that, "All that we did, all that we said or sang/Must come from contact with the soil...." However, in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" he gives a rougher sound to that same sentiment. The origin of his poetry is now,

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till...¹³⁰

Here is the language of Raftery and Synge, of Crazy Jane and Lady Gregory. Brutal and vivid, he speaks in the language of the people's daily lives, in the language he learned from Lady Gregory's Kiltartan dialect. He concludes the poem saying, "I must lie down where all the ladders start/In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." The origins of poetry and now even man's dying fate now have both been consigned to the realm of brutality and crude images.

¹²⁹ Collected Poems, 346.

¹³⁰ Collected Poems, 346.

However, there is some hope left. Yeats reflects on his early poems, describing them as "stilted." This word can have multiple meanings, but one of them is that his earlier work was artificially formal. He sees this as a flaw because it failed to communicate with his audience. If, in Yeats's view, the nobility of Ireland will not survive into the future, his work must communicate with what will. From Yeats's perspective the middle class was rising in power and would soon control the national culture. Thus, his poetry must communicate the power and strength of the ideal peasant in order to preserve it. However, if his early poems were stilted, then his later poems are not and therefore, perhaps they succeed where the others failed. Yeats leaves the reader with this hope – that by using earthy language, Yeats conveys to all of Ireland the strength and value of the nobility and that the benefits of Coole Park are not all lost when the estate itself no longer stands. His poems capture the language and symbolism of the common people and in doing so, provide a tool which Yeats uses to convey to the entire population his ideals of nobility and tradition.

Thus the influence of Synge, and through him, of Lady Gregory, becomes apparent in Yeats's language in this poem. These examples of peasant language do not seem to fit Yeats's ideal of the beggarman and how he would speak. However, that concept has not died. Rather, Yeats is attempting to convey his ideals to the society that he sees around him, and that is a stark contrast to the perfect aristocracy and peasant classes. He uses language that he thinks will

reach the people in order to convey his ideas about what society should be striving for.

Conclusion

Lady Gregory's influence on Yeats's poetry can also be seen in the change in his work after her death. He lived only seven years after she died, but those years were full of more changes in his poetry and outlook on life than any while she was living.¹³¹ He wrote of the time immediately after her death: "I found that I had written no verse for two years; I had never been so long barren; I had nothing in my head and there used to be more than I would write. Perhaps Coole Park, where I had escaped from politics, from all that Dublin talked of, when it was shut, shut me out of my theme, or did the subconscious drama that was my imaginative life end with its owner?"¹³² These changes in part reflect the absence of Lady Gregory and the stabilizing influence of Yeats's time at Coole. The house was leveled shortly after her death, so all traces of the peace and productivity that Yeats found there were destroyed. His poem, "Three Songs to One Burden" demonstrates this difference. The poem embraces easy violence. John Kelly writes that, "What at Coole was individual, courageous, and traditional is now eccentric, defensive, and introverted, the Seven Woods shrunk to a storm-bitten green."¹³³ He writes in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" of Coole's "demesne." In "Three Songs to One Burden," the demesne has changed to become:

I have a small demesne
A small forgotten house that's set

¹³¹ Kelly, 254.

¹³² Salvadori, 33,

¹³³ Kelly, 255.

On a storm bitten green...¹³⁴

This image seems to be a reflection of what was once Coole Park. Thus after Lady Gregory's death, Coole has been forgotten and the woods destroyed. This represents Yeats's worst nightmare among the possibilities that lay in the future for Coole and it shows the depression which Lady Gregory's death created. Lacking the central image of the lady and her home, Yeats's work falls into extremes of despair.¹³⁵

When Lady Gregory died, Yeats wrote to Mario Rossi : "I have lost one who has been to me for nearly forty years my strength and my conscience."¹³⁶ Her influence on his life was enormous. Without Lady Gregory's support and her hospitality at Coole, Yeats would have been forced into journalism to make a living and would thus have had less time for poetry.¹³⁷ She saved him from this fate by hosting him at Coole and providing a scheduled lifestyle for him there. Therefore, her disciplined influence was largely responsible for much of his important work. Her influence is, however, pervasive within his work as well. Her image walks through his poems, with the "sound of stick upon the floor," bringing stability, peace, and an ideal upper class model. She and Coole Park came to represent what Yeats saw that he wished to preserve out of the Ireland of the past and which would be lacking from the future. Her Kiltartan dialect

¹³⁴ Collected Poems, 243.

¹³⁵ Kelly, 255.

¹³⁶ Kelly, 256.

¹³⁷ Kelly, 255.

touched his poetry, through Synge, as well as her influence on the speeches in his poems and his treatment of Coole Park and Major Robert Gregory. Lady Gregory's effect on Yeats's prose and dramatic work has been firmly established, but her influence on his poetry, both thematic and stylistic, is important as well. His desire to preserve both her style and her memory stems from Yeats's own belief that the upper class that she represented would not long outlive her.

Thus, after examining the many elements of Lady Gregory's influence on Yeats's work, we see that she seems to have pushed him in an unexpected direction. As head of the household at Coole Park, Lady Gregory represented everything that was civilized and cultured to Yeats. He writes of her always as a person of truly noble qualities that should be emulated by aristocrats everywhere. However, her influence on his poetic language contradicts this image of her. She seems to have pushed Yeats more towards the language of the peasants than towards an idealized language of the aristocrat.

Yeats saw in Coole Park what he cherished most in Irish society. Away from the city crowds and middle class entrepreneurs of modern Ireland, Yeats saw the raw materials for the unified Irish culture he believed was so important. The peasant class still retained some of the old myths and beliefs that could provide strength and vitality to the Ireland of the future. However, the world of Coole Park was vanishing and Yeats knew that there was no stopping the progress that would soon clear rural Ireland of the vestiges of colonial rule and aristocratic power.

In order to preserve the culture that he valued and the symbols that he found there, Yeats strove to capture Coole Park in his poems. He worked to tell his readers just what Ireland was losing as it changed with modernity. However, Coole Park itself and all of the culture and nobility which it represented to Yeats was not all that Ireland was losing. The peasants, who Yeats believed held the most important cultural symbols in their language and myths, would have no place in an Ireland without the great houses. They would move to the cities and never be able to reclaim their ability to provide Ireland with the tools for cultural unity which they possessed while living rough on the land.

Yeats took on the task of preserving the peasant symbols and language in his poetry as well. It was Lady Gregory who first turned him to this project during his time at Coole and thus it was her influence which pushed his writing to incorporate the "Book of the People." The two of them collaborated on many prose collections of myths and stories and on plays for the Abbey Theater in Dublin. Yeats also strove to capture the peasant language itself in his poetry. The "Crazy Jane" series in particular shows his attempts to preserve peasant dialogue, imagery, and dynamic power in his poems as a result of Lady Gregory's influence.

Therefore, the end result of the aristocratic and cultured influence of Lady Gregory was that Yeats wrote poems that emulate the language of the uneducated, earthy peasants. The images of her in his poetry conflict with the language which he used as a result. However, this is not contradictory to one of

the main ideas which Yeats used to organize his world. He believed strongly in the idea of the nobleman and the perfect peasant. Thus, in Lady Gregory, he found both. He found a flawless hostess who could satisfy his need for culture and for refinement. He also had access to the "Book of the People" through the vast lands of the Coole Estate. Lady Gregory, representative of the vanishing Irish nobility, thus provides for Yeats the symbols and the language for his poetry.

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