

The Motif of the Rose in the Poetry of William Butler Yeats

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Odjel za anglistiku

Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

Marko Matas

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Završni rad

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Zadar, 2018.



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MOTIV RUŽE U POEZIJI WILLIAMA BUTLERA YEATSA

Sažetak:

Ovaj rad proučava motiv ruže u odabranim pjesmama Williama Butlera Yeatsa. Rad nastoji prikazati načine kojima je Yeats primjenjivao ružu kao motiv: kao simbol Maud Gonne, izraz ljubavne boli i prikaz Irske. Uz to, rad istražuje kako se poetski stil mijenjao tijekom Yeatsove karijere.

Ključne riječi: William Butler Yeats, ruža, Maud Gonne, Irska

THE MOTIF OF THE ROSE IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Summary:

This paper sets out to explore the motif of the rose in William Butler Yeats's selected poems. It attempts to demonstrate in what ways Yeats used the rose as a motif: as a symbol for Maud Gonne, an expression of love's pain and portrayal of Ireland. This paper also analyses how his poetic style changed throughout his career.

Key words: William Butler Yeats, rose, Maud Gonne, Ireland

1. INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats is considered one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. However, this does not mean that he was inactive in the late 19th century. Born in Sandymount in 1865, he spent most of his childhood in the town of Sligo. His frequent exposure to the stories of legendary heroes that once roamed his homeland influenced the development of a deep interest towards his nation's tradition and folklore at a young age (Kogoj-Kapetanić, Vidan 161). His joining to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890 only took his interest even further (Kelly 19). This was reflected in Yeats's early verse in forms of multiple elements and symbolisms pointing to the occult and supernatural, something which Yeats was incredibly fond of at the time.

A turning point in his life occurred at the beginning of 1889, when he met Maud Gonne (Kelly 15), a woman who would change his life and his worldviews forever. He quickly fell in love with her due to their common interest in the occult. His love for her was so strong that it had a major impact on the direction his poetry took. However, Yeats's obsession with Maud Gonne did not come without its repercussions. In Bazdulj's words, as much as she respected Yeats as a poet, Maud Gonne did not really love Yeats the same way he loved her (7). This had a profound effect on him as a person as well as a poet. His love poetry – a predominant point of interest during that time – thus focused on themes like unrequited love and love's suffering. Combining that with his knowledge of the mythologies, he produced a poetry collection *The Wind among the Reeds* published in 1899.

Despite that, however, his hope that she would eventually fall in love with him did not abandon him. For that reason, throughout his life Yeats proposed to Maud Gonne on more than one occasion. In fact, it took him five times to realise that she did not love him back. He eventually turned to another woman, Georgie Hyde-Lees, who accepted him. The two got

married in 1917 (Bazdulj 10-11). The marriage seemed to have a positive impact in regards to the unhappiness he had felt before. It is the marriage that, according to Ellmann, has turned him into the nationwide recognised poet by stating that “had [he] died instead of marrying in 1917, he would have been remembered as a remarkable minor poet who achieved a diction more powerful than that of his contemporaries but who, except in a handful of poems, did not have much to say with it” (223). This shift in his poetic style resulted in him being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1924 (Kelly 231).

Yeats’s love for his homeland stood out throughout his lifetime. When he officially met Lady Augusta Gregory in 1896, the two quickly became friends and started collaborating. Along with other writers such as M. Synge, Seán O’Casey and Padraic Colum, they started a movement known as The Irish Literary Revival. Their efforts bore fruit with the opening of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, where his play *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* was performed (Bazdulj 8). Then it is no wonder that he wholeheartedly supported Ireland’s independence from England, which first manifested itself in the Easter Rising in 1916. No doubt, the tone in his poetry was affected by the ensuing bloodshed of both the rising and the First World War. The poem *The Second Coming* conveys his view of the world in chaos after the battles (Kogoj-Kapetanić, Vidan 162-163).

The goal of this thesis paper is not the analysis of Yeats’s poetry in general. Despite the invaluable impact he has on Irish literature, what stands out as a motif in his poetry is the symbol of the rose. The rose represented many things for Yeats, which in turn reflects its importance to him. As such, there are various motifs of the rose in his poetry, whose meanings would shift from time to time as his life went on. The aim of this paper is to analyse six selected poems. To be specific, we will explore the motif of the rose, how it developed and evolved over time and try to find out what inspired him to create these works of poetry in the first place. The poems in question are “To a Sister of the Cross and the Rose”

(1891), “The Rose of the World” (1892), “The Lover Tells of the Rose in his Heart” (1892), “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” (1892), “The Secret Rose” (1896) and “The Rose Tree” (1917).

2. OBSESSION WITH MAUD GONNE

It was Maud Gonne to whom Yeats dedicated one of the earliest poems he had ever written, peculiarly titled “To a Sister of the Cross and the Rose”. The poem itself was never published during his lifetime, but it holds importance in the interpretation of his poetry nonetheless. In this poem, the rose can mean several things. One of the more obvious ones is that it is a part of a symbol of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Recognised by its symbol of the rose and the cross, McIntosh describes it as an esoteric movement whose origin dates back to the early 17th century (23). Accordingly, Bornstein and Gould interpret the title as the one suggesting “Rosicrucian lore and the welcoming of an initiate as a ‘sister’ of an order” (179). It immediately suggests that Maud Gonne had the same interest in the occult as Yeats had, which is why he refers to her as a sister. However, the symbol of the cross and the rose, as we will see later, can also represent Ireland as her homeland. For that reason, she is called sister because the lyric speaker and she belong to the same nation. Nevertheless, she is addressed directly from the beginning of the poem:

No daughter of the Iron Times,

The Holy Future summons you;

Its voice is in the falling dew

In quiet star light, in these rhymes,

In this sad heart consuming slow (Bornstein, Gould 179)

By saying that she is “no daughter of the Iron Times” (179), the lyric speaker alludes to escapism and his own dissatisfaction with the reality he lives in. The sharp contrast between the industrial reality – hence the name “the Iron Times” (179) – and the opportunistic and hopeful future makes this clear. He simply believes that the present age does not deserve her. On the other hand, the future leaves hints “in the falling dew/ In quiet star light, in these rhymes” (179), where we notice a repetition of the preposition *in*. That way, he establishes a tranquil tone. Elements of nature are linked with his own poetry to express intimacy in order to ensure that this poem is meant for his chosen reader. Once we learn that the future is also “in this sad heart consuming slow” (179), it becomes clear that the lyric subject develops gradation, starting from motifs of the outside world of nature to motifs of his own, intimate world. He seems to express a feeling of lingering pain caused by his love for someone who appears more than a sister to him. The final lines of the poem do not break the flow as much as advise her to be more cautious with what he refers to as “good common hopes” (179) of the time she lives in. It is him who saw through their deception by managing to finally see the “enchanted day” first-hand and hear “the morning buggles blow” (179). This poem can be seen as the starting point for Yeats’s interest in expressing his love for Maud Gonne and her mesmerizing allure in his poetry.

However, it is not the only poem in which the rose symbolises her. “The Rose of the World”, for example, is characterised by a tone which is exclusively intimate. It also introduces us to Yeats’s interest in fantasy and various mythologies, particularly Greek and Celtic. They serve as a way of expressing his emotional state brought upon by his affection for Maud Gonne and her almost inhuman qualities. It begins with a rhetorical question concerning the passage of everything, even beauty itself: “Who dreamed that beauty passes

like a dream?” (Finneran 36) The following lines try to contradict that by providing a portrayal of the woman as some sort of *femme fatale*:

For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,

Mournful that no new wonder may betide,

Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,

And Usna's children died. (36)

Her enchanting lips carry “mournful pride” (36). Those same lips led to the destruction of Troy “in one high funeral gleam” (36), which is a reference to Helen of Troy, King Menelaus’s wife. After being put under Aphrodite’s spell to fall in love with Paris, her guest and suitor, Helen fled to Troy with him. It was the forbidden love between the two that led to the decade-long Trojan War, leading to massive bloodshed (Seemann 253-254). A parallel between Greek mythology and Irish folklore is drawn in the next line. Namely, the lyric speaker mentions how that beauty also led to the demise of “Usna’s children” (36).

Usna, or Uisneach, is regarded as the spiritual center of Ireland, and is linked to the story of Deirdre of Sorrows. Following Freeman’s version of the story, she was born as the daughter of Fedlimid, king Conchobar’s “chief storyteller,” and his wife. Shortly after Deirdre’s birth, the druid Cathbad foresaw that her beauty “will bring evil on [them] all.” Ulstermen reacted with a desire to kill her on the spot to prevent the omen from happening. However, Conchobar decided to keep her alive until she came of age for him to lay in bed with her. That same decision led to a series of unfortunate events – Noise of Uisneach was enchanted by her beauty, which led to the exile of him and his brothers. They died upon returning to their homeland due to Conchobar’s plot to get Deirdre for himself. However, this sparked a war between him and the previous king Fergus, who slaughtered most of his men

and turned to the service of another king. Taken prisoner by the greedy king, Deirdre committed suicide by smashing her head against a rock so that no man could ever fall in love with her again (52-57). Comparison between these tragic heroines just serves as an emphasis on the ravishing yet dangerous beauty which the poet's chosen holds. Such is the rose, whose thorns the holder has to endure in order to witness its beauty.

The following stanza continues what is briefly touched upon in the first one – the fleeting nature of time and subsequent temporariness of everything under its influence: “We and the laboring world are passing by” (36). What follows next is the portrayal of everything that succumbs to it:

Amid men's souls, that waver and give place

Like the pale waters in their wintry race,

Under the passing stars, foam of the sky,

Lives on this lonely face. (36)

Among them are the living souls of people, using the time they have to roam around in the vast world while they can. Similarly, during harsh times of winter, streams of water keep spreading until they eventually freeze and stop. The passage of time is also conveyed in the movement of the ever-shifting clouds in the sky, which the lyric subject poetically describes as “foam of the sky” (36). However, the final line of this stanza returns to the motif of the woman's fatalistic beauty by noticing the “lives on this lonely face” (36). Clouds appear only to later fade away, and people come and go. Similarly, the woman's suitors eventually abandon her, leaving her alone in sadness and distress. In a way, this stanza is an answer to the question of danger that her blinding charm might pose – love from the men she met was short-term so they abandoned her in one way or another.

The final stanza of this poem appears to return to the elements linked to the mystical and supernatural just as in the first stanza. The difference here is that it is not a national folklore or mythology that is in question, but an actual religion, specifically Christianity. The scenery is envisioned in heaven as the symbol of absolute perfection, which only the best people can get to witness. Therefore, that elegant woman would fit in there perfectly:

Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode:

Before you were, or any hearts to beat,

Weary and kind one lingered by His seat;

He made the world to be a grassy road

Before her wandering feet. (36)

As a biblical motif, archangels appear to be a very specific choice of words in this context. Following Soldatić's descriptions of Christian lore, archangels belong to the third and the lowest rank of angels, with the main duty of executing or following God's decisions. Not only that, but unlike angels, they bring news that are considered of great importance (11). This precision in word choice is what basically serves as a hyperbole to even further express the chosen woman's beauty – even God's greatest and most loyal assistants must show respect to her. What is more, if her beauty was not unfathomable until now, even God himself subjected to her. He went as far as turning the world he carefully created to be "a grassy road/ Before her wandering feet" (36). It could be argued that this poem with its exaggerating imagery functions as the epitome of Yeats's deep love towards Maud Gonne. Her beauty captures him and leaves him in pain. He does not mind, however, as even when in pain he is allowed to admire her. This brings us back to the imagery of the impeccable rose with its daring thorns.

However, this does not mean that Yeats understood that same pain. Because Maud Gonne did not share his feelings, he underwent a period of love's stings which he tried to capture in his poems. The short poem "The Lover Tells of a Rose in his Heart" tries to accomplish that – capture that feeling of love's pain and lack of understanding towards it. The rose thus illustrates fateful love that bloomed in the depths of his heart. In the first stanza, the lyric speaker blames the ordinariness of life for his pain. He directly addresses his love interest when he says that the same imperfection is "wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart" (Finneran 56). Acoustic images like "the cry of a child by the roadway, the creak of a lumbering cart,/ The heavy steps of by ploughman, splashing the wintry mould" (56) have negative connotations in this context. They are usually associated with disturbance and interruption, or in this case, disruption of peace and quietude. That is why he considers them "uncomely and broken" (56) – their cacophony breaks that delicacy of intimacy between him and his beloved. In fact, they are impactful and unbearable to the point where her worldviews are distorted as a result, and the lyric speaker considers that simply unacceptable.

The second stanza appears revolutionary in comparison to the first one – all those things are so repugnant that he has a strong desire to "build them anew and sit on a green knoll apart" (56). Bloom explains this line as if "the world is not shapely enough to provide fit context for his love" (125), which pretty much concludes the entire stanza. There are potential hints to biblical motifs in regards to God's creation of everything – he created the world and then decided to rest. In a similar vein, the speaker sees himself as a supernatural being who is willing to do anything to feel his love's embrace. Even the fundamental elements such as water, earth and air are to be remade "like a casket of gold" (56). They need to be perfect and that perfection is what will make his love possible, all "for [his] dream of [her] image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of [his] heart" (56). This final line is nearly

identical to the one in the first stanza. However, this time the lyric speaker subconsciously reveals the real reason for his pain – the idealisation of his love interest. She is a human being, but to him, she is much more than that: a goddess, a muse, his entire world. Since this love is not returned, he tries to compensate it by blaming the world he lives in for the imperfections that ruin his imagined perfection. This poem thus rises to a relatable level even in today's context – love can be blinding and can prepare us for the unexpected.

3. HINTS OF PATRIOTISM IN THE EARLY VERSE

Although Maud Gonne was the point of focus in much of his early poetry, the rose as a recurring motif is not tied exclusively to her and Yeats's desire for her. One of his best known poems is "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time", which can be interpreted in a number of ways. Kogoj-Kapetanić and Vidan, for instance, read it as his hoping that his search for beauty does not ruin his understanding of the common things in life (161). However, what remains a mystery is the person whom Yeats addresses here. As much as it can refer to Maud Gonne again, there are many hints in this poem as to why it heralds the upcoming Irish Literary Revival. Therefore, it may actually refer to Ireland instead of any other woman. Considering that the poem was published in 1893, this is very likely because the movement began in 1897, when Yeats started collaborating primarily with Lady Augusta Gregory and later with other poets. Their activities, above else, included translations of ancient Irish sagas and songs of Irish national folklore (Bazdulj 8). This is quite noticeable in much of Yeats's early poetry. However, what sets this poem apart from others such as "The Rose of the World" is the tone and address of the lyric subject to his woman of interest. Moreover, when we compare its title to "The Sister of the Cross and the Rose", it can be argued that they are

linked together. As mentioned before, the sister is Maud Gonne while the cross (rood) might symbolise Ireland.

The poem starts with a direct address to that rose: “Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!” (Finneran 31). He calls her for the purpose of telling the ancient stories of Celtic heroes who once roamed and ruled what is now known as Ireland, as if trying to educate her about her own past:

Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide;

The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed,

Who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold;

And thine own sadness, whereof stars, grown old

In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea,

Sing in their high and lonely melody. (31)

Notable figures of Celtic mythology are mentioned in the first stanza of this poem. Squire describes Cuchulain as Celtic version of Achilles or Heracles, having accomplished incredible tasks for a mere mortal (151). His most notable deeds include defeating and killing Culann’s hunting dog as a boy, thus earning his name – literally meaning “Culann’s hunting dog” (153) – to single-handedly slaughtering the entire army of Queen Medb of Connaught (159-160) and other countless ordeals. Druids are also a common occurrence in the mythology, serving mostly as king’s advisors and prophets. The druid referred to in this poem is most likely Cathbad, one that is predominant in the Ulster Cycle.

Suspicious are confirmed with the mention of Fergus in the following line. It was Cathbad who promised a child to a beautiful woman named Nes, convincing her that he will

become a king. After their intercourse, Cathbad was true to his words, as Nes together with her son Conchobar managed to rise to power later. Fergus, the king at that time, was deceived by the two and relegated to a mere servant, a duty which he reluctantly agreed upon. Nevertheless, in the context of this poem, these ancient figures serve as a reminder of what sort of people trod the lands of Ireland in the past. When he looks at Ireland now, he only sees a desolate land of stars chanting their “high and lonely melody” (31) to their reflection in the sea. This creates a melancholic tone from someone who wishes to experience the age of heroes and kings – he wants history to reoccur. The remaining lines of this stanza are a result of the longing for the past – the lyric speaker does not want to be “blinded by man's fate” and experience “all poor foolish things” of the current age (31). After all, the ever-longing beauty is all he ever wanted, and it is right next to him.

The next stanza immediately delivers a repetition of the same phrase “come near” to accentuate the lyric subject’s longing even further. At first, he cannot stand the present anymore, but he quickly comes to his senses by realising he might be going too far: “Ah, leave me still/ A little space for the rose-breath to fill!” (31). The speaker becomes aware that he cannot live in delusions anymore:

Lest I no more hear common things that crave;

The weak worm hiding down in its small cave,

The field-mouse running by me in the grass,

And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass;

But seek alone to hear the strange things said

By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,

And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know. (31)

The common things of his age which he pitied in the previous stanza should still be something to experience instead of ignore. As much as he loves the history of his precious Ireland, he still wants to fit in the society he is a part of and not lose the grasp of reality. The initial feeling of alienation brought by deep melancholy is now rejected, as he does not want to end up speaking “a tongue men do not know” (31). A minor link between Irish national folklore and Christianity is drawn here as well, but apart from mentioning God as a supernatural being, it is not of much importance. In the remaining three lines, even though the lyric speaker refuses to lose himself in reality, he promises to recount more ancient tales – not of Ireland but of Eire, the name of his land in his mother tongue as a way to express national identity. The final line is identical to the one at the beginning: “Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days” (31). The tone is, however, different – initially the speaker is enthusiastic and excited, which is emphasised by the exclamation mark. However, he eventually becomes aware, if not slightly saddened that they have to part ways.

Numerous motifs are present in this poem and they complement each other, while the contrast between the two stanzas becomes clear. While most certainly that of Ireland and its history, this poem displays a struggle some of us might experience in our lives. It stems from the disparity between past and present experiences. We may focus only on the past, ignoring the reality and living the illusion, or live in the exhausting present, never reaching unmatched happiness that we think we had before. The temporal element in the title is essentially used for this reason – time passes and does not stop when we want it to stop. This is a recurring motif which Yeats likes to use in his poetry. It fits the escapist nature of his early poems, which are usually accompanied by a feeling of lingering melancholy.

4. ROSE OF MYSTERY

Sometimes it is not always clear to what or whom the motif of the rose may refer. The title of the poem, “The Secret Rose”, refers to the rose as something mysterious. While it is certain that the addressee is a woman – judging by other motifs in the poem – the exact identity is perplexing, to say the least. It could be Maud Gonne, but it could also be Ireland because recurring motifs from the previous poems happen to intertwine. Yeats might be referring to both, but the definite article used in the title could disprove that claim already – there is only one rose. However, multiple motifs prove that perhaps there might in fact be two entities being referred to. Other personas appearing in the poem are mysterious so the lines serve as hints which make the reader think about who they might be. At the very beginning we are met with that same secrecy:

Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose,

Enfold me in my hour of hours; where those

Who sought thee in the Holy Sepulchre,

Or in the wine-vat, dwell beyond the stir

And tumult of defeated dreams; and deep

Among pale eyelids, heavy with the sleep

Men have named beauty. (Finneran 69)

The lyric speaker immediately begins with his desire to feel the embrace of that mysterious woman. Biblical motifs make appearance here for the purpose of emphasizing her importance. She is compared to Jesus whom his followers were looking for in the Holy

Sepulchre after his death on the cross. Only other people who managed to see her, including the speaker himself, were drunk men unaffected by “...the stir/ And tumult of defeated dreams” (69). She appears as a perfect, unreachable dream, with eyelids so delightfully shaped that she is the personification of beauty. This part of the poem can be read as the one which alludes to Yeats’s earliest poetry, where Maud Gonne’s beauty is the central topic. Similarly to the addressee in “The Rose of the World”, her beauty is no ordinary – it is flawless, sought after as much as unimaginable. Elements of Christianity and fantasy only emphasise the effect it has on everyone who lays eyes on her.

The remainder of the poem, on the other hand, is interspersed with elements of Celtic mythology and Christianity. The lyric subject mentions everything that her “great leaves enfold” (69) or in this sense, remember:

The ancient beards, the helms of ruby and gold
 Of the crowned Magi; and the king whose eyes
 Saw the pierced Hands and Rood of elder rise
 In Druid vapour and make the torches dim;
 Till vain frenzy awoke and he died; and him
 Who met Fand walking among flaming dew
 By a grey shore where the wind never blew,
 And lost the world and Emer for a kiss; (69-70)

They carry a tragic but awe-inspiring history, with ancient kings, druids and wizards of Irish national folklore. Even Jesus is mentioned here as the King of Jews, who saw his own

“pierced Hands and Rood” (69) during his painful crucifixion. Symbolically, we can draw parallels between this imagery and “The Rose upon the Rood of Time”, where the rose represents Ireland and its painful history. This portrayal here is used to illustrate the feeling of pain and tragedy, something which dominates the remainder of the poem. Accordingly, the lines that come next make a reference to tragic events from Cuchulain’s story. As told by Freeman, Fand is a mysterious woman from the Otherworld whom Cuchulain met and quickly became close to, which in turn sparked jealousy between Emer and him (131). According to Squire, Emer is Cuchulain’s wife and the daughter of Forgall Monach, regarded as the most beautiful maiden in Ireland (154).

Nevertheless, Cuchulain’s subsequent loss of Fand after the argument between the three caused so much sadness in him that he ended up drinking amnesia potion just to forget about her (Freeman 133). Squire again mentions how Cuchulain met his demise when he was half-paralysed and armed with only three spears, rejecting threats from the approaching druids who sought each one for their own ends. Rejecting them was considered bad luck, which came to truth when Cuchulain killed the third and the last druid. The spear flew through him and ended up in the hands of his adversary, Lugaid, who pierced the same spear through Cuchulain’s body, fatally wounding him before decapitating him and bringing his head to Queen Medb (168-169). All of these tragedies are impactful in their own way, as is Ireland’s history to the lyric speaker.

And him who sold tillage, and house, and goods,

And sought through lands and islands numberless years,

Until he found, with laughter and with tears,

A woman of so shining loveliness

That men threshed corn at midnight by a tress

A little stolen tress. (70)

According to Bloom, “Yeats has no real source for this; it is his own beautiful fiction, a vignette attaining a visionary climax in a remarkable Romantic conceit...The shining pathos here is that this is the poet's own defeated dream” (131). Yeats thus probably provides this imagery to prolong the chanting tone of the ancient tales. That way, he does not disturb the flow of images in the rest of the poem.

I, too, await

The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.

When shall the stars be blown about the sky,

Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?

Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,

Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose? (70)

In these final lines, the lyric speaker seems to envisage the impending doom. The poem closes with the same line with which Yeats opens the poem, except that this one is written in the form of a question – the answer is not certain. Bloom sees these lines as heavily inspired by Shelley and Blake. According to him, the “great wind of love and hate” refers to how Shelley names the West Wind both destroyer and creator, while the apocalyptic imagery and prophecy is a reference to Blake and his unfinished poem, “The Four Zoas” (131-132). It is unclear whom the rose might represent here. As much as it could be Maud Gonne, the portrayal of possible demise does not fit in here. The same could be argued about Ireland – there is no reason why Yeats would want to see the destruction of the land he cherishes. The

identity of this rose thus remains a mystery, but what can be said is that it seems to shift in this poem. Namely, the first few lines refer to Maud Gonne, while much of the poem seems to evoke Ireland and its history. However, the final lines may appear out of place, if not just as a reference to the poets who influenced Yeats's poetic style.

5. WITHERING BLOOM OF MOTHER IRELAND

As we have seen, Yeats's poetry frequently uses elements taken from Celtic mythology and folklore as well as Christian religion, which either express emotions or emphasise human qualities. However, after more than a decade in his career, we can notice how Yeats's poetic style took a different, if not the opposite turn. There are no more druids and heroes that wander around in his poems. Emotions more or less disappeared altogether and matters like love and passion no longer occupy the center of his attention. The issues he deals with now are more serious and up to date with his homeland's situation. The poem "The Rose Tree" is the prime example of this sharp turn. It is written in the form of a dialogue between two revolutionaries and masterminds behind the Easter Rising, hoping to establish independent Irish Republic. The two people in question are Patrick Pearse and James Connolly. According to McGarry, Patrick Pearse was a schoolmaster and leader of the Ulster Volunteer Force activist group, who believed that nationhood is best expressed through arms and battle. In other words, he supported practical patriotism (64). Meanwhile, James Connolly led the Citizen Army (94) and later joined the military council (103). The rose tree they are talking about in this poem represents Ireland in the making – Easter Rising was the first step leading towards its independence. The tree represents life and birth, but it is an allegory of the state of Ireland, seen as a mother to her children. Therefore, roses stand for Irish citizens.

The poem begins with Pearse telling Connolly how the “breath of politic words/ Has withered [their] Rose Tree” (Finneran 183). It was a political dissatisfaction that provoked the rising, worsening the state of Ireland as a result. Reference to the culprits is made in the following lines, displayed as a wind that “blows/ Across the bitter sea” (183), representing the opposing English forces. It is that same wind that blew away the tree’s roses, leaving it barren. In a similar vein, the Englishmen took Ireland her children during the outbreak. In the following stanza, Connolly replies by saying that the tree needs water in order to grow, to “spread on every side,/ And shake the blossom from the bud/ To be the garden's pride” (183). The rising was a major step towards Ireland’s independence. Now that the withering period which the tree has suffered is over, it is time to tend to it and let it grow more than ever before. In contrast to that, the final stanza is what symbolically concludes the ideology behind the revolution, or any revolution for that matter:

'But where can we draw water,'

Said Pearse to Connolly,

'When all the wells are parched away?

O plain as plain can be

There's nothing but our own red blood

Can make a right Rose Tree.' (183)

Once the revolution begins, there is no turning back. There are no wells to water the tree, because the enemy forces made them parish. As no one wants to submit to England at this point, it is their own blood that will eventually make Ireland independent, or in this case, make the tree grow. In other words, action in the form of violence will give rise to the independence they seek.

In many ways, this poem shows how much Yeats matured throughout the years. He started as an escapist poet who would enrich his poems with elements of Irish folklore, mythologies and magical beings from fantasies. Now he takes a turn in expressing his national identity because of that sense of belonging he has developed. Yeats's love for his homeland, something that was hinted back in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time", prevails here. Ireland is portrayed as a mother losing her children to enemies and it is up to him to express that in verse, while at the same time making it clear enough whom he refers to. This poem is thus a contrast to "The Secret Rose" – there is no more room for mystery and secrecy.

6. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that William Butler Yeats made a lasting impact on Irish literature of the 20th century. He began his career by writing about Celtic myths and their heroes he was fascinated by at that time. Once he met Maud Gonne later on, her presence was instantly noticeable in his poems. Her persona is either linked to the elements of the aforementioned myths or simply dominates lines of particular poems. After his marriage, Yeats's devotion to the independence of his motherland is predominant in his poems. As such, his poetic style changes, no longer focusing on Maud Gonne to such a degree as before. His poetry grew more and more realistic and conscious of the world he lives in. This gradual switch from idealism to realism is what makes his poetry a truly complex and unique field of research – his style of writing changed constantly throughout his life. Accordingly, the motif of the rose is not an exception. Possible meanings and symbolism he attributed to the rose shifted over the years.

Early poems with this motif are focused on celebrating Maud Gonne's immaculate physical beauty which is portrayed as almost inhuman. Motifs of pain and suffering caused by this unrequited love are also recurrent in his poetry. Sometimes Yeats employs metaphors to compare her with tragic heroines from different mythologies in an attempt to portray his experience of her beauty as accurately as possible. The rose as a representation of Ireland, on the other hand, is also recognisable in these poems. The rose is here linked to Ireland's mythological history as a way to express a feeling of longing for those times or provide tragic imagery to lament fallen heroes. Later in his life, Yeats grew to realise that Ireland and its current political state were of bigger importance to him. This can be noticed by a more realistic tone in his poems, as well as a direct way of expressing himself – there is very little room for fantastic imagery that used to dominate his earlier poetry. Yeats stops using mythological aspects he once followed devoutly. In fact, he takes a serious turn from yearning for Ireland's past to portraying the state of Ireland at its present moment, ravaged by the enemy forces and in the process of separating from England.

In conclusion, Yeats's adroit use of symbolism and metaphors is what sets him apart from other poets of his time. Love for his homeland is very noticeable and accompanied by the motifs taken from Irish national folklore. It can be concluded that his selected works of poetry are written with such a delicacy and precision that they require a rather careful reading. As for his rose, its meaning always seems to elude us as readers.

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