

A Primer for Yeats's Transitional Phase

When critics talk about Yeats's "transitional phase," they usually mean the period from roughly 1898 to the end of 1913. Some critics dispense with this distinction altogether, simply viewing the turn of the century as the start of Yeats's middle period.

Maud Gonne:

- **Maud's Lover:** By late 1898, Maud's relationship with her French lover, Lucien Millevoye, had soured considerably. On December 8, 1898, she confessed the relationship to Yeats, revealing that she had conceived two children with Millevoye: Georges (who died shortly after birth) in 1889 and a daughter, Iseult, in 1894.
- **A change in attitude:** Maud's revelation had a tremendous impact on Yeats; he now came to see her less as an ideal beloved who embodied spiritual beauty and more as a woman of the world, someone caught up in real political and sexual passions. After the revelation, Yeats proposed, and Maud refused (likely seeing it as an empty chivalrous gesture); she instead told him that they would begin a new, "spiritual marriage" rooted in dreams and mystical experiences.
- **John MacBride:** In February of 1903 Maud Gonne married John MacBride, a fellow hard-line nationalist who had fought against British forces during the South African Boer War. MacBride was, by all accounts, a rather despicable person who drank heavily and often became violent. In 1905 Maud revealed to Yeats that MacBride had sexually abused her seventeen-year-old half sister, Eileen, and her eleven-year-old daughter, Iseult. By 1908 the two were separated, and, in the aftermath, Yeats and Maud (likely) had a brief sexual relationship, though Maud again quickly insisted on a Platonic friendship.

Augusta Gregory:

- **Patronage:** In 1896 Yeats met Lady Augusta Gregory, a forty-four-year-old widow, whose husband had been a wealthy Protestant landlord. Gregory and Yeats shared a number of common interests, including peasant folklore and the establishment of an Irish national theater, and she quickly assumed the role of his patron (during this period, Yeats was making little money from his own work). In 1897 he spent a summer with Lady Gregory at her estate, Coole Park, in county Galway. These summer visits would continue off and on for the next two decades, and the areas in Coole, such as the "Seven Woods," would feature in much of his later poetry. In some respects, Gregory became a nurturing, mother figure for Yeats, whose own mother died, after a lengthy period of infirmity, in 1900.
- **The allure of aristocracy:** Lady Gregory represented for Yeats all that was good in Ireland's Protestant Ascendancy class. Although Yeats had little time for wealthy Protestants who championed British rule, he also idealized those Protestant leaders who had had a positive influence on Irish history, particularly those who had supported the arts. During this transitional phase, Yeats became increasingly enamored with the Protestant aristocracy, viewing the finest members of this class as people who cultivated the arts, promoted cultural nationalism, and resisted an Irish middle class that, in Yeats's eyes, cared only for sterile religious piety and money making.

The Irish National Theatre:

- Yeats, Gregory, and Edward Martyn founded an Irish National Theatre (later, the Abbey Theatre) in 1899. Each shared Yeats's basic vision: the establishment of a theater that would produce top

flight drama, much of it based on Irish legend, folklore, and peasant culture, in order to instill pride in the Irish people. This vision contrasted sharply with what they saw upon the British stage, where dramatic works were intended simply to make a profit and where the “stage Irishman,” a stock character who was often drunk, served as a source of mockery. By cultivating the arts in their Irish public theater, Gregory, Yeats, and Martyn sought to promote Irish culture at a time when, as they saw it, Ireland was becoming increasingly bourgeois, increasingly dominated by crass middle class materialism.

- John Synge: Perhaps the most important dramatist during this period was John Synge, a playwright who wrote comedies and tragedies set among Ireland’s peasant communities.
- Style: Whereas Synge and Gregory tended to write realistic peasant plays, Yeats generally wrote highly-stylized and symbolic works, plays, that is, in which language and formal gesture are more important than plot or scenery. Yeats’s core idea was that drama could be a ritual experience, putting the audience in a type of trance-like state in which their minds would be more receptive to those deeper, mystical truths binding humanity together. (This, by the way, usually didn’t work well on stage, and many of his early symbolic plays are simply unwatchable; his best ones, though, are striking).
- Controversies: From the start, the Irish National Theatre was marked by controversy. Although its mission was nationalist, the National Theatre founders consistently stressed the importance of art over politics. As a result, many of the plays were greeted with anger by a Dublin public eager to see tales about noble peasants, mythic Irish heroes, and the evils of the British. Indeed, several of the plays sparked rioting.
 - The Countess Cathleen: Among Yeats’s earliest plays, the Countess Cathleen focuses on an aristocratic Irish woman who, during the Famine, sells her soul to the Devil in order to save her starving peasants. Catholic nationalists objected to the play as blasphemous (a young James Joyce signed a petition defending the play against these charges of immorality).
 - In the Shadow of the Glen: John Synge’s comic play is based on a peasant legend in which a young woman, living in isolation among the hills of Wicklow, marries a prosperous old farmer for financial security. Thinking that the young woman is having an affair with a young farmer, the old man pretends to be dead. During the course of the play, the old man, laid out in the cottage for the wake, overhears his wife speaking with the young farmer and with a wandering tramp. The old man “awakens” and denounces the wife; the wife, in a heroic and passionate speech, denounces her husband and their empty marriage; and, in the end, she departs for a difficult life on the road with the tramp. The play, clearly influenced by Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, did not square well with the patriarchal attitudes of Catholic nationalists. They attacked it as a libel on Irish women, and as an untruthful mockery of peasant life. Riots occurred during the first performances.
 - The Playboy of the Western World: John Synge’s 1907 comic play is, again, based on a peasant legend. Here, a young man, Christy Mahon, arrives in small Irish town. He is a rather weak figure to begin with, but, after he confesses that he has just come from murdering his father, the townspeople inexplicably treat him as a hero. Christy quickly blossoms into the “playboy,” a heroic figure who becomes the object of affection for all of the townswomen, including the play’s heroine, Pegeen (the other men in the play are either drunkards or spineless followers of the local priest). Late in the play, the father,

who was only wounded, not killed, tracks down his son. When the father arrives, Christy attacks his father and seems to kill him. Confronted with an actual murder, and not a story of murder, the townspeople turn on Christy and threaten to hang him. The father, though, returns again, and he and Christy depart for a life on the road, denouncing the townspeople as they go. Only Pegeen appreciates what they have lost: a vital, heroic man. Once again, Catholic nationalists denounced the play as a mockery of peasant Ireland. Citing a few (extremely tame) references to sexuality, they also decried the play as immoral.

- Yeats's Reaction: The controversies in the Irish National Theatre had a profound influence on Yeats. During the riots occasioned by Synge's play, Yeats spoke directly to the rioters from stage, shaming them for their inability to appreciate great art. When Synge died in 1909, Yeats quickly came to associate Synge with Parnell, believing that, once again, Catholic piety and bourgeois intolerance had caused the Irish to reject a truly great artist.

Features of Yeats's Transitional Phase in the poetry:

- Gender: Because of his tumultuous relationship with Maud, his poems begin to reflect a changing sensibility about beauty. In the early phase, Yeats often focuses on ideal beauty. In the poems of his transitional phase, by contrast, the beloved (often in the guise of figures such as Helen of Troy) is regarded in more complex ways, ranging from temptress to innocent victim.
- Politics: The influence of Augusta Gregory, the betrayal of Maud, and the riots accompanying John Synge's plays profoundly shaped Yeats's understanding of nationalism. In the poems during this period, we see a more direct critique of middle class culture begin to emerge, as well as a tendency to idealize figures from Ireland's Protestant Ascendancy past.
- Style:
 - Yeats's work in the theater prompted a change in his style. Whereas his dreamy, romantic, and symbolic language worked well in his early poetry, it was not suited for the theater. Indeed, Yeats's experimented with a number of mystical, dreamy plays, but they never came to much. His best plays, from this period, tend to use more compact and direct language. During the first decade of the 1900s, we see this compact style begin to emerge in his poetry. The evocative language tends to fade away in favor of direct utterance. His poem, "Adam's Curse," is perhaps the best example of this transformation.
 - Masculine energy: Since Yeats worked mainly in the theater during this period, his poetic reputation tended to rest upon his early, "Celtic twilight" poetry. Desiring to strike out a new course, and convinced that his failings with Maud were due partly to his tendency to play the role of the dreamy artist instead of the man of action, Yeats sought to infuse his poetry with a new level of energy and authority. As he told Augusta Gregory in 1903, "My work has got far more masculine. It has more salt in it."
 - The Mask: During this period Yeats began to develop an idea that would structure much of his mystical and poetic thought during the remainder of his life: each individual (and nation) has an inherent "self," a way of being. In order for the individual to transform himself, to becoming something more, he must put on the mask of his "anti-self," a mask that expresses all that he is not. Thus, if Yeats is the dreamer, his mask is the man of action, the hero. In assuming this mask, Yeats believed that he could achieve what he

calls Unity of Being. This formulation, developed out of his earlier interest in the tension between opposites, emerges in his poetry as an underpinning theme: each poetic act involves the creation of a persona, a self that forged out of an act of will, such that the poet no longer speaks only of his own subjective experiences but of those objective experiences that bind human beings together.