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Burning, Drowning, Shining, Blooming: The Shapes of Aging in W.B. Yeats' Poetry

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Introduction

A Personal Preface

The first time I can remember feeling truly connected to a piece of poetry was reading "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot in my high school English class. I loved the metrical experimentation, the unexpected rhyme scheme, the mysterious refrain. While I didn't comprehend the poem on an analytical or rhetorical level, I remember feeling amazed at how much of the poem's essence I gleaned at the sonic level. I later learned that measuring one's "life out in coffee spoons," (Eliot 4) for example, represents how Prufrock feels about his monotonous and unfulfilling life, but this level of meaning was not known to me at the time. Despite my initially superficial understanding of the poem, I still adored lines like this one, repeating them back in my head over and over.

After arriving at Claremont McKenna College and declaring as a literature major, I found myself in Professor Nicholas Warner's British Writers II class. When we arrived at the 20th century, I was excited to come across "Prufrock" again. However, I soon discovered just how little I had understood the poem when I had encountered it before. I found myself obsessed with the poem once again, now thematically rather than just sonically. The notions of insecurity, physical ugliness and aging that Eliot raises in the poem are raw and cerebral, and I rediscovered a poem I had always loved.

As it came time to choose my thesis topic, I couldn't stop thinking back to the satisfaction I felt from analyzing "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." However, I also wanted to push myself to work with something new. Following Professor Warner's

advice, I decided to take a closer look at some of Eliot's contemporaries and influences. Upon reading W.B. Yeats' work, I was amazed to find many of the same themes that had so intrigued me in "Prufrock." While it was not my first time reading Yeats, it my first time venturing outside of the often-anthologized. As I read deeper I soon discovered just how prolifically Yeats wrote about aging. While he is typically known for his emphasis on love— a theme particularly motivated by his long and tumultuous relationship with the strong-willed Maud Gonne— I discovered upon reading more of his work that Yeats' focus on love cannot be fully understood without also analyzing his concern with age. The more I read, the better I understood poems like "The Second Coming" and "No Second Troy." The theme of aging in Yeats' poetry soon became the obvious choice for my thesis topic.

While I originally set out to look at aging alone, as I read more it became clear how thematically inseparable love and growing old are for Yeats. I discovered a recurring use of symbolism, complicated Irish allusions, and a sometimes jarring treatment of women in the poems I read. As unrelated as these elements sometimes felt, I ultimately walked away from this project understanding just how intricately they are weaved together. This thesis attempts to not only expose and analyze these intricacies, but also challenge the way the literary canon typically isolates Yeats' more famous poems without the context of his other work. By providing a deep analysis of just a slice of his hundreds of poems, I have only cracked the surface of work to be done on this persistent— yet often overlooked— element of Yeats' poetic genius.

Chapter I

Eyeing the Elements: Fire and Water in W.B. Yeats' Theme of Aging

It is unequivocally clear that W.B. Yeats is concerned with aging in his poetry: a quick glance down the table of contents in a book of his poems shows how often the word "old" appears in the titles alone. Yet, how Yeats *feels* about aging, about leaving youth behind, and even about dying is less clear. His poems contrast youth and age, looking at what age is, but also discussing youth by showing the audience what age is not. Time and time again, Yeats' poems suggest a strong symbolic connection between old age and water, whereas youth is associated with fire. Understanding this symbolism can help the audience to decipher Yeats' attitudes about aging. From the "drop" (Yeats 82) of water that emphasizes an erasure of individuality brought about by aging, to an old man reminiscing about his "burning youth," (Yeats 136) Yeats' poetic symbols effectively illustrate his attitudes about aging.

This symbolic connection is unexpected, though, because it is unconventional: some of the most prominent poets predating Yeats connected water with vitality and longevity rather than with old age or death. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Water Ballad," it is the steady "row on, row on" upon the "brightly flowing" streams that allows the speaker's lover to stay "forever by [his] side" (Coleridge). In Wordsworth's "The Simplon Pass," he quite straightforwardly proclaims waterfalls to be "The types and symbols of Eternity / Of first and last, and midst, and without end" (Wordsworth). These symbolic associations could not be more opposite of Yeats', where we will see water associated not with the eternal, but rather with physical degradation and loss of vitality.

However, as we will discover, Yeats was not alone in his reimagination of water's relationship to human existence: his symbolism is resonant with his contemporary T.S. Eliot's work, particularly in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Perhaps poets like Yeats and Eliot were pushing against the symbolic conventions of their predecessors, striving for something original. Avoiding cliché and creating poetic innovation can indeed play a role in creating groundbreaking poetry. Or, perhaps these poets simply found that their symbolic associations of water with old age and fire with youth to be more appropriate and effective than the conventions. Whatever the case may be, Yeats' use of water and fire symbolism lights an innovative torch for his audience, and allows us to fully submerge ourselves in the waters of his ideas and attitudes about the human experience of aging.

We will begin our investigation of the power of Yeats' fire and water symbols by first turning to an early poem, "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner." Throughout this evenly proportioned three stanza poem, Yeats sets out a clear-cut juxtaposition of water and fire as symbols for the trials of age and the triumphs of youth. In order to best understand the context for this symbolism, we must first turn our attention to the tone that Yeats sets up at the start of the poem. The first stanza immediately sets the scene for the old speaker's current state as well as his past. By using "Although" (Yeats 46) to start the poem, Yeats conveys a melancholic tone and subtle longing for a different time: he seems to say, 'This might be where I am right now, but you will soon see that it was not always this way for me.' He starts in present tense, but does not fully accept the present moment that he experiences. Rather than outright starting, "I shelter from a broken tree," (Yeats

46) beginning the line with "Although" implies to the audience that whatever the speaker is experiencing right now does not accurately represent the story of his life. This urgency to tell the audience about the past makes us aware of the insecurities that the old man might be feeling about his current situation, and we are in turn prepared for a soon-to-come discussion of age and youth.

In light of this melancholic beginning, it becomes more clear that the water imagery we will see in these first few lines has sad associations for Yeats. The imagery of failing to shelter from rain under a broken tree is intrinsically gloomy and unhappy, which also contributes to the depressive feeling here. It's also key to note that these lines depict entirely natural elements. Rain is an uncontrollable force of nature, something that humans cannot predict with much control or accuracy. While getting caught in the rain happens to everyone, here we see this occasional annoyance take on larger significance, representing more of a perpetual life condition for the old speaker than a meaningless mishap. Unlike fire, rain cannot be reproduced by humans, so the rain and water here represent the uncontrollable and also the inevitable. A broken tree is also a product of nature that is not molded by human control. Thus, the rain, paired with the broken tree as an unsuccessful shelter, implies the futility of human attempts to control our outcomes.

As we see in the next few lines, Yeats reflects on his youth as a time of control, comfort, and bliss. The reflection on youth exemplifies what age *lacks,* and it appears that the speaker would much rather be youthful than in his current state. Here we also see a symbolic association of fire with youth. Yeats recalls to the time when his "chair was nearest to the fire / In every company" (Yeats 46) He longs for the days when he gathered

closely around a fire with other people to talk of the "love" or "politics" (Yeats 46) that he once felt so passionately about as a young person. Now an old man, the speaker has lost hope for the topics he once felt such passion for, and he realizes that every person one day finds himself under the "broken tree," (Yeats 46) pelted by rain, longing for the fireside discussions that once seemed so important. The image of young people speaking of "love or politics" (Yeats 46) around a fireplace implies a youthful hopefulness about the world, an unjaded perception that life will always feel this exciting and invigorating. The use of the fireplace exemplifies this: it's an invention of man. We contain these small fires in our homes, homes which are also manmade. If it were raining outside in this scene that Yeats reminisces on, it would not matter: the fire-warmed indoors (it is clear that he is indoors because he sits in a "chair") would protect the "company," (Yeats 46) and the rain would not extinguish the fire. The image of uncontrollable rain dripping through a broken tree shelter comes into sharp contrast with the man made, indoor fireplace of Yeats' youth. Alas, now he is old and lacks any sort of elemental control as he laments under the broken tree, and his fire of youth is extinguished by a force far greater than any amount of human will, desire or passion: "Time" (Yeats 46).

The second stanza shows how the old speaker has lost faith in the ability of humans to meaningfully control their lives. He starts again with word choice that implies uncertainty: "Though" (Yeats 46). But this time, "Though" reflects on the young people that the old man observes. Thus, we see him beginning to accept the futility of youthful desire. Yeats creates a tone of indifference toward young people when he says they "are making pikes again / for some conspiracy / And crazy rascals fill their rage / At human

tyranny" (Yeats 46). For the old speaker, who contemplates how "Time has transfigured" (Yeats 46) him, these "lads" and "rascals" are rebelling in vain. "Some conspiracy" and "human tyranny" (Yeats 46) are trivial in comparison to what he now experiences: he realizes that during his youth he, too, tried to change the evils that he perceived in his world, but all along the real evil was Time. It is only now, standing in the symbolic rain of water, that the old man understands what a waste all of his youthful vigor was, and that these "lads" are doomed too. This sentiment is more concisely expressed in Yeats' "The Second Coming," when he imagines a hellish world where "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" (Yeats 187). It seems that this imagined universe comes alive in "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner": we imagine the youths, with their pikes and fiery torches, protesting in vain, and we realize that no matter who is "closest to the fire" (Yeats 46) as a young person, we all will end up old, vulnerable, withering and "lack[ing] all conviction" (Yeats 187). The rain of Time will always find a way to extinguish our fireplaces, our "passionate intensity" (Yeats 187).

After analyzing "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner," it's hard not to consider the curiously parallel-titled, "The Meditation of the Old Fisherman." The latter, though structurally very different from the former, indeed bears many similarities thematically, as they both depict old men reflecting on youth. The structure of this poem comes into conversation with its water imagery, and shows how versatile Yeats' symbolism is in evoking the same feelings in two visually unalike— but thematically complementary— poems.

The first three line couplets are addressed to "You waves," (Yeats 21) as Yeats reminisces about a childhood in "Sligo town," where he spent much of his youth (Conner 173- 174). Structurally, the lines appear to resemble waves creeping up on a shore as the tide comes in:

> You waves, though you dance by my feet like children at
>
> play,
>
> Though you glow and you glance, though you purr and
>
> you dart;
>
> In the Junes that were warmer than these are, the waves
>
> were more gay, (Yeats 21)

The even numbered lines become progressively longer, thereby evoking the passing of a day at the beach as the shoreline slowly and steadily creeps up. This consistency gives the reader a feeling of assurance and prediction structurally. Yet, as with the last poem, certain diction in the lines leaves us feeling uneasy: Yeats uses the word "though" in the first and third lines, so we know that the happy memories of waves that "dance at my feet like children" and "glow...glance...purr…[and] dart" (Yeats 21) will likely be interrupted. Indeed, the waves— we find out in line six— "were more gay" (Yeats 21) in the past. As with the last poem, the first of three anaphoric lines in the poem is introduced here to solidify how the waves have changed for the worse now that old age has taken hold. The metaphor of waves for time represents how old age creeps up on us. Taking each wave individually, we don't notice the shoreline moving. But over time, these little increments force us to leave the beach when the tide is too high. The symbolism in this poem

reinforces the notion— also presented in "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner"— that water and its properties as an element can help us to better understand the complex emotions and experiences of aging.

In "The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water," we again see water as a symbol for aging, and further, for death. Structurally, the poem's narrow, compact shape emphasizes the meaning of each word. As with any poem, each word is chosen with care, but the particular brevity of this one makes unusual or distinct word choices stand out even more. We question, for example, why the poet chooses to use the word "alters" to describe change: "I heard the old, old men say, / 'Everything alters'" (Yeats 82). "Alters" is a word of considerable hardness and consonance, whereas the other words thus far in the poem are softer. Because of this, it stands out and make us think, "Why did Yeats choose this word? Why not 'Everything changes'?" One possibility is simply avoiding cliché, as "Everything changes" is much more conventional way to express a similar sentiment. However, if we continue to read to the end of the poem, we see that the word "alters" end up rhyming with end of the last line, "Like the waters" (Yeats 82). By rhyming alters with waters, Yeats implies that these words have an inherent similarity. In typical Yeatsian slant rhyme fashion, he encourages us to subconsciously associate water with alteration, thus solidifying that water stands as a symbol for aging and the changes that come with it.

This poem— unlike "The Lamentation" and "The Meditation" poems— makes a statement about death with water symbolism, in addition to the discussion of age present in all three poems. The phrase "drop away" (Yeats 82) echoes the idea of drops of water,

thereby associating passing away with water symbolism, as the old men appear to be speaking about their impending deaths. By using the image of water drops, we are made to understand that when death occurs, people must experience it alone, "one by one" (Yeats 82). Rhythmically this line is a perfect line of monosyllables, with an exception of the last word. This structure in turn evokes a sense of drip dropping and isolation in the deaths of the old men; they have each other on the riverbed, but when it is their turn to die it happens alone. A monosyllabic line might typically run the risk of unoriginality or over-simplification in poetry, for there are only so many single-syllable words, and these words tend toward overuse and simple meaning. Yet, it's the originality of the symbolic implications held in these simple words that make the line so effective. The line has a certain feigned simplicity, where the concerns over isolation and being forgotten after death are only understood with careful reading. Yet, it is also the simple diction that makes the more complicated meaning all the more impactful for the reader once it is discovered. Once Yeats' careful intentions here are understood by the audience, the structure of the line leaves us grappling with the fact that a death bed is only big enough for one, and often no one is there to witness our last dying breath.

However, once a person has "drop[ped] away," (Yeats 82) it seems that they become part of something bigger, similar to a stream of water. The fact that the men are standing "By the waters" (Yeats 82) would evoke an image of these individual drops falling into the same water that the men are "admiring Themselves in" (Yeats 82). What does this say about death? What does it say about existence *after* death? It seems that Yeats is implying some sort of reunification of the old men after they "drop away,"

(Yeats 82) but it is not obvious what that reunification looks like. Continuing with the water metaphor, the old men also say that "'All that's beautiful drifts away / Like the waters'" (Yeats 82). If the men dying is symbolized by drips into a singular stream that then drifts away, then we can imagine as readers that, though they are no longer alive, the old men do not cease to exist entirely. Rather, the old men drift away in a continuous stream to some unknown destination. Perhaps the oneness of the stream implies an erasure of individual identity with death; after all, as we saw in "The Lamentation," Yeats seems to view young passion and vigor as futile. So, perhaps he comparably sees human individuality as pointless, if in the end we all end up in the same singular stream.

The mystery of the waters in this poem leaves the reader still guessing and wondering at the end. The old men may be the subject of this poem, but they still remain distant and guarded. If Yeats had wanted to grant us access to the exact thoughts and feelings of the men, he would have given them the first person narration in the poem. Rather, he has a separate and presumably younger individual report what he heard the old men say. This degree of separation adds to the sense that what happens after death ultimately remains unknown, just as a bend in a river hides where that river leads. Furthermore, the way the men are described also distances them from the reader: the old men have "hands like claws" (Yeats 82) and "their knees / Were twisted like the old thorn-trees," (Yeats 82) both physical qualities that make the old men seem untouchable. Like a lion with its claws or a rose with its thorns, one can perhaps get close enough to hear the old men, but one cannot touch them or fully understand their experiences.

"Men Improve with the Years" also bears subtle but rich water and fire imagery. Repeated in a pair of anaphoric lines, the old speaker here calls himself "A weather-worn, marble triton / Among the streams" (Yeats 136). In the previous poem, old age was depicted as a man staring down at his reflection in water, essentially seeing his destiny—death— in the water; then, he becomes part of the water when he passes on. In this poem, the triton is already "among the streams" (Yeats 136). Does this mean he is dead? It is not immediately clear, but whether or not the speaker is alive in this poem, he is depicted as strong: he is made of marble, and though he is weather-worn, he persists. The title comes into focus with this repeated line: being weather-worn is a positive attribute, thereby verifying that men indeed "improve with the years" (Yeats 136).

But is this a truth that Yeats truly stands by? Though the triton be wise and weather-worn, he also mindlessly conforms to what's happening around him: he is quite literally going with the flow, swimming "among the streams" (Yeats 136). It seems that Yeats struggles with the contradictory nature of old age and its virtues: on the one hand, age is seen as a culmination of experience that results in wisdom and knowledge about the world; on the other, age is a physically debilitating state of conformity. These two realities co-exist, but simultaneously hinder one another's persistence: the physical degradation of the body over time makes it difficult to use the wisdom that old age brings. The old man wants to live, to conquest, to break out of the stream, but old age inhibits him. Yeats shares this frustration with us when he writes, "O would that we had met / When I had my burning youth!" (Yeats 136). Once again strongly associating fire with youth, the man bitterly acknowledges that he has grown "old among dreams" (Yeats

136). The dreams in this poem particularly connect to erotic desires and sex: as an old man, the speaker feels inadequate and unable to be with another person sexually as he could in his youth. This is further implied by the "triton" (Yeats 136): half fish-half man, this creature lacks the physical parts needed to engage in sexual intercourse with another human. The old speaker imagined in this way has a clear apathy towards life. Thus, we see how the poem's title is deceptive: perhaps men do improve with the years mentally, but ultimately the physicality of the human experience limits the ability of old people to attack life with the vigor they had in youth. Unfortunately, it is not until old age that we appreciate and understand the utility of this "burning youth" (Yeats 136). Yet, it is only in old age that we understand how to make best use of this vitality.

As it turns out, Yeats was not alone among his contemporaries with an innovative connection of water to old age. T.S. Eliot pondered old age in a strikingly parallel manner to Yeats in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Prufrock— a hopelessly awkward, fumbling man— faces old age throughout his famously mysterious yet also gruesomely straightforward dramatic monologue. Prufrock is obsessed and disgusted with his changing appearance, interrogating the reader with questions such as, "Shall I part my hair behind?" (Eliot 7) He wonders what the small, seemingly meaningless changes that he experiences might mean on a grander scale: "Do I dare eat a peach?" (Eliot 7) refers to his old stomach's inability to digest fibrous fruits, but also his fails at sexual conquest, where the peach depicts a woman's young, supple body. Prufrock fits Yeats' "weather-worn, marble triton" (Yeats 136) quite seamlessly: he stumbles through his old age with more youthful desire than ever, but an inability to put these desires to action.

The famous last lines of Eliot's poem remind us of Yeats' water imagery, as Prufrock walks along a beach. He longs for acceptance from the "sea-girls" (Eliot 7) he observes out in the ocean, but of course he cannot be with them: he can only look. Interestingly, this image is a reversal of Yeats' triton: in Eliot's poem, the speaker is the one on land, and the unattainable is the half-fish out at sea. Either way, though, the old man's desires cannot be fulfilled because of incongruous bodies. Death for Prufrock happens in water, just like Yeats' old men in "Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water." However, Prufrock's water death is depicted as a drowning (Eliot 7) rather than a peaceful passing with the flow of a stream (Yeats 82). It seems that Prufrock's more gruesome and sudden death is meant as a warning to those who veer too far out of their lanes. Prufrock acknowledges all his fears and desires throughout the poem, always pointing to his old age as reasoning for not pursuing them. When he finally ventures into the water where the unattainable sea-girls live, "linger[ing] in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed in seaweed red and brown," (Eliot 7) he is punished for doing so with an abrupt and terrible death. Yeats' old men go with the flow of the stream, and live a boring, inconsequential existence until one day they pass on with no more disturbance to the universe than a small drop of water in a rushing stream. Eliot's Prufrock finally faces his fears, and dies a terrifying, universally felt death, exemplifying in the pronoun switch from "I" to "we" (Eliot 7) at the end of the poem. Both ways to die are depressing and serve to exemplify the debilitating form of existence that old age encompasses for Yeats and Eliot. In both cases, the poets use water symbolism to help the reader better understand their attitudes toward the mystery of death.

Another instance where Yeats employs water symbolism to depict old age and facing death can be seen in "The Lover pleads with his Friend for Old Friends." In this case, the water takes on the form of "Time's bitter flood," (Yeats 71) which rises to sweep away "old friends" (Yeats 71) when they die. Yeats pleads with his friend— or as it is made apparent in the last line, his lover— to remember and think about old people, for they deserve more than "new friends busy with your praise" (Yeats 71). The old speaker knows what it is like to be old and finds it terrifying. He has realized how "your beauty perish and be lost" (Yeats 71) in old age, and he wants his friend to savor his or her "shining days" (Yeats 71) before being swept away by the flood of Time. This poem reveals a darker side of Yeats' water imagery. Rather than old age being depicted as a drop in the waters or a triton in the stream, this is an entire flood: an unpredictable slam of nature that hits all at once and shows no mercy. This poem thus serves as a sage warning: it gives a young reader sacred insight into the future and a sense of urgency to prepare for such a future, or perhaps even a way out of this nasty fate. Yeats' other poems about old age, as we've seen, serve more as a declaration of inevitability, such as "The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water": "All that's beautiful drifts away" (Yeats 82) is definitive, anticlimactic and makes the reader feel as if there is no way to avoid this same fate.

Perhaps Yeats does believe that most people end up just another average drop in the stream. But what if there was something for Yeats that could defy that inevitability? As the ending of "The Lover pleads with his Friend for Old Friends" implies, perhaps that way out might achieved by finding true love early on in life. The last line in this

poem presents a twist in what we expect, as Yeats writes, “Your beauty perish and be lost / For all eyes but these eyes” (Yeats 71). The “but” here turns the whole concept of “Time’s bitter flood” (Yeats 71) on its head: at the very last minute, we see a way out of what we were just convinced was inevitably hopeless. Perhaps, Yeats’ ultimate lesson that only true love can save us: to find another human who sees your beauty even when all other eyes no longer can. Only this, it appears, can save us from the sad, average fate that most people will face.

Chapter II

Ethereal and Effortless: W.B. Yeats' Timeless Muse

In the last chapter, we explored Yeats' often futile view of mankind. This attitude can be attributed in large part to the inescapable human reality of growing old: in fact, Yeats finds aging to be one of the key defining qualities of mankind. It seems that old age will inevitably ruin us, costing us our physical abilities, ambition, potential for love and human connection, and eventually our individuality. Furthermore, the inevitability of aging makes for a lifetime of dread and despair as we approach old age and watch our physical selves experience the touch of time.

Yet in some instances, we are granted a glimmer of hope: often coming in the form of a subtle twist at the end of a poem, true love seems to be a force that can overcome the pitfalls of aging, because it allows men to gain access to the mysterious powers that women hold. For Yeats, loving a woman reinvigorates his youthful memories, and even allows him to retain them: it's a preserving force that makes written records or poetry appear futile in comparison. His muse, a woman with "cloud-pale eyelids" (Yeats 67) and "dream-dimmed eyes" (Yeats 67) can make some of the most powerful forces in the universe move with the drop of her hand. She is a God-like figure, and true love is often framed in a biblical manner to convey the enormity of her power. On the whole, the poems that feature this ethereal being are hopeful, and provide a sharp contrast to the negative and hopeless undertone of many of Yeats' age-themed poems discussed in the previous chapter. In these moments of hope, we find sublime, celestial images used to convey the enormity of force needed to overcome man's futile process of

aging. Furthermore, this imagery shows that true love can allow us to escape the undistinguished ending that most men face.

To explore these attitudes toward love and aging, we will first turn our focus to "On Woman." This poem starts as something of an ode to women, as Yeats praises God for woman's existence. Yet, the succinct and thematically straightforward first stanza is then followed by a lengthy second stanza that starts with bold biblical interpretations, dives into insecurities about aging, creates a moon savior that gives the old man a second chance at love, and ends in madness. Despite the shocking finish to the poem, there are critical moments in this final stanza that establish symbolic significance and display the power of women and love (Yeats 146).

One such instance is the use of the moon to convey the regenerative force of women. While the moon is not explicitly used as a symbol for women here— though we will see it do so in other poems— we do find that the woman and the moon in this poem serve a similar purpose, thus creating associative symbolic significance between the celestial object and the earthly female. In the first stanza, Yeats describes how "A man may find in no man / A friendship of her kind / That covers all he has brought / As with her flesh and bone" (Yeats 146). Women serve as a fixing force in these lines, one that can cover up a man's problems and help him start over. The image of covering someone with one's flesh and bone serves as a metaphorical medical transplant, where a woman's timeless beauty and wisdom can be transferred to save the withering, aging man. But our speaker fears that he is not great enough for a woman this powerful, stating "God grant

me — no, not here / For I am not so bold, / To hope a thing so dear" (Yeats 147). We see the same insecurities of an old man that are often expressed in the aging poems.

But in a sudden twist, the moon emerges as a symbol of hope and second chances. Right as Yeats laments, "Now I am growing old," (Yeats 147) he then says "But when, if the tale's true / The Pestle of the moon / That pounds up all anew / Brings me to birth again—" (Yeats 147). We can see here how the poem runs through several life cycles, where the male speaker learns of the power of a woman's love in his first life, misses the opportunity to be with her because of his insecurities, and quietly grows old. But then, when faced with death, the old man finds himself reborn through the powers of the moon. The celestial symbolism of the moon as regenerative is juxtaposed with the first stanza's depiction of women who bear similar powers. In effect, the poem depicts womanly "tenderness and care" (Yeats 147) as something out-of-this-world: a celestial and divine force that commands over earthly mortals, just as the moon commands the tides. If women are powerful enough to give men a new lease on life, then the moon— with its ability to bring men "to birth again" (Yeats 147)— becomes a most appropriate symbol for womankind. As we will see, this is not the last time Yeats will turn to the moon to help him convey his attitudes on women to his audience.

It is fitting that a poem entitled "On Woman" focuses on the powers of women specifically, but most of the poems in this chapter consider women in the broader context of love. In "A Memory of Youth," we again see the moon, this time as a direct symbol for true love. As is the case in "On Woman," the moon in this poem saves lovers from the despair of growing old. Yeats writes how time— metaphorically imagined as a "cloud

brown from the cut-throat north" (Yeats 123)— "Suddenly hid Love's moon away" (Yeats 123). He tries everything he can think of in his humanly power to stop this darkness that symbolizes the impending mortality of he and his lover: he "praised her body and her mind," "made her eyes grow bright," and "made her cheeks grow red" (Yeats 123). Yet, all these signs of youthful vitality are not enough to stop the looming "darkness overhead" (Yeats 123).

But soon, the poem takes a daring turn: as we saw in "On Woman," a sudden twist at the end of the last stanza makes the seemingly inevitable and unavoidable doom to vanish. Within just five lines, our speaker goes from accepting "that even the best of love must die," (Yeats 123) to proclaiming "that Love upon the cry / Of a most ridiculous little bird / Tore from the clouds his marvellous moon" (Yeats 123). The moon once again acts as a savior, and achieves in one line what the man has tried to do his entire life, which spans the second stanza: the moon makes his love last despite growing old. Once again, putting the fate of the lovers in the hands of "Love's moon," (Yeats 123) Yeats emphasizes the futility of man's attempts to save himself: only a higher, out-of-this-world force can restore our faith in love. Whether such a force is a higher power, a heavenly body, a power only women possess, or the force of true love itself is not made clear by this poem alone. But what the poem does demonstrate is the immortality of human love in contrast with the mortality of human lovers. Though the poem leaves us questioning and confused, the unclear ending also leaves room for us to be hopeful.

In "He gives his Beloved certain Rhymes," the poet again toys with the idea that women alone are the reason love can withstand time and age. After all, given the

correlation between being in love and feeling young, it makes sense that a man might contribute those youthful feelings directly to the presence of women, at least in a heteronormative sense of love. Yeats writes how he has spent his life "build[ing] these poor rhymes," (Yeats 63) recalling how his heart "worked at them, day out, day in" (Yeats 63). The speaker's self deprecating tone here is made even more potent by calling his poetry nothing but "poor rhymes," (Yeats 63) despite the fact that his life has been devoted to writing it. Here is W.B. Yeats, perhaps one of the greatest poets of all time, doing what he does best: writing poetry. Yet, he expresses within that very medium that his rhymes pale in comparison to the power of the woman he loves: "You need but lift a pearl-pale hand /… And stars climbing the dew-dropping sky, / Live but to light your passing feet" (Yeats 64). The lover's power in this poem is indisputable: the stars shine for her, and an ethereal lift of her hand commands the universe. Again, we see the use of sublime, celestial images: the grandeur of the woman's description shows just how mortal and earthly a poet's ambitions are. Yeats, it appears, maintains a dependency on this image of perfection, a perfection that he cannot seem to ever achieve himself.

On the surface, the poem is an account of a goddess-like woman humbling a male speaker; but as we dig deeper, we can see how this poem epitomizes Yeats' personal insecurities about growing old and losing precious time on earth. He says that his "poor rhymes" (Yeats 63) only amount to "Building a sorrowful loveliness / Out of the battles of old times" (Yeats 64). He recognizes here how difficult it is to immortalize "old times" (Yeats 64): no matter how close poetry or prose gets to representing or recreating the past, it cannot be replicated with perfection. Even the most perfect poetic craft will not

save man from his humanity: “all men’s hearts must burn and beat,” (Yeats 64) and all men’s hearts must someday *stop* burning and beating. If a woman can be as powerful and perfect as the one found in this poem, could loving or being with such a woman save man from his mortal miseries?

Keeping in mind Yeats’ tumultuous relationship with the love of his life, Maud Gonne, we can better understand the power that women seemed to hold over his world. We can also sense how insecure Yeats is about losing the woman he loves, which he ultimately did in the case of Gonne. In “He gives his Beloved certain Rhymes,” this insecurity is apparent immediately, as he asks his beloved to “Fasten your hair with a golden pin, / And bind up every wandering tress” (Yeats 63). The hair, a symbol of his beloved’s beauty, is too dangerous to be let down: the poet wants to hide her away, so that he can keep her forever and no other man will steal her away from him. Asking her to “bind up every wandering tress” (Yeats 63) is akin to pleading with her to never wander away from him, to never give away even a glimpse of her immeasurable beauty to other men.

In another poem on a similar topic, “He tells of the Perfect Beauty,” Yeats again deprecates the tireless work of poets, contrasting with the effortless and unlaboring “Perfect Beauty” of a woman. The poem tells us how “The poets labouring all their days / To build a perfect beauty in rhyme / Are overthrown by a woman’s gaze” (Yeats 67). In these lines, we again see futility of man’s attempt to save himself, to build his own “perfect beauty in rhyme” (Yeats 67). The pointlessness of poetry is made apparent when

a woman can so easily achieve with just her gaze what men work tirelessly to achieve in a lifetime of verse.

Yet, ironically, this idea is communicated to us *through* poetry. If the important message about the futility of human craft can only be conveyed through that very craft, then how could we call it pointless? And ultimately, it is clear that Yeats did not think poetry was pointless enough to stop writing it: he wrote prolifically throughout his life, well into old age. As it turns out, poetry is not powerless. Rather, what is being shown here is just how powerful women are by *contrast*. In the context of Yeats' mortal world, poetry is immensely important: it's his life's work. But when it comes time for a man to grow old, for "God [to] burn time," (Yeats 67) only his heart's passion for his beloved will save him from misery. In the context of the sublime and effortless forces of the universe— "the unlabouring brood of skies" (Yeats 67) and "the unlabouring stars and you" (Yeats 67)— the old man's labors suddenly become so insignificant by comparison. Yeats' insecurities and his agedness vanish in the face of such "perfect beauty" (Yeats 67). What results is a paradox between a completely nihilistic view of human existence on the one hand, and positing the human woman as the most powerful force in the universe on the other.

Yeats emphasizes this universal, transcendent quality of woman by describing her physical features with heavenly images: her "cloud-pale eyelids" (Yeats 67) and "dream-dimmed eyes" (Yeats 67) exist simultaneously on her earthly, physical face as well as in the clouds of the sky. He goes on to say how his "heart will bow… Before the unlabouring stars and you" (Yeats 67). Amongst the "unlabouring stars," we imagine her

less as a human and more as a celestial object, perhaps even a moon, among the stars. By merging her human physicality with these rich, otherworldly descriptions, Yeats is able to express the immensity of his lover's power over him.

Another instance of sublime imagery that ends with a plot twist is seen in the monostanzaic, eight-line poem "The Lover pleads with his Friend for Old Friends." Though short, the poem features multiple layers of characterization and relationships in the classic eight-six rhythmic framework. The speaker in the poems— presumably either an older man or a younger prophetic individual who forsees the experience of old men— tries to convince his friend of the importance of "old friends" (Yeats 71). What's interesting about the use of the word "old" here is that it is not necessarily referring to friends who are themselves old in age, though it could be. Rather, the term "old friends" (Yeats 71) can refer more broadly to those individuals with whom a person has been friends with the longest, regardless of the age of anyone involved. This subtle distinction creates two possible meanings of the poem, though perhaps these meanings aren't so different from one another.

If we entertain the first meaning— that "old friends" (Yeats 71) simply refers to a person's most long standing friendships— then the poem stands to show the importance of creating bonds and relationships with others when we are still young, or at least before we are too old to really get to know a new person. This notion is not limited to romantic relationships, either: the more expansive term "friends," rather than "lovers," allows us to think about the way in which all our human relationships can affect our aging experience. Yeats is telling us that when we do get old— when "Time's bitter flood" (Yeats 71)

rises— it is only our oldest, most weathered relationships that continue to see our "beauty" (Yeats 71). Perhaps, this is because our oldest friends are also the friends who knew us when we were young and beautiful, thus allowing them to remember our beauty even after it is "lost" (Yeats 71). Or, perhaps it is that our oldest friends simply do not care about our beauty. If our oldest friendships are theoretically the deepest and least superficial, then perhaps those are the very relationships that can withstand the physical changes that old age brings about, because they're not based upon outward beauty in the first place.

Whichever the case, the point is that old friends can make aging a bit less miserable. Yet, it is not until we are old that we realize how vital these relationships are. The sense of urgency in conveying this message is interesting, and brings about a subtle sense of apocalypse or impending doom. The lover "pleads" (Yeats 71) with his friend. Why does he not just "converse" with his friend, or "suggest"? The sense of pleading implies that the lesson the lover is trying to give is in fact impossible to bestow: he is trying to get through to his younger friend, but they do not understand why he is so worried. This reintroduces the great irony seen in the last chapter: only in old age do we have the wisdom to know what we should have done in hindsight, but this wisdom always comes too late for us to apply it to our own lives. Here, we see the speaker trying in vain to help someone else avoid his same fate.

As we've seen in other poems, the sublime imagery here conveys the significance of love and human connection— both romantic and non-romantic in this case— and, by comparison, the insignificance of individuality. The phrase "Time's bitter flood" (Yeats

71) epitomizes the sense of the sublime. From vast, misty waterfalls to 100 foot-high tsunamis, water is often used to visually represent the sublime, and the metaphorical "flood" here is no exception. The person the speaker is pleading with sounds quite accomplished and significant at the beginning of the poem, as he says, "you are in your shining days / … new friends busy with your praise" (Yeats 71). This person sounds popular, beautiful and close to perfect. But, we soon find out, none of that matters: when "Time's bitter flood" (Yeats 71) rises, the individual life that seemed so radiant and influential is suddenly forgotten amongst the flood, and hardly anyone is left to remember them: "Your beauty," we are warned, will "perish and be lost / For all eyes..." (Yeats 71). But, with his classic plot twist at the end, Yeats continues, "For all eyes *but these eyes*" (Yeats 71). "These eyes" refer back to eyes of the "old friends" that the speaker begs his audience to "think about… the most" (Yeats 71). All within one line, we are conveyed the futility and utter meaninglessness of humanity, while also being presented with the solution to escaping that very hopelessness. The way in which we receive the most important information at the very end of the poem is emblematic of the way in which humans only learn how to save themselves when it is too late to do so. The ending is overwhelmingly epiphanic, yet also subtle enough that it runs the risk of going unnoticed; but can we not say the same of the human experience?

We see a similar notion of love as the light at the end of the tunnel of time in "The Lover tells of the Rose in his Heart." In the first stanza, the poem appears to maintain the more dreary and unhopeful sentiment toward aging that we saw from the previous chapter: the earthly objects and people who embody the passing of time are described as

"uncomely and broken" (Yeats 56). From "the creak of a lumbering cart" to "the heavy steps of the ploughman, splashing the wintry mold," (Yeats 56) Yeats concludes that these physical representations of time are affecting his own ability to believe in true love. Using a rose to represent the blossoming vitality of a young love, the speaker laments how all these things "Are wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart" (Yeats 56). Though it may be buried down in the "deeps" of his heart, the love that Yeats once had is his glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak and breaking world. Now, this image is becoming tarnished by "all things worn out and old" (Yeats 56).

If we think back to the old age poems that we explored in the first chapter, we would not be surprised if the poem stopped here. This apathetic ending would fit in well, for example, with the "weather-worn, marble triton" (Yeats 136) from "Men Improve with the Years." The image of a triton conveys a hopelessness in pursuit of love, as a half-fish triton would be unable to have a sexual relationship with another human. Ending "The Lover tells of the Rose in his Heart" here would give a similar sense of giving up and hopelessness: because the lover's "rose in the deeps of [his] heart" (Yeats 56) is being wronged by the decay of the world around him, he might as well accept this fate, and fade into the oblivion of natural decay.

As it turns out, this is not where the poem ends. Instead of accepting his fate and letting his metaphorical rose shrivel and die, Yeats expresses a drive to change his outcome in the final stanza. He starts, "The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong too great to be told" (Yeats 56). At first, the futility of poetry or written records in preserving the past is accepted by the speaker: these are simply "wrong[s] too great to be told"

(Yeats 56). But in the next line, we see a sudden inspiration to try anyways: "I hunger to build them"— the "unshapely things"— "anew and sit on a green knoll apart" (Yeats 56). Invoking a Christ-like image of standing on a hill to sermonize the words of some high power, Yeats imagines a world where love can reinvigorate and rebirth even the most decrepit earthly creations. We see a drive in him that is entirely absent from many of his other poems about aging. He imagines a world "With the earth and the sky and the water, re-made," (Yeats 56) another set of grand and sublime images. The rhythmic pace in this line particularly reinforces the excited and inspired tone that the stanza takes on as a whole. The repeated use of the word "and"— rather than using commas, an almost childlike grammatical choice— gives off a feeling of innocence and limitless possibility, a hopeful anticipation of something else to add to the list of elements to be "re-made" (Yeats 56).

Just as we begin to wonder where this sudden optimism has sprouted from, Yeats swiftly brings the poem full circle, back to the image of the rose, ending the poem with, "For my dreams of your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart" (Yeats 56). The subtle change to an otherwise anaphoric line emphasizes the shift in mentality that the speaker discovers over the course of the poem, and the way in which the rose— his love— has allowed for him to embrace this buoyant outlook. Before, the line read "*Are wronging* the image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart" (Yeats 56). This line is bitter and hopeless: the man sees no way out, and even if he did, he is apathetic toward trying. Now, by starting the line with "For my dreams," (Yeats 56) we see how hopeful the speaker has become when he lets love and free will take over his imagination and

possibilities. The true love he hopes for may not be in his grasp quite yet: indeed, it is only in his “dreams,” and the image of the rose remains in the “deeps” of his heart (Yeats 56). At the very least, though, Yeats is allowing himself to dream. He is no longer letting the fear of a worse failure stop him from hoping, and even trying, for something better.

Chapter III

"High and solitary and most stern": Maud Gonne and the Rose

If the discoveries of the preceding two chapters have taught us anything, it's that Yeats has a certain affinity for repeated symbols. From fire and water to the moon and her stars, these nature inspired symbols help to uncover both the trials and triumphs of the human condition. While the moon allowed us to understand the mysterious, celestial power that women possess, in this chapter we will explore a new symbol that brings us back down to earth: the rose. And while the rose could represent any strong, independent woman of Yeats' affection, we must keep in mind one "high and solitary and most stern" (Yeats 91) rose in particular: Maud Gonne. In addition to symbolism, we also will find that the rose poems are frequently packed with Irish mythology. These allusions are often compared to Yeats' and Gonne's tumultuous relationship, as well as used to convey time's destructive quality, given Ireland's complicated history and folklore.

Beginning with "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," we find what resembles an ode to the "rose," and thus to Gonne, who Yeats calls an "eternal beauty" (Yeats 31). He starts and ends with direct references to the rose, though it is also referred to throughout as "you." The poem begins with a characterization of the rose symbol, exclaiming, "Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!" (Yeats 31). Though simple and straightforward, this three-part statement effectively anthropomorphizes the rose and introduces its human significance while also maintaining its floral imagery. Yeats makes a point of clarifying the color of the rose, which is interesting considering our automatic assumption would already be that the rose is red. By stating this outright, we not only see

the vivid red petals more clearly in our minds, but we are also encouraged to consider the importance of the color red within the rose's symbolism.

We next see Gonne's human qualities made evident when Yeats characterizes the flower as "proud" and "sad" (Yeats 31). This progression of descriptions serves to ease the reader into understanding the rose as a human of Yeats' fascination: first, a literal color for the rose; then, "proud," a word most typically used for humans, but one that could also be used to describe a flower; and finally, "sad," an undeniably human quality that inextricably ties the rose to humanity. The line swiftly allows us to understand the rose both as a piece of classic floral symbolism, yet also an aesthetic stand-in for Yeats' beloved Gonne.

Yeats finishes this descriptive first line with, "Rose of all my days!" (Yeats 31). This somewhat dramatic and exclamatory statement is reminiscent of sentiments in the previous chapter's discussion of age and relationships in "The Lover pleads with his Friend for Old Friends." We recall from this poem the importance Yeats places on his oldest friendships and relationships, and see here a person who fulfills this quality: this person has been in Yeats' life for a long time, and he foresees them continuing to be in his life in the future, given the eternal quality of "all my days!" (Yeats 31). The use of the exclamation mark here further emphasizes the impact the rose has upon Yeats; the punctuation choice is so eager that it feels vaguely melodramatic or over-compensating. It is noteworthy, too, that the exclamation mark is dropped when the otherwise identical statement is repeated as the final line of the two-stanza poem. Does the "Rood of Time" take away some of the passion we see for the rose at the beginning of the poem? Does

this love succumb to “the bitter tide” (Yeats 31) of time? Or perhaps this subtle shift teaches us that time will always reveal in retrospect the inevitable destruction of love caused by human aging. Perhaps, even the most perfect love cannot withstand the “heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass” (Yeats 31).

What happens between the rosy, anaphoric first and last lines of “The Rose upon the Rood of Time” is an action-packed, rhyming couplet-clad lamentation over human mortality and ailment. From a reference to the Irish legend Cuchulain who died “battling with the bitter tide,” to the “stars, grown old,” to “old Eire and the ancient ways,” (Yeats 31) Yeats employs Irish mythology, water (“tide”) symbolism, and celestial images to unpack time’s destructive force. As we will see, the fire, water, and celestial imagery continue to come into conversation with the symbolic rose and Irish allusions in Yeats’ other rose poems. We particularly see these repeated symbols in the similarly titled poems, “The Rose of the World” and “The Rose of Peace.”

As is the case with “The Rose upon the Rood of Time,” we see the symbolic rose characterized with human qualities in “The Rose of the World.” Again emphasizing the redness of the rose, Yeats describes “these red lips, with all their mournful pride” (Yeats 36). The “red lips” are not only a physical characterization of Maud Gonne, but also work subtly to tie in the red rose with its “lips,” its petals, as a central symbol of the poem. Furthermore, describing the rose as prideful harkens back to the same human trait mentioned in the previous poem, creating a sense of continuous characterization of the rose.

Such deliberately repeated descriptions also ask us to consider why Yeats chose the rose in particular to talk about the person he loves. Roses are conventionally associated with love, to the point of extreme overuse. It seems that such conventional symbol— such as the rose for love— should not be encouraged in poetry; perhaps some might even argue that Yeats is unoriginal and cliché for using rose symbolism. A deeper look at Yeats' use of the rose, however, reveals how his approach is far more complex than typical love poem tropes. Take, for example, the multiple instances of calling the rose prideful. While "pride" (Yeats 36) may not be what first comes to mind when we think of a rose, it also makes sense that Yeats would choose a rose rather than, say, a white lily to describe his prideful muse. Roses have thorns, to protect themselves. Their red petals are tightly layered, always covering up the petals beneath. They are difficult to pick, often expensive and coveted, and grow in a solitary way. When we think of roses in this way, describing them as prideful makes far more symbolic sense. Furthermore, perhaps Yeats chooses the rose not only because it is an appropriate symbol for a "high and lonely" (Yeats 31) woman like Gonne, but also because he was well aware of the conventionality of rose symbolism, and hoped to challenge these conventions by using an overused symbol in an original way.

In the second stanza of "The Rose of the World," we once again see the male speaker's insecurity about aging juxtaposed with the female muse's unlaboring beauty. Yeats laments how the "labouring world" is "passing by / Amid men's souls, that waver and give place / Like the pale waters in their wintry race" (Yeats 36). While the thorny, thick-stalked, unwavering red rose remains untouched by time, the male speaker withers

away along the "labouring world" (Yeats 36) around him. Once again engaging with water imagery, Yeats imagines himself as part of a larger stream of "pale waters in their wintry race," a race against other "men's souls" (Yeats 36) that ultimately leads to nowhere, much like the "waters" (Yeats 82) from "The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water." This stanza also reminds us of the celestial imagery explored in the previous chapter: here the male speaker imagines himself in the stream of time, "Under the passing stars, foam of the sky" (Yeats 36). While his rose is imagined as literally out-of-this-world, the male speaker is damned to a mortal earthly experience, one that is subject to time, aging and ultimately a loss of identity in the stream of death. The "Rose of the World" has powers far greater than other worldly beings can fully comprehend.

Such heavenly powers of women continue to be explored in the context of rose symbolism in "The Rose of Peace." In this evenly-metered, four stanza poem, the "rose of peace" (Yeats 36) is so powerful that her presence alone allows for amends between perhaps the two most irreconcilable elements in the universe: Heaven and Hell. Yeats paints an unconventional religious picture where God plays a role as a simultaneous mediator and instigator between the two warring sides of the afterlife. Upon arriving in this "divine homestead," (Yeats 37) Yeats' muse quickly becomes the center of afterlife attention: "Michael, leader of God's host /… Brooding no more upon God's wars / … would go weave out of the stars / A chaplet for your head" (Yeats 37). Normally preoccupied with handling God's great battle, Michael suddenly finds "his deeds forgot[ten]" (Yeats 37) when he sees this ethereal beauty. Again invoking celestial images, Yeats imagines his beloved being unlaboringly coronated with a crown of stars,

making such an impossible feat appear almost commonplace. “And God,” the male speaker continues, “would bid His warfare cease / Saying all things were well; And softly make a rosy peace, / A peace of Heaven with Hell” (Yeats 37). Heaven and Hell, arguably the two most powerful symbols of eternality that mankind has ever conceptualized, are brought together effortlessly by the ever more perfect and eternal “rose of peace” (Yeats 36). Such a reunification renders striving for Heaven a practically pointless pursuit, because Heaven and Hell are now without differentiation. The woman’s beauty manages to not only outlast but also eradicate the notion of eternal paradise or damnation.

As fascinating and powerful as the “rose of peace” (Yeats 36) is in the larger discussion of aging and time in Yeats’ poetry, this poem on its own still does not fully address why Yeats specifically chooses the rose as his symbol for the incorruptibility and eternality of Maud Gonne. Besides in the title, the only other time Yeats directly references “rose” in the poem is at the end, when she moves God to “softly make a rosy peace, / A peace of Heaven with Hell” (Yeats 37). Though this small mention could easily be missed, it does ask us to question other ways that a rose could symbolize the female subject that Yeats keeps coming back to. The concept of a “rosy peace,” (Yeats 37) though derived from the rose flower, overall lacks any floral quality. “Rosy” in this context seems to imply a certain doctrine of idealism, as one would invoke when saying, for example, “She looks at the world through rose-colored glasses.” Considering the different connotations of the word “rose” allows us to better understand Yeats’ symbolic

choices. Perhaps, the rose stands as a symbol of untouchable beauty, yet also a symbol of a certain blissful ignorance/innocence that Yeats observes in his eternal beauty.

This discussion of ignorance and innocence comes into clearer focus in "The Secret Rose." Continuing with the trend of rapid, successive characterization of the rose in the first line, Yeats starts, "Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose" (Yeats 69). This is perhaps the most straightforward and clear description of the rose that we've seen so far. While other poems described the symbolic rose more vaguely as "proud" or "sad," here we see Yeats give us a direct message about the rose's symbolic connection to Gonne. The rose is "far-off," (Yeats 69) in that she is both mysterious and untouchable. She is "secret" (Yeats 69): perhaps, secret about how she possesses her womanly power over Yeats. Or, perhaps her powers are a secret to all other men but Yeats. Finally, she is "inviolate" (Yeats 69): safe from violation. These descriptions together allow us to understand more clearly why Yeats chooses the rose to symbolize Maud Gonne in particular: roses, with their thorns and tightly layered petals, are indeed a closed-off, inviolate flower.

The other rose poems we have looked at characterized the rose far more vaguely and subtly: these poems fall into Yeats' earlier work that is softer, dreamier and less cerebrally descriptive. Here in "The Secret Rose"— indeed a later work, though still pre-1900— Yeats proclaims certain aspects of his rose outright with his strong symbolic characterization. As we will see, such pointed language is used throughout this poem, exemplifying the beginning of the shift to the other side of Yeats' poetry that is dense, specific and highly sublime. The rhyme scheme here reflects this dense and intense

feeling that Yeats evokes on this side of his poetic spectrum: the successive rhyming couplets and lack of separate stanzas gives a hurried and anxious feeling to the poem. The lines are enjambed, making the poem feel like a stream of consciousness. Yet, it is also meticulously rhymed, which would suggest the opposite of spontaneous thought. Perhaps, these seemingly incompatible poetic realities are meant to evoke the way Yeats feels about his tumultuous experience with love. Furthermore, as Yeats and his poetic style aged over the years of his life, it is worthwhile to examine the way in which shifting attitudes toward aging play into the more hardened and anxiety-filled expression of love that we see here, in juxtaposition with the earlier rose poems. While those poems were certainly concerned with aging too, pieces like "The Secret Rose" exemplify the beginning of the well-recognized shift in Yeats' attitude toward aging and love, one that is far more hopeless and bitter.

In the next lines, the speaker begs his "Rose" to "Enfold me in my hour of hours" (Yeats 69). Again using an image of the rose's tightly layered petals, the symbolism here allows us to understand just how deeply the speaker feels about Gonne, and the power she has over him. Yeats asks her to "enfold" him, to hide him away from the rest of the world, as a rose might enfold and hide a dependent pollinator in its petals. Yeats appears particularly concerned with how other men have treated the "Rose," as he describes her "pale eyelids, heavy with the sleep" (Yeats 69). This peculiarly structured line seems to express that the woman's eyelids are metaphorically heavy with sleep, perhaps meaning that she is innocent, even ignorant, to the cruelties of the world around her. Furthermore,

Yeats is disturbed that other men are so infatuated with this secrecy and inviolance, “the sleep / Men have named beauty” (Yeats 69).

The image of flowery envelopment continues, this time using the rose’s leaves, as the man says “Thy great leaves enfold / The ancient beards” (Yeats 69) The “ancient beards” here refer to allusions in the lines that follow: “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” (Yeats 69). The biblical “Magi,” the “Pierced Hands,” and the “Rood” all invoke the New Testament. Perhaps, the speaker is concerned with the way in which his beloved has “enfold[ed]” ancient Christianity into her “leaves” (Yeats 69)— perhaps she is a devoted Christian— but has yet to enfold, or accept, the man who loves her. Yet, in classic Yeatsian quasi-religiousness, we also see an out-of-place reference to ancient Celtic culture with the mention of “Druid vapour and make the torches dim” (Yeats 69). This chaotic line is difficult to fully unpack, but based on what we have discovered in the way of Yeatsian fire symbolism, it is fitting that the youthful fire of “torches” is “dim[ming]” (Yeats 69): Yeats’ “burning youth” (Yeats 136) is extinguishing, and time is running out to win the affection of women. Yet, it appears that his transition into the waters of old age is in flux too: the use of “vapour” rather than, say, “liquid” shows how our speaker remains in between these two opposite elements. His fire is dimming, yet he is not fully drenched in his older years, but rather takes the form of a gaseous vapor, perhaps representing the sudden realization that time has just begun to take its toll. He finds himself invisible to the human eye, but more importantly, to the woman he loves.

Going back to the phrase "my hour of hours," (Yeats 69) we can see here that the speaker has lived a long, almost torturous existence awaiting his Rose: finally, he hopes, his hour has come. The line is reminiscent of Yeats' later work "The Second Coming," when he evokes a similar sense of a moment long awaited: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (Yeats 187). A similarly quasi-religious element soon announces itself in "The Secret Rose," as the exasperated male speaker tells us of "those / Who sought thee in the Holy Sepulchre, / Or in the wine-vat" (Yeats 69). The likeness of "The Secret Rose" to "The Second Coming" becomes even more apparent, when the speaker says, "Surely thine hour has come" (Yeats 70) this time addressing the woman of his affection rather than himself. This is reminiscent not only of the lines above but also the line "Surely some revelation is at hand" (Yeats 187) from "The Second Coming." The old speaker in "The Secret Rose," whose "hour of hours" (Yeats 69) are dwindling, is begging his love to finally choose to be with him, whilst trying to convince himself that she "surely" (Yeats 69, 187) will be.

The uncanny likeness of the two poems is further solidified by their respective endings. In "The Secret Rose," we see Yeats' uncertainty and insecurity about his age and romantic prospects in his final lines: "Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows, / Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?" (Yeats 69). We cannot help but think of the ending of "The Second Coming," where the speaker is also left questioning: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" (Yeats 187). Looking at these poems side by side, we can see how alike they are. Yet, "The Secret Rose" is so explicitly about a woman, whereas the "The Second Coming"

makes no mention of women whatsoever. In fact, humanity in general is almost entirely absent from the 1915 poem, barring the semi-human "shape with lion body and the head of a man" (Yeats 187). By placing these poems into juxtaposition, we can see ever more clearly how love-jaded Yeats has become by the time he writes "The Second Coming," over 15 years after "The Secret Rose." It is shocking to see how much the speaker's attitudes have changed with age: he uses a "rose" (Yeats 69) to symbolize his beloved in the earlier poem, and a "rough beast" (Yeats 187) to symbolize her in the other. We can see how time has not only marred the speaker, but also his ability to believe in true love.

In the same vein of comparison, it is difficult to ignore the similarity between the succeeding line in "The Secret Rose" and the last line of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In line 12, Yeats says: "Till vain frenzy awoke and he died" (Yeats 69). This clearly reminds us of Eliot's famously eerie last line, "Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (Eliot 7). Eliot's line exemplifies the use of water to symbolize old age and death, a device also used by Yeats, as we explored extensively in Chapter I. Here, though, we see Yeats appealing to a strange mix of fire and water, as he follows "Till vain frenzy awoke and he died" (Yeats 69) with "and him / Who met Fand walking among flaming dew" (Yeats 70). It seems that Eliot— who published Prufrock over 15 years after "The Secret Rose"— opts for a more straightforward use of the water imagery when he ends with, "and we drown" (Eliot 7). Yeats' imagery is far more convoluted. In fact, we might be wary to classify "flaming dew" (Yeats 70) as fire-water *imagery*, considering it is practically impossible to *imagine* water droplets that are simultaneously aflame. Eliot's line pales in comparison to Yeats in terms of absurdity, yet the strong

likeness between the two lines reveals just how confused and convoluted Yeats' feelings toward Gonne are by comparison. Unsurprisingly, the individual named "Fand" (Yeats 70) who Yeats mentions in this line refers to an otherworldly female figure in Irish mythology (Conner 61- 62). Only Gonne could manage to exist among "flaming dew"; only she could be simultaneously young and old all at once. Her "most secret, and inviolate" (Yeats 69) ways are just as mysterious and elusive as the images Yeats invokes to describe her.

Circling back to the quasi-religious element present in many of Yeats' rose poems, "The Blessed" presents us with a satirical response to monotheistic religion that once again favors the power of Maud Gonne over the God of Christianity. With a careful mix of monotheism and figures of pagan Ireland, Yeats paints a story that on the surface praises Christianity, but on a deeper level satirizes it. The poem opens with Irish figures Cumhal and Dathi having a conversation about Christianity (Yeats 68). Keeping in mind that these are pagan figures— Dathi, in fact, was the last pagan king of Ireland (Conner 45)— this conversation is blatantly ironic from the start. Yet, the content of the allusory figures' conversation seems genuine at first: Cumhal claims to have godly powers, stating that he "can bring you salmon out of the streams," and Dathi, "With the secrets of God in his eyes," encourages Cumhal to "'Praise God'" instead (Yeats 68).

Yet, the satirical nature of the conversation is swiftly exposed when Dathi goes on to say that Cumhal should also praise "God's Mother" (Yeats 68). This notion, of course, implies that God is not monotheistic after all, in that praise for his powers should also go to his mother. Furthermore, the notion that God has a mother would not sit well with a

Christian audience: God is supposed to be the uncreated creator of the universe. As the lines pass, Yeats' skepticism toward religion becomes ever more apparent. Using various versions of the word "blessed" to signify the ridiculous way in which some people try to quantify their piety, Dathi notes, "I see the blessedest soul in the world / And he nods a drunken head" (Yeats 69). A Christian audience would be appalled to be told that the "blessedest" person is the world is in fact a drunkard, as such an assertion brings the standards of "blessedness" down to the 'lowly' levels of a sinful person. This, of course, is exactly what Yeats is trying to do: expose the folly of those who spend their lives striving for the status of "blessedness" in God's eyes. Yeats does not outright reject the possibility of God's existence, but rather renders Him powerless in comparison to someone far more powerful: "The Incorruptible Rose" (Yeats 69). Though the rose is only introduced in the last five lines of a 40-line poem, the way that she is positioned emphasizes her importance. While "God" had to share His line with "God's Mother" and "Dathi" (Yeats 68) earlier in the poem, "The Incorruptible Rose" (Yeats 69) gets her own line, further emphasizing her powerful and untouchable quality. The capitalization of Gonne's title also reinforces her God-equivalent importance.

In the last four lines of the poem, Yeats manages to combine nearly every symbol of mortality and aging that we have discovered so far. We once again see the significance of the rose as an incorruptible, god-like, mending figure, who can cover up a mortal man's misgivings simply by "drowsily" dropping her eternally "faint leaves on him" (Yeats 69). The rose enchants the speaker, and convinces him of her powers— "the sweetness of desire" (Yeats 69)— in just a few lines, a feat that God Himself could not

achieve in all of the preceding eight stanzas. We also see the sublime again, as Dathi describes how “time and the world are ebbing away” (Yeats 69). The rose, with her effortless and unlaboring immortality, continues to exercise her powers even as time causes the physical world to wither away, as if this immense catastrophe does not even cross her immortal radar. Finally, the poem ends on yet another manifestation of fire and water symbolism: “In twilights of dew and of fire” (Yeats 69) Similarly to how the aged “dew” and youthful “torches” (Yeats 69) are encompassed all at once by the female figure in “The Secret Rose,” here we see Yeats’ love maintain her effortless incorruptibility despite all the forces “of dew and of fire” (Yeats 69) that cause the world to wither away around her. The “dew” and “fire” are casually mentioned side by side, within the same line, as if they are one in the same. The difference between youth and old age, indeed, seems almost negligible in the presence of “The Incorruptible Rose,” (Yeats 69) a notion that leaves us wondering why Yeats was ever concerned with aging to begin with.

Chapter IV

Lessons of a Lifetime: "A Man Young and Old"

Despite the frequency with which aging is discussed in W.B. Yeats' poetry, we find that we can never quite pin down the poet's true attitudes toward aging. This is not only a result of often elusive diction and syntax, but also the wide variation in the attitudes that are expressed and explored. There's the side of Yeats' poems that complacently laments the inevitability of aging and death; there's the more forgiving side, that finds solace in the powers of true love; and then there's the side that abandons concerns over aging altogether in the presence of "The Incorruptible Rose" (Yeats 69). It becomes clear that Yeats himself did not maintain an end-all, definitive attitude toward aging, despite his constant concern with it. Given our subject matter, this inconstancy makes a great deal of sense: if aging causes us to change, then wouldn't we expect our attitudes toward aging to change over time, too? In his 11-part poetic sequence, "A Man Young and Old," (Yeats 221) Yeats explores how one's outlook *on* aging changes *with* aging. Keeping in line with our discoveries from the preceding chapters, Yeats intersects this examination of aging with a look at love. Though the beginning poems in the sequence do not address aging directly, we will find that the later poems of "old" come into direct conversation with the earlier poems of "young," all while charting the changing relationship that the speaker has with women and love. And what better place to start than with the ubiquitously experienced "first love" (Yeats 221)?

In his appropriately titled "I. First Love," Yeats once again engages with moon imagery and symbolism, though this time we see a slightly different symbolic version of

the celestial for the young speaker. The poem starts with the speaker recalling how he fell for his first love: he was "nurtured like the sailing moon / In beauty's murderous brood" (Yeats 221). The notion of women as nurturers reminds us of "On Woman"— as discussed in Chapter II— where Yeats' lunar female muse also acts as a nurturing force who can heal men with her mysterious, unworldly beauty (Yeats 146). However, because in this case the speaker is experiencing a first love, it seems he is not yet aware that women possess different powers than mortal men. She appears human and mortal, Yeats shares, as "she walked awhile and blushed awhile /… Until I thought her body bore / A heart of flesh and blood" (Yeats 221). This again reminds us of "On Woman," where Yeats describes how the woman of his affection "covers all he has brought / As with her flesh and bone" (Yeats 146).

Soon, however, Yeats discovers that his first love's heart is not made of mortal "flesh and blood," as he thought: having "laid a hand thereon," he finds "a heart of stone" (Yeats 221). Upon this discovery, the young speaker laments, "I have attempted many things / And not a thing is done, / For every hand is lunatic / That travels on the moon" (Yeats 221). Though subtle, Yeats has managed to create a dual purpose for his moon symbolism. As we saw in Chapter II, many of Yeats' poems concerning love and aging juxtapose the mortal male speaker with the immortal, ethereal, celestial female figure. In these cases, the moon makes an appropriate symbol as it emphasizes the power this woman has over the world: she controls the symbolic tides of earth and lights up the paths of men below, like the moon. Here, though, the poet does not paint such a sublime picture: upon laying his hand on the woman's "heart of stone," (Yeats 221) the speaker is

shocked and disappointed, as he does not yet understand the power that a certain stone in particular— the moon— holds. Yeats plays with the etymological origins of lunar, stating that "every hand is lunatic / That travels on the moon" (Yeats 221). Because his first attempt at love has presumably failed, the speaker cannot see the vastness of womanly powers that lie rooted in this symbolic heart of stone. Instead, he concludes that any man who tries to find love is "lunatic" (Yeats 221): young and naive, the speaker does not yet see that there is more to this symbolic stone than a first encounter would suggest. With time and age, he will someday discover that this heart of stone is not an indication of "beauty's murderous brood" (Yeats 221). Rather, the stone ties women to the symbolic moon, which is regenerative and perhaps even a means of transcending human mortality.

This clever reimagining of the celestial is continued as the dejected male speaker finds his muse "Emptier of thought / Than the heavenly circuit of its stars / When the moon sails out" (Yeats 221). Upon gaining more experience in love, we suspect that this man will someday understand that calling the stars "emptier of thought" could not be further from the truth: in fact, the stars represent a celestial woman who is nearly omniscient. As we will see in the later poems of this eleven-part sequence, the male speaker's attitudes toward women will evolve as he gains more wisdom in old age. The necessity of women and true love in helping men transcend agedness will be uncovered, but not without some trial and error first.

Moving to the next poem in the sequence, "II. Human Dignity," we again see the moon used as a symbol for women. Unseen and unloved by the woman he covets, the young speaker declares "Like the moon her kindness is, / If kindness I may call / What

has no comprehension in't, / But is the same for all" (Yeats 222). Here the moon represents a woman who, in her indifference, reaches only the bare minimum standard for kindness, "if kindness I may call [it]" (Yeats 222). Being made of stone, the symbolic moon here stands for a beautiful woman who "has no comprehension" (Yeats 222) within her: under the surface, she too is made of symbolic stone. Furthermore, "like the moon," this woman's kindness "is the same for all," (Yeats 222) leading the young man to feel undistinguished and average. He is just another lunatic subject under the lunar trance of this woman's beauty, a beauty that young Yeats deems superficial, with "no comprehension in't" (Yeats 222).

We then see another angle of the metaphorical stone when Yeats laments, "So like a bit of stone I lie / Under a broken tree" (Yeats 222). Immediately we recall "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner," where an older speaker "shelter[s] from the rain / Under a broken tree" (Yeats 46). The image of Yeats' dejected, loveless speaker under a broken tree in "The Lamentation" represents the perpetual life condition of lacking control or agency in love. Here, too, we see a young lovelorn man, lying under the unromantic and unsightly broken tree, feeling utterly unseen by the woman he loves. In this case, the man compares himself to "a bit of stone," (Yeats 222) an interesting image to use considering the symbolic connections made between women and stones in "I. First Love." The stone used here further emphasizes how invisible the speaker feels in the presence of the woman he admires. A beautiful woman, we might imagine, would avoid looking at or sitting under a broken tree, nevermind giving attention to the insignificant "bit of stone" (Yeats 222) that lies beneath it.

It is also noteworthy that the image of the broken tree is repeated here, this time with a young speaker. In "The Lamentation," the speaker is old and yet still finds himself under the broken tree. The repetition of this symbol across the speaker's various ages forces the careful reader of Yeats to reckon with the possibility that man will always find himself beneath the broken tree of repetitious failure, indeed a rather dark view of man's efforts to find love and happiness. It seems that the young man here recognizes that women are untouchable and out of his reach, but cannot yet realize that this is a result of the ethereal, celestial power that women hold over other worldly beings. Instead, the naïve speaker prematurely concludes that his poor luck with love must be rooted in some inherent fault of his own, rather than— as he will later discover— a difference between men and women in general. He self deprecatingly exclaims, "I am dumb / From human dignity," (Yeats 222) and seems to have lost all hope.

Though the next poem, "III. The Mermaid," lacks any celestial/stone symbolism, it does continue the sentiment of hopelessness and female cruelty. Rather than a womanly figure who can enlighten and fix men with her powers, the female "mermaid" (Yeats 222) figure here destroys her male lover in a matter of six lines. We can see how she continues to maintain her untouchable and mysterious quality: the man she finds is a "swimming lad," (Yeats 222) while she is something different from human all together, a mermaid. The mermaid is an appropriate symbol, for she resembles a woman in some ways, but also has the ability to swim underwater without needing to come up for air, while the man is a mere mortal who belongs on land and has ventured into her territory.

The contrast of the mermaid to the mortal man emphasizes that men and women might appear similar at first, but are in fact fundamentally different.

At first, it seems that the man has finally found success in love: the mermaid "Picked him for her own, / Pressed her body to his body" (Yeats 222). Yet, this love story soon turns tragic, as the mermaid, "plunging down / Forgot in cruel happiness / That even lovers drown" (Yeats 222). Compared with the first two poems of the series, the man in this poem at least is able to find love. However, the takeaway is that love, and female lovers specifically, will only destroy the men they latch onto: women and men are different to the point of long-term incompatibility. The use of the mermaid here exemplifies this inevitably tragic notion of heterosexual love, where the vastly different female 'species' will inevitably destroy men in the process of loving them.

It's difficult not to think of the ending of Eliot's "Prufrock" when we read Yeats' short, evenly metered "The Mermaid." Written years after Yeats' "A Man Young and Old," Eliot's famous ending is strikingly similar in both its sentiment and symbolic imagery:

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea

By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown

Till human voices wake us, and we drown (Eliot 7).

We see here how the old male speaker finds himself isolated from and mystified by the "mermaids" and "sea-girls" (Eliot 7) who sing to each other, but not to him. The speaker finds himself "linger[ing]" in the "chambers of the sea" (Eliot 7)— similar to Yeats' "swimming lad" (Yeats 222)— while trying attain the sacrosanct creature. We see a sudden shift from the use of "I" to "we," (Eliot 7) implying that the mortal male has finally connected with the womanly creature he chases. But, just when he thinks he has succeeded in his endeavors, his mortal reality comes knocking: human voices wake the man from his delusions. He drowns in the water because, in reality, he does not possess the powers that the mermaid does. Similarly, Yeats' "swimming lad" (Yeats 222) finds himself drowned with the delusion of love, a delusion that makes him forget his inability to live under water. What's also notable in both these poems is the mutual destruction between the man and his lover: even though the woman, presumably, should be able to live underwater as a mermaid, in both cases we see her own downfall occur in synchrony with her male lover. The "we" (Eliot 7) pronoun in "Prufrock" and the collective "lovers" (Yeats 222) in "The Mermaid" leave us with a utterly tragic and fully-destructive outlook on heterosexual love.

Returning to the repeated moon symbolism in "A Man Young and Old," we see another instance in "V. The Empty Cup." Here we find a presumably male speaker observing the behavior of a "crazy man" (Yeats 223). The monostanzaic, 10 line poem

starts, “A crazy man that found a cup, / When all but dead of thirst, / Hardly dared to wet his mouth / Imagining, moon-accursed, / That another mouthful / And his beating heart would burst” (Yeats 223). Though no mention of a woman is made, we can imagine that the man’s crazy behavior is the result of some womanly influence, given previous woman/moon symbolic associations and the fact that the man here is described as “moon-accursed” (Yeats 223). Cursed by the moon, the lunatic man refuses to drink water despite his near-death thirst. His self-destructive behavior appears to be motivated by a fear that his “beating heart would burst” (Yeats 223) if he had one more sip of water. Thus, we can see how the cup of water represents the love of a woman. The man finds himself unable to continue on in this destructive relationship, because as much as he relies on his beloved to live, the more he craves her, the closer he comes to death.

The poem’s focus suddenly shifts to the narrator, who also finds the cup of thirst-quenching liquid. But he discovers the cup is “dry as bone,” (Yeats 223) and also goes insane. We continue to see the lunar/lunatic symbolic connection here warped into an outlook on love that is bleak and hopeless, rather than awe-inspiring and sublime. At this point in the poetic sequence, we might imagine that, chronologically speaking, the speaker is on the tail end of his youthful days. Still a young man, he continues to mistake the woman’s moon-like demeanor for something deceptive and evil, rather than something desirable and ethereal. Having read and analyzed Yeats other celestial poems, the reader begins to wonder if the man in “A Man Young and Old” ever will discover the true celestial nature of womankind.

In "VI. His Memories," our now sane but equally insecure speaker describes his own physical aging. Since the bodily descriptors in this poem are strikingly similar to those of "The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water," we might conclude that the speaker in "His Memories" is too an old man, far past his physical prime. Appearing to speak on behalf of men in general, Yeats begins, "We should be hidden from their eyes, / Being but holy shows / And bodies broken like a thorn / Whereon the bleak north blows" (Yeats 223). The self degrading and demoralized tone here certainly does not suggest any sense of hope for finding love. Creating an "us" versus "them" dichotomy, the speaker seems resolved give up on women, and would prefer that he be "hidden from their eyes" (Yeats 223) altogether. Furthermore, by use of "we" in this first stanza, the speaker suggests that *all* old men share this inability to find love, and thus tries to convince others that they, too, should hide their aged bodies. Though self-degrading, we can see in this first stanza how the speaker attempts to find comradery among other men in his failed pursuit of women, resigning his bad luck in love to a universal condition of mankind rather than something that he lacks in particular. With their "bodies broken like a thorn," (Yeats 223) we see the resemblance between the men Yeats describes here and those in "The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water," who have "knees /… twisted like the old thorn-trees" (Yeats 82). In both these poems, the universal physical degradation of old age eventually renders all men undesirable.

In the second stanza of "His Memories," however, we see the speaker's use of "we" shift to a more personal "I," and thus we begin to understand that his insecurities perhaps do not have a universal application, but rather are something that plague the

speaker in particular. The old man laments, “The women take so little stock / In what I do or say / They’d sooner leave their cosseting / To hear a jackass bray” (Yeats 223). The lines here suddenly become hyper self aware and personalized, and we find ourselves allowed entrance into the speaker’s head. The sentiment expressed here closely resembles that of the other poems so far in “A Man Young and Old”: the speaker appears to have lost all faith in love, and sees women not as vitally important to man’s survival, but rather, a detriment to it.

The next two lines that finish out this self-conscious second stanza return to an image of an old, thorny body: “My arms are like the twisted thorn / And yet there beauty lay” (Yeats 223). Again using personal pronouns, we see how the old speaker views his body: disabled, unsightly, and unattractive. What is also notable about the image of thorn-like appendages is the symbolic connection to the female rose that we saw in the previous chapter. The “arms… like the twisted thorns” (Yeats 223) not only represent an unsightly, aged body, but also a closed off and mysterious body. When used to describe women, the image of a thorny rose evokes being “far-off, most secret, and inviolate,” (Yeats 69) to quote “The Secret Rose.” This sense of secrecy is viewed as a positive and desirable quality for women. For the old man, though, thorniness protects and distances him from the possibility of failure. His thorny arms are not only a symbol of his insecurity, but also the wall he has built up around himself when it comes to finding love. The rose, too, has a protective layer of thorns built up around her, but this mystery creates an allure that draws men near her, whereas the man’s thorns only push women away. This sort of self-imposed, symbolic double standard that Yeats constructs serves to fuel

the anger toward women even further in this poem: the speaker feels justified in being bitter toward the mysterious, hard-to-reach woman, whose desirable mystery sharply contrasts to his own undesirable untouchability. Furthermore, Yeats' muse can make his teetering, insecure world come crashing down with ease, whereas the old man struggles for even the slightest female attention.

This destructive, even sadistic view of women is further emphasized in the last stanza of "His Memories," as the first personal narrator laments how "The first of all the tribe lay there / And did such pleasure take — / She who had brought great Hector down / And put all Troy to wreck" (Yeats 224). Not only does this woman have the ability to bring "great Hector down" and "put all Troy to wreck," but she derives "pleasure" in doing so (Yeats 224). The mention of "Hector" here alludes to Hector of Troy, a Greek mythological hero who was said to be the greatest Trojan fighter in the Trojan war (Conner 84). Even a man as celebrated and physically strong as Hector of Troy is taken down with ease by the woman Yeats loves. The sentiment and subject matter here quite clearly resembles "No Second Troy," where Yeats angrily reprimands Maud Gonne for her "high and solitary and most stern" (Yeats 91) ways, and ends with one of the most famous rhetorical questions of poetry: "Was there another Troy for her to burn?" (Yeats 91). We might conclude with certainty, then, that "His Memories" is also an angry manifesto of Yeats' frustration with Gonne's "beauty like a tightened bow," (Yeats 91) a beauty that Yeats did not ultimately win over.

This frustration and dissatisfaction with Gonne and women in general is further emphasized by a sonically dissonant ending. After "And put all Troy to wreck," (Yeats

224) Yeats finishes the poem with, “That she cried into this ear, / ‘Strike me if I shriek” (Yeats 224). As rhyme-expectant readers, we anticipate that the last word of the poem would rhyme with the earlier “wreck.” While the words contain similar consonance, they maintain such dissonant vowel sounds that an awkward sounding ending results, rather than the clever and satisfying slant rhyme that we have come to expect from Yeats. The reader is left feeling dissatisfied and frustrated with the rhyme scheme, just as Yeats feels about Gonne and his love pursuits.

In the next poem of the sequence, “VII. The Friends of his Youth,” we are introduced to a new female character: “old Madge” (Yeats 224). Madge, we learn, is an old woman who has gone crazy. The narrator, though, seems to have caught a bit of Madge’s lunacy himself. Using the first person “I,” Yeats starts, “Laughter not time destroyed my voice / And put that crack in it” (Yeats 224). With no mention of Madge so far, these lines clearly reflect the condition of the speaker, who we would assume to be Yeats, and therefore male. It is difficult at first to discern exactly why “laughter” would cause someone to age more quickly. An abundance of laughter would normally indicate a life filled with friends and fulfillment: why would such a life bring about accelerated aging? But perhaps this is a crazed laughter, an interpretation reinforced by the lines that follow: “And when the moon’s pot-bellied / I get a laughing fit” (Yeats 224). The idea that a full— or “pot-bellied” (Yeats 224)— moon causes crazy behavior is a well-debated phenomenon, and is rooted in the etymological origins of “lunar” and “lunatic.” Furthermore, the notion of a “laughing fit” (Yeats 224) might evoke an image of a crazed person laughing to themselves, or being unable to control their laughter. From these first

lines, we can conclude that the narrator himself has reached some degree of insanity which appears to have accelerated his aging, a counterintuitive contrast to the fact that insanity is often a result of old age, not the cause of it.

Soon, we meet a similarly old and crazy character: "that old Madge comes down the lane" (Yeats 224). Once again connecting the moon/stone symbol with insanity, Yeats continues, "A stone upon her breast, / And a cloak wrapped about the stone, / And she can get no rest / With singing hush and hush-a-bye; / She that has been wild / And barren as a breaking wave / Thinks that the stone's a child" (Yeats 224). Madge, who has mistaken her cloth wrapped rock for a living infant, is a clear image of insanity. However, if we recall back to the stone symbolism Yeats presented in previous poems, we see how love, too, can trick perfectly sane men into delusion. In "I. First Love," the speaker remembers a lover whose "body bore / A heart of flesh and blood" (Yeats 221)—that is, until he "laid a hand thereon / And found a heart of stone" (Yeats 221). The stone symbolically represents the human tendency to assume a thing's content based on its superficial or outward appearances, indeed a mistake often made by perfectly sane people. Though Madge seems to take this mistake to a more extreme level by mistaking a stone for a human child, we might argue that what Madge experiences is not all that different than what the male speaker experiences in "I. First Love." By repeating the stone symbol, Yeats connects crazy, old Madge with the young, sane lover, thus reinforcing just how harmful and craze-inducing love can be. As Yeats says in "I. First Love," "every hand is lunatic / That travels on the moon" (Yeats 221).

The next stanza introduces yet another character, Peter, who resembles Madge in his delusions. He announces that he is the "King of the Peacocks, / And perches on a stone" (Yeats 224). The stone again represents mistaking something ordinary for something magnificent: Peter, believing that he is the "King of the Peacocks," (Yeats 224) mistakes a stone for his royal throne. Having now presented us with two insane subjects, each of a different gender, the first person narrator now makes an entrance back into the poem: "And then I laugh till tears run down / And the heart thumps at my side" (Yeats 224). The poem has suddenly taken a sad turn as the speaker's laughing fit turns to crying. He reveals in the last two lines that his sadness is from the overwhelming realization that Madge's "shriek was love / And that [Peter] shrieks from pride" (Yeats 224). This gendered conclusion appears to cast women in a new light. While the male Peter is deluded with pride, the female Madge goes crazy with a craving for love. Perhaps, the speaker realizes, what is stopping him from finding love is not that he is unlovable, but rather, that his own pride and fear of failure stop him from trying. Perhaps, then, women are not the culprits after all.

From "VII. The Friends of his Youth" forward, we see the speaker's attitude shift. As the speaker ages, he also becomes more aware of his own faults that might be inhibiting his love life, rather than blaming it all on women. Whereas before women were presented as mysterious and thus standoffish in the speaker's eyes, we now see him recognizing his own shortcomings by the end of "VII. The Friends of his Youth." At the very least, he appears to now have some sympathy or solidarity for women. Seeing old Madge cry out over love shows our speaker that women, too, suffer from heartbreak.

This more generous outlook on women and love— and even toward aging— is evident in the eighth poem in the sequence, "Summer and Spring." Yeats depicts what sounds like an idyllic relationship: a pair of lovers, sitting "under an old thorn-tree," talk "away the night" together (Yeats 224). The man and woman reminisce on how they have "halved a soul / And fell the one in t'other's arms" (Yeats 225): they have a simple, blissful love. The mention of the old thorn tree, however, does catch our attention as a potential sign of disarray for this picture perfect couple. As we've seen, Yeats loves to symbolically associate thorns with both women and men, often concluding that the two sexes are incapable of congruous love. These lovers seem happy, but placing them under the unsightly thorn tree gives readers pause. This being noted, the fact that the lovers are happily under the tree *together* suggests, perhaps, that the pair have overcome their respective insecurities, and have opened themselves up to love.

The poem then takes what seems to be a sharp turns at line nine, when suddenly, "Peter had a murdering look" (Yeats 225). Given the cynical attitudes we've seen so far in "A Man Young and Old," this line would reasonably lead us to anticipate, perhaps, a fated falling out of love between the couple, or maybe a sudden and terrifying realization that youth is lost. Much to our surprise, this could not be further from the case. Peter, as we come to find, has realized that he and his lover sat "under that very tree" in "their childish days" (Yeats 225). Again, given Yeats' usually negative outlook on aging, we might expect Peter's realization to be accompanied by paralyzing terror over the prospect of time passing. But again, we find ourselves surprised by a joyful and nostalgic end to the poem: "O what a bursting out there was / And what a blossoming, / When we had all

the summer-time / And she had all the spring!" (Yeats 225). Rather than viewing old age as a dreary and pitiful existence, Yeats seems to suggest that old age— especially when accompanied by true love— is a time for joyful reflection on youth, and making peace with the wisdom old age brings.

This attitude that growing old is desirable and characterized by special wisdom is evident in the next poem, "IX. The Secrets of the Old." Reintroducing the character of Madge, the narrative speaker starts, "I have old women's secrets now / That had those of the young; / Madge tells me what I dared not think / When my blood was strong" (Yeats 225). A few important characteristics of our narrator are revealed here. First, the speaker appears to be old himself, given the past tense used in the line, "When my blood *was* strong" (Yeats 225). Furthermore, when the speaker explicitly refers to the secrets he has learned as "old women's secrets" (Yeats 225), it implies that our speaker is not a woman, but an old man.

With this understood, we might ponder why an old woman's secrets would differ so greatly from an old man's. This binary understanding of the genders reinforces the idea that men and women are fundamentally different from one another, and that the experience of an old woman is a complete "secret" to her male counterpart. Indeed, in earlier poems we saw our young male speaker feel a certain resentment and hatred against women for their seemingly mysterious and unattainable demeanor. Now, we see an older and presumably wiser man taking the time to listen to a woman's perspective. We also see him engaging in retrospective reflection after she tells him secrets that he "dared not think / When [his] blood was strong" (Yeats 225).

Another reference to the past comes in the next two lines, as Yeats writes, “And what had drowned a lover once / Sounds like an old song” (Yeats 225). This line clearly references the earlier poem in the sequence, “III. The Mermaid,” where a malicious female mermaid figure drowns her male lover and laughs while doing it (Yeats 222). Now that the male speaker has heard the “old women’s secrets,” (Yeats 225) it appears he no longer resents the mermaid, for this tale that once angered him now “sounds like an old song” (Yeats 225). Though Yeats does not reveal the “secrets” to his audience, it appears that whatever Madge has shared with our male speaker has changed his perspective to make him far more sympathetic to women than he was in his youth.

As we reach the end of “A Man Young and Old,” we find a poem both structurally and thematically divergent from the previous ten. With long lines that fill the width of the page and an abandonment of the characters and symbols Yeats has presented thus far in this poetic sequence, “XI. From Oedipus at Colonus” perhaps serves as the aged man’s final words of advice before death. Touching thematically on time, human suffering, love, and finally death, the poem brings the reader full circle and offers a final verdict on how to live “best” (Yeats 227).

Each four to five line stanza appears to offer a different piece of advice. First, Yeats writes, “Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span; / Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied / aged man; / Delight becomes death-longing...” (Yeats 226). Starting on a particularly dreary note, this first stanza reminds us of the more futile view that often colors Yeats’ attitudes toward aging. Rather than instructing us to enjoy the life we are given, we’re instructed to “endure” it, as if life is more of a prison

sentence than a haven of opportunity. Yeats further encourages the "travel-wearied / aged man" to forget the "delights of youth altogether," for he warns, remembering such delight will only lead one to long for death (Yeats 226).

However, just as we are beginning to feel utterly defeated, Yeats gives us a glimmer of hope. He finishes the last line of this first stanza with, "*if* all longing else be vain" (Yeats 226). That is, holding on to one's youthful memories will lead to "death-longing," (Yeats 226) *unless* there is something else to long for that isn't in vain. Could this something else be love? Perhaps, but Yeats does not give the reader much time to ponder this subtle instance of hope: he swiftly returns to advocating for the abandonment of youthful memories in the second stanza. He recognizes the "delight" that our "memories treasure," (Yeats 226) but maintains that holding on to these memories only allows for "Death, despair, division of families, all entanglements of mankind" (Yeats 226) to grow.

The old speaker next turns to young love. He tells of "the long echoing street" where "laughing dancers throng," (Yeats 226) and describes a groom carrying his newlywed bride to their "chamber through / torchlight and tumultuous song" (Yeats 226). The laughing dancers here remind us the use of laughter in "VII. The Friends of his Youth" (Yeats 224). The dancers laugh with joy now, but, caught in their youthful blind ignorance, they cannot foresee how future memories of such delight will later destroy their will to live. Similarly, the speaker in "VII. The Friends of his Youth" laments, "Laughter not time destroyed my voice / And put that crack in it" (Yeats 224). Furthermore, the fire imagery that we discovered in Chapter I comes aflame once again,

as the bridge and groom's youthful, blissful ignorance is symbolized by the "torchlight" (Yeats 226) that lights their path. The "tumultuous song" (Yeats 226) that accompanies the young lovers to bed suggests an eerie inevitability of rough times, and perhaps eventually failure, for their relationship. Despite all this, we again see a moment of hope as the last line of the second stanza: "I celebrate the silent kiss that ends short life or long" (Yeats 226). Does this suggest that true love can last to the end after all?

Again, this moment of celebration is short lived: the final stanza starts, "Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say; / Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked / into the eye of day" (Yeats 227). Now, rather than suggesting that we forget our youthful memories as we saw earlier in the poem, Yeats takes his cynicism one step further by stating it would be better to have never lived at all. The irony in this statement, though, is that the intended audience for this poem appears to be the "travel-wearied / aged man" (Yeats 226). How can Yeats' best advice for an old man be to "Never to have lived" (Yeats 227)? Obviously, any person reading this poem has not only lived, but is living, and will continue to live until death. Furthermore, whether we get a "short life or long," (Yeats 226) death itself cannot undo the living. If anything, death affirms that a life was lived, for no thing can die that hasn't first lived. We are all chained to the reality of our past existence. Of course, Yeats is fully aware of this reality, and thus grants us a final alternative: "The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn away" (Yeats 227).

Though rather elusive in meaning, this last line seems to suggest that the best we can do as humans is to live and die in the present. We might imagine a "gay goodnight"

(Yeats 227) to refer to the routine "goodnights" exchanged between an old, married couple in bed, or the reflexive last words uttered between dear friends before parting ways for the evening. Yeats uses this idea of a "gay goodnight" (Yeats 227) to evoke the little, seemingly meaningless moments in life where our happiness does not require complexity or explanation. This is the epitome of living in the moment: to enjoy the passing moments of one's life without questioning the present, consulting the past, or looking to the future. The future is terrifying, and it can be difficult to look away, especially when anticipating the trials of growing old and eventually facing death. But if we strive to live in the moment, when death does come, it will be nothing more than "quickly turning away" (Yeats 227). If we live our entire lives worrying over growing old and dying, then life itself becomes a sort of "death-longing" (Yeats 226), and we end up wasting the precious life we have.

Conclusion

Though hidden within the otherwise dreary and negative tone, the moments of hope presented in "XI. From 'Oedipus at Colonus'" leave us with a sense of urgency to live our lives to the fullest before it is too late. As inspiring as this sentiment is, as we've seen, it is not an attitude that Yeats ardently stuck to. The poems discussed in Chapter I that make use of fire and water symbolism tend toward a view of life that is bleak and meaningless, pushing forth the argument that old age will inevitably ruin us, and that trying to stop this is a futile act. The celestial woman of Chapter II provides us with a more promising outlook, one where true love can save man from his mortal miseries. Yet, when the ethereal woman is reimagined as a rose, as seen in Chapter III, we are met with the challenge of actually attaining such a strong willed, closed off and mysterious beauty. Moments of both hope and hopelessness find a place in "A Man Young and Old," making the sequence a representative microcosm for the whole of Yeats' work on aging. Yet, as fully as this thesis attempted to cover the concern with aging, the vastness of Yeats' body of work prevents even the most committed, lifelong scholar from uncovering all his intricacies. Ironically, the futility of trying to fully understand this poetic genius aligns quite seamlessly with the message that Yeats so often drives home: as strong as our ambitions and desires might be, in the end they are nothing more than "heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass" (Yeats 31). Perhaps the only way to combat this crippling sense of meaninglessness that the future holds is to live— and love— in the present.

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