



## Historicizing Love and Loss in W.B Yeats's "When You Are Old"

Dorathy Ch Marak

Research Scholar, Department of English, North Eastern Hill University, Tura Campus

---

### ARTICLE DETAILS

---

#### Research Paper

**Accepted:** 19-04-2025

**Published:** 10-05-2025

---

#### Keywords:

*pilgrim, occult, resistance, propaganda, transcend, revolutionaries, historicism, Irish identity, disillusionment, chaos, resistance, imagery, unrequited love.*

---

---

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines W.B Yeats's "*When You Are Old*" through a historicist lens, exploring the poet's personal emotions against the turbulent political backdrop of Ireland. Unlike the overt Irish revolutionaries, Yeats channelled his spirit and resistance through art and literature, subtly embedding his nationalistic fervor within emotional and romantic imagery. The fading beauty and changing face of Maud Gonne mirror not only personal aging but the sorrowful passage of Ireland's struggles. Yeats's portrayal of fading beauty in the poem can be paralleled with the fading beauty of Ireland's landscape, which was marred by centuries of colonial oppression, famine and rebellion. Gonne admired for her charisma and passion for Irish freedom, rejected Yeats's spiritual, unconditional love, choosing instead a path that led to personal and political disillusionment.

---

**DOI :** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15407064>

---

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was an Irish poet, dramatist and writer. He studied poetry from an early age, fascinated by Irish legends and the occult. He was deeply influenced by writers like John Keats, William Wordsworth, William Blake and many more. Yeats became an integral part of the Irish literary revival and in 1897 he became the chief playwright for the Irish Literary Theatre. Yeats was deeply involved in the Irish Literary Revival alongside figures like Lady Gregory and JM Synge. This movement sought to revive Irish culture through literature, drama, and art. Yeats's poetry reflects his vision of Ireland as a spiritually rich and eternal nation, where its legacy can be sustained through literature, rather than the fleeting victories of political revolutions.



To truly understand Yeats's poetry, we must read through the lens of historicism-considering the cultural, social and political context of his time. This perspective helps us see why Yeats chose to engage with Ireland's struggle through literature, using pen and paper as his tools, rather than joining the (militant) revolutionaries with armed resistance. Yeats smartly chose to fight for Ireland's cause not through violence, but through poetry and cultural revival. Writing allowed him to engage in the national struggle in a way that was less lethal and far safer than armed rebellion. While many revolutionaries risked and often lost their lives fighting with weapons, Yeats believe that preserving Ireland's spirit through art, myths, and literature was just as powerful. In "*When You Are Old*," we see this approach reflected in his focus on emotional and spiritual endurance rather than physical struggle. His celebration of the "*pilgrim soul*" shows how Yeats valued the lasting, unseen spirit over temporary, visible victories.

"*When You Are Old*" was written in 1891, published in Yeats's poetry collection "*The Rose*". Yeats loosely based this poem on a sonnet by Pierre de Ronsard, a French poet, who also wrote about a woman looking back at her youth and lost love. The title of his collection symbolically represents both Maud Gonne and his longing for an idealized Ireland- blending personal desire with national aspiration. At the time, Ireland was struggling under British rule, and widespread turmoil and chaos were deeply embedding themselves into the fabric of Irish society. However, Yeats chose to subtly weave this turbulent background into his poetry, giving a clear and determined touch to his artistic vision, emphasizing emotional and spiritual endurance over political violence. Yeats's consistent choice to resist not with force but with feeling is both impeccable and profound, revealing the strength of emotional and artistic defiance in a time dominated by political violence. In the poem, Yeats admired Maud Gonne not just for her beauty, but also for her intellect, passion for Ireland, and the depth of her spirit. He might have hoped that through his poetry and spiritual love (for Maud Gonne and Ireland), she would come to see a deeper side of him. Just as Maud Gonne remained steadfast in her commitment to Ireland's fight for Independence, Yeats too relentlessly continued to love despite the emotional hardships and repeated rejections. His unwavering devotion reflects not only his personal feelings but also his broader commitment to enduring values like love, cultural preservation, and spiritual connection, even amidst the turbulence of their time.

The title "*When You Are old*" invites reflection on the inevitable fading of youthful passion and strength. Yeats writes from the present but speaks of an imminent future, one shaped by the inescapable passage of time. With the opening lines "*When you are old and grey and full of sleep*", "*And nodding by the fire, take down this book*", he pulls the reader into an imagined scene-his beloved, now aged, resting by the



fireside, eyes heavy with sleep, body softened by the weariness of age. It's a quiet and intimate vision. The phrase "*slowly read*" captures not just the frailty of old sight but also slowed by the ravages of time, the sluggish body drags in lifeless motion. Yeats emphasizes also on emotional slowness- a request to absorb the depth of his words, to feel every syllable as it resonates through time and space, memory and loss.

Ireland, with its political, cultural, and social turmoil, was deeply involved in the propaganda and planning of revolutionary attacks. The spirits of the revolutionaries carried a strong sense of mystery. Maud Gonne being one of them (deeply involved in politics) must have witnessed many of these secret plans and movements making the "*deep*", shadowy mystery in her eyes evocative.

The second stanza folds into more personal territory. It becomes almost confessional, almost confrontational. Yeats places himself in contrast to other admirers, asserting the depth of his love. Where others saw only surface, he saw soul. He loved her "pilgrim soul", the restless evolving soul within her-and even the sorrows that time etched upon her face. His love transcended flesh and time; "*her changing face*". It was not fleeting or conditional but love for a woman in all her stages: past, present and future. Yeats's endless struggle to win Maud Gonne's love is striking, as he contrasts his love with that of other admirers. In the lines, "*How many loved your moment of glad grace,*" "*And loved your beauty with love false or true,*" he acknowledges that others might love her- superficially-drawn to her beauty and strong personality. Yet, Yeats expresses a deeper, more enduring affection. Many admired her for her public persona, and passionate spirit, but Yeats recognized the inner self, "*the pilgrim soul*" in her. Just as Yeats loved the very soul of Ireland, he also cherished the true soul of Maud Gonne. He has already accepted her for who she is as he says "*But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you, and loved the sorrows of your changing face.*"

Taking Historicism as my approach, Yeats's love for Maud Gonne reflects not just personal emotion, but also the historical and political atmosphere of Ireland. While the fight for the physical land and political control can be overthrown, but the spirit of Irish identity remained unbroken. Similarly, while physical beauty can fade or be damaged, the soul-both the soul of Ireland and the soul Yeats saw in Maud Gonne remains eternal. Yeats's spirit, like that of the revolutionaries, is eternal, though he expresses it in a different, more personal way-especially in this poem. His spirit deserves to be saluted, as he has remained unwavering in his love for Maud Gonne. Even as her beauty fades and her changing



face reflects the passage of time (old age), Yeats continues to love her, showing devotion that transcends mere physical appearance and endures beyond the superficial.

Yet, for all his devotion, his love remains unreturned. The final stanza is laced with quiet heartbreak. *“And bending down beside the glowing bars,”* we feel the weight of unrequited love pressing down on him, *“Murmur a little sadly, how love fled”*-this is no outburst but a whisper of defeat, of surrender. Love, the great romantic force he once held so dearly and so stubbornly, has fled. It fled both literally and, metaphorically-Maud Gonne’s rejection of Yeats or perhaps love in its idealized form has slipped away.

In “When You Are Old”, Yeats subtly captures the idea that the loss of love touches both himself and Maud Gonne, though in different ways. Yeats mourns the loss of a love he offered, but was never accepted, embodying a deep sorrow and unfulfilled longing. On the other hand, Maud who rejected Yeats’s sincere devotion in favour of her own ideals and marriage to John MacBride, later faces her own loss- a realization that true, enduring love had fled her life as well, love has *“paced upon the mountains overhead”*. Thus, through the poem, Yeats not only grieves for his own broken heart but also hints at Maud’s future regret and loneliness, making the poem a shared elegy for love lost on both sides. In the historical and political context of Ireland, the line *“hid his face amid a crowd of stars”* reflects not only the distance and fading of love, but can also be read symbolically. Unlike the Irish revolutionaries who openly protested and fought against political oppression, Yeats hid his deeper intentions within his poetry. His spirit of rebellion and resistance did not take the form of violence but manifested itself through his artistic expressions, making his literary voice a quieter yet enduring form of protest. While *“crowd of stars”* can be read as a metaphor for the many Irish nationalists (although Yeats refrains from explicitly naming them), yet, a historical analysis allows us to perceive the revolutionary spirit-embodied by figures like Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, and John MacBride-as a silent backdrop to his personal grief and artistic resistance. His pen and paper became his weapon- a tool to shape the Irish spirit and mythology as essential components of the nation’s quest for independence.

Maud was a woman with strong conviction. She viewed marriage as a social compromise-something that invited complications to her practical and political drive rather than comfort. She didn’t see marriage as a romantic ideal. She prefers political missions over personal romance. For her marriage was almost like a kind of debacle, a system that could break down individuals, stripping them of their



independence and purpose. This belief shapes her decision especially in how she responded to Yeats's repeated proposals.

As much as Yeats held tight to his romantic idealism, Maud Gonne stood in sharp contrast, grounded in her fierce commitment to Irish nationalism. This ideological diversion was perhaps the key reason behind her repeated rejections of Yeats's persistent, unconquerable love. That's where John MacBride entered the scene (albeit his marriage with Maud Gonne was short-lived and deeply troubled.) His political convictions and active involvement in nationalist movements resonated deeply with Gonne's unwavering pride in her country. Where Yeats offered poetry and dreams, MacBride offered shared action and tangible resistance. And in that shared vision of Ireland's future, MacBride found the place in her heart that Yeats could never quite reach. Yeats being a romantic at heart immortalizes his love for Maud Gonne in every possible way- both verbally, face-to-face, and symbolically through his written words (particularly poetry). He pours his emotions into poetry; carefully placing ink to paper, word by word, so that even time cannot erase what he felt. His love, his proposal, his memory of her- all are preserved through verse. In doing so, Yeats ensures that his devotion lives on. Untouched by time, his love stays forever the same, bears the same intensity as strong and as vivid when they were young. Just as many revolutionaries lose their lives and their loved ones in battles, Yeats loses his heart, not once, but countless times. And just as the battles will be remembered throughout history, Yeats's relentless devotion will be etched on the lips of every romantic lover.

Through a historicist perspective, "*When You Are Old*" emerges not merely as a personal lament for unfulfilled love but as a subtle reflection of Ireland's own historical struggles. Yeats's unwavering choice to resist feeling (love) and oppression (British rule), mirrors his endurance of a nation scarred by political, cultural, and social turmoil. Just as Maud Gonne's fading beauty symbolizes the inevitable changes brought by time, so too does Ireland's once celebrated landscape bears the wounds of historical upheaval. While the revolutionaries of Yeats's era fought with arms and open rebellion, Yeats's form of resistance remained deeply emotional and artistic, weaving sorrow, loyalty, and memory into the fabric of his poetry. Ultimately, Yeats's idealization of Maud Gonne, much like his love for Ireland, transcends physical decay and political defeat, preserving the essence of what he cherished most-the enduring soul beyond the ravages of history.



REFERENCE:

- “A Summary and Analysis of W.B.Yeats’ ‘When You Are Old.’” Interesting Literature, 1 May 2020,
- <https://interestingliterature.com/2020/05/yeats-when-you-are-old-summary-analysis/>. Accessed 28 Apr.2025
- “*Death of W.B.Yeats.*” History Today, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/death-w-b-yeats> .Accessed 25 Apr.2025.
- “*Irish National Archives.*” National Archives of Ireland, <https://www.nationalarchives.ie>. Accessed 25 Apr. 2025.
- “*W.B.Yeats.*” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W.\\_B.\\_Yeats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._B._Yeats). Accessed 26 Apr. 2025.
- Yeats, W.B. “*When You Are Old.*” Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43260/when-you-are-old> Accessed 25 Apr. 2025.