



**Mycroft Lectures.**  
**Adapted Transcript for:**

**William Butler Yeats's**  
***No Second Troy.***

(Mycroft lectures always provide sentence-by-sentence parsing, paraphrasing and explanation of each poem. However, each lecture also presents extra information to enhance appreciation and understanding of the poem under discussion. As the Mycroft lectures are not read from a script, a transcript of a lecture contains the imperfections of a spoken presentation. To avoid the embarrassment of having the spoken performance thought to be an essay and being quoted as such, I have made occasional changes to the spoken lectures for the purposes of clarification. What follows is the transcript of a lecture, not an essay.)

**Chronology of the Lecture.**

1. The flow of the lecture is explained.
2. The poem is read through.
3. Explanation of Troy.
4. The Irish political situation at the time the poem was written.
5. Yeats' relationship with Maude Gonne.
6. Reading of *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*.
7. Yeats' relationship to the Irish political situation of the time.
8. The poem is parsed, paraphrased, explained line by line in simpler English. Various complications noted, or areas of interest raised and questioned, are:
  - ▲ Different meanings for *Hurled the little streets upon the great*.

- △ The complicated similes in the poem ('simple as a fire', 'beauty like a tightened bow').
  - △ Definition of nobleness.
  - △ The attributes of Gonne that Yeats seems to find attractive.
9. The form of the poem, the 'douzaine'. How iambic is used to affect the way we read the poem. Examination of 'being' and 'why.'
  10. The lecture examines reasons why some may dislike the poem.
  11. The opening stanza of *Easter 1916* is read out as a contrast to *No Second Troy*.
  12. The poem is read through for a final time.

**From the lecture: “What Yeats is telling us here is that Maude Gonne is born out of her time. The people of Dublin are not ready... almost to *receive* her.”**

## **Transcript for the *No Second Troy* Lecture.**

Now, to understand *No Second Troy*, there are four areas you need to be aware of that are external to the poem. The first of these is Troy itself, what it is. The second is the Irish political situation around the time that the poem was written, which was 1912. The third is Yeats' relationship with a woman called Maud Gonne. And the fourth is Yeats' relationship with the Irish people and Home Rule for Ireland, independence for Ireland from England.

Now, the way I'll teach this to you is, I'll read the poem through first, I'll then explain all four of these areas. I'll then look at the poem's form, the way Yeats puts across what he wants to say in the poem.

So this is the first read-through of Yeats' *No Second Troy*.

*Why should I blame her that she filled my days*

*With misery, or that she would of late*

*Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,  
Had they but courage equal to desire?  
What could have made her peaceful with a mind  
That nobleness made simple as a fire,  
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind  
That is not natural in an age like this,  
Being high and solitary and most stern?  
Why, what could she have done, being as she is?  
Was there another Troy for her to burn?*

So that's the poem. Let's look at those four areas you need to understand to appreciate this poem.

The first, Troy.

Now, Troy is an area in ancient Greece where a famous war was fought. Many have heard of it due to the wooden horse of Troy story. The war starts because of a woman called Helen of Sparta, the most beautiful woman of her age, who is married to Menelaus, the brother of the Greek King Agamemnon. Helen, Helen of Sparta, is taken from Sparta by the young Trojan prince, Paris. There are different versions of this story; some would say that Paris abducts and rapes her and takes her away. Some say that because Paris is much younger than the older Menelaus, Helen is more than willing to go to Troy with the younger, more attractive man. The point is, Helen goes to Troy, and Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus launch a fleet of a thousand ships to come and bring her back. A war is fought over this woman. The most beautiful woman of her age, a war is fought over her. She is the type of woman who can inspire an army, and Yeats is very interested in this sort of thing. So that's

Troy.

The second thing we need to know is the Irish political situation at the time the poem was written, which was 1912. In 1912, Ireland, the island of Ireland, is a part of Britain in the same way that Wales and Scotland are today. I'll try to relate to you in the most uncontroversial way that I can, but it seems fair to say that the people of Ireland minded more being ruled from Westminster, being ruled from London, than the people of Scotland might, or the people of Wales might, because Ireland itself is an independent land mass in a way that Scotland and Wales are not. So because Ireland is an independent island, there is a lot of call for Irish independence; for Ireland to have its own parliament. This independence happens in 1921, after a revolution takes place in Ireland, out of Dublin. The relevance of this is that at the time when this poem is written, the revolution which is going to oust the British from Ireland has not yet taken place. It doesn't take place until four years after this poem is written.

The third thing you need to know is Yeats' relationship with a woman called Maud Gonne. And this is a great story. Maud Gonne is the love of Yeats' life. He meets her when he is in his early twenties. And he is a famous Irish poet, he's just written *The Wanderings of Oisín*, and Maud Gonne comes into his life, and he says 'The troubling of my life started'. He sees her and in her, he sees the woman that he wants to be his companion through his life. She is everything he wants in a woman. She is sophisticated, she is passionate, she is an Irish nationalist, she's the type of woman who is going to inspire him to greater things. She is a goddess. There's nothing unusual in this. A lot of poets love the idea of a muse, and they select a woman to be their muse, or women to be their muse, and from this they get the work that they're going to present to the public. They get the poems from the woman they have selected as their muse. Maud Gonne was slightly different in this. She rejected Yeats time and time again. He was to propose to her 5 or 6 times over a period of 30-40 years and each time, she rejected him. The last time that Yeats proposes to her, she rejects him, and Yeats

proposes to her daughter, Iseult Gonne, who also rejects him. When Yeats first meets Maud, he sees her as the virginal, beautiful, goddess-type woman. And he is distraught to the point of a nervous breakdown some ten years later to find that she is the mistress of a very right-wing French politician and has had a daughter by him, Iseult. Some time later, Maud Gonne marries a man who at the time was an Irish military hero, a man called John MacBride, who Yeats was to call a 'Drunken, vein, glorious, lout'. Yeats hated him.

Maud Gonne was to say of her relationship with Yeats, she has this wonderful line whereby she says that, 'The world will thank me, Willy, for continually rejecting you, because...' I'm paraphrasing what she says here, but basically Maud Gonne's statement to Yeats on her continually turning him down and breaking his heart time and time again is, 'The world will thank me for this, because through me doing this, you will get more and more beautiful poems.'

And she was right here - we did.

Through having this woman continually break his heart, Yeats gives us poems like *Words*, which is a wonderful one on his belief that he only became the poet that he became in order to express himself to her, and if she wasn't there, he wouldn't have been able to become William Butler Yeats, the Irish poet. He might have had a better life, he considers, but he wouldn't have been the person he became.

He gave the world, or Yeats' relationship with Maud Gonne gives the world, poems like *He Wishes for the Clothes of Heaven*, which is a short one, so I'll recite that for you now.

*He Wishes for the Clothes of Heaven* goes:

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,*

*Enwrought with golden and silver light,*

Meaning, if I had a cloth which had all the most beautiful colours in the heavens on it.

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

And what a beautiful last line that is.

*I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

Yeats must have been the only man in history to have said that to a woman and not profited by it. So there's Yeats' relationship to Maud Gonne, the woman to whom this poem is addressed. The woman who he has loved all his life, who has continually broken his heart. And incidentally, we can question the poet's sincerity in complaining about the woman he has selected to break his heart actually breaking his heart all we like. But it is undeniable that Maud Gonne put Yeats through a lot of misery.

The fourth thing, the fourth thing we need to be aware of here is Yeats' relationship with Home Rule for Ireland. For Maud Gonne was a near fanatical Irish revolutionary. She believed passionately that the English did not belong in Ireland and was willing to do

anything to get them out. Yeats wasn't as keen on the idea as she was. He was to become an Irish senator in the Irish free state. But at the time that this poem was written, 1912, he is to say of his relationship with the English, 'My hatred [of the English] is tempered by my love, and my love is tempered by my hatred.' With all that in mind, that should give you some backdrop as to what is going on in this poem.

So we'll now do the line-by-line read through, whereby I will explain what Yeats says in this poem in the simplest English I can.

*Why should I blame her that she filled my days with misery?*

He's addressing Maud Gonne here, and this is quite simple.

*Why should I blame her that she filled my days with misery?* 'Why should I blame her that she messed my life up?' There's Yeats' days as a cup, Maud Gonne fills up his days with misery. Very simple stuff.

*Or that she would of late*

*Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways.*

Well, that's quite easy. 'Ignorant men' means stupid men, and 'violent ways' means to be violent. I would point out here that this is violence in a political connotation. This is violence against the British. Or against the British colonial rule in Ireland. So why should I blame her that she has recently, 'of late', taught stupid people to be violent?

*Or hurled the little streets upon the great.*

*Had they but courage equal to desire?*

*Or hurled the little streets upon the great?*

I see two meanings for that. One is to create a class war. 'The little streets' being the little streets of Dublin, the poorer streets of Dublin, against the great streets of Dublin, the more important streets of Dublin. The line could mean, 'Why should I blame her that she has attempted to create a class war?' There's a definite reading there, a definite truth to that reading. The way I prefer to read that line is that Yeats is talking about the little streets as the streets of Dublin. I should phrase that actually as Yeats is talking about, for the purposes of this poem, 'the little streets' as the streets of Dublin, and the 'great streets' as the streets of Troy. And what Maud Gonne will do is pick up, if you imagine this as the map of Dublin, and this as the map of Troy, she will pick up the little streets of Dublin and hurl them upon the great streets of Troy. Meaning that she will make Dublin into the stuff of legend. James Joyce hasn't written *Ulysses* at the point when this poem comes out. Dublin is not quite the stuff of legend that it is later to become. So, she *hurled the little streets upon the great, had they but courage equal to desire?* So the line *Hurled the little streets upon the great* either means create, or instigate, a class war in Dublin; meaning 'Hurl the little streets against the great people of Dublin', of which Yeats considered himself, incidentally. Or create a legend by hurling the map of Dublin onto the legend of Troy, turning Dublin into another Troy. *Had they but courage equal to desire*, of course.

And 'they', in this sentence, is the people of Dublin, the ignorant men to whom Maud Gonne is attempting to teach these violent ways.

Great line, incidentally.



*Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
Had they but courage equal to desire?*

You can use that in a lot of other contexts. 'It would happen, had they but courage equal to desire.' 'If they had the bravery to do what they actually want to do.'

So I'll briefly read that opening question of the poem through.

*Why should I blame her that she filled my days  
With misery, or that she would of late  
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,  
Had they but courage equal to desire?*

Now the poem *No Second Troy* has four questions.

That's the first of them. The second is,

*What could have made her peaceful with a mind  
That nobleness made simple as a fire,  
A kind that is not natural in an age like this.*

So, what would have made her peaceful? What would have calmed her down? *What would have made her happy with a mind that nobleness made simple as a fire?*

'Simple as a fire' is a simile. There are two similes in this sentence, which are both really interesting: *as simple as a fire*; and *beauty like a tightened bow*.

So, Yeats assesses Maud Gonne and says, *What could have made her peaceful with a mind that nobleness made simple as a fire.* Now, I don't really know if the way Yeats sees nobleness is the same way as I see nobleness. 'Nobleness'? Let's try and define it in a way that both of us might agree on. To him, nobleness I think is 'elevated moral conduct, right-thinking'. And those seem okay. Whether what Yeats saw as elevated moral conduct and right-thinking would be the same as what you or I would see as elevated moral conduct or right-thinking would be more open to debate.

But Maud Gonne's nobleness is 'as simple as a fire'. The reason why I find fire as a simile so interesting here is that fire by its very nature burns. It destroys. It is one track. It's as if Yeats is saying that Maud Gonne's nobleness made her single-minded, having a one-track mind. And that's not necessarily a good thing. 'Simple as a fire' is something that you might say to someone who is a fanatic. It's not something you would necessarily say to somebody who you thought deserved your praise. And that is indeed the way that Yeats is using this simile. *With a mind that nobleness made simple as a fire.* She has a destructive, one-track mind. But who can deny that fires are also quite beautiful? Unless you're the one getting burned by them, of course. And Maud Gonne, of course, not only has a mind that nobleness has made simple as a fire, she has *beauty like a tightened bow, a kind that is not natural in an age like this.*

Beauty like a tightened bow? Okay. In what way can a tightened bow be seen as beautiful? I think the answer to this is that in no real way can a tightened bow be seen as beautiful, except... in what way is a rose beautiful? 'She was as beautiful as a rose.' 'She was as beautiful as a sunset.' Well, the only way that those things can be beautiful is that they are good to look at. So do you think that a tightened bow is good to look at? Just imagine it, you know. I mean, you've seen *Lord of the Rings*. It does look very cool.

*Beauty like a tightened bow.*

The trouble with that simile, or why that simile is so interesting, is that a tightened bow by its very nature has been tightened to fire. (Shoot.) It's just about to be destructive. It's also an image out of antiquity. I mean, when Yeats says *Beauty like a tightened bow, a kind that is not natural in an age like this*, the 'age' is 1912, they didn't use bows - tightened or otherwise - for warfare at that time. They used bows in ancient Greece at the time of Helen of Sparta, later to become Helen of Troy. Her *beauty is like a tightened bow*. It's dangerous and it is not natural in an age like this.

So what Yeats is telling us here is that Maud Gonne is born out of her time. The people of Dublin aren't ready to - almost to - *receive* her. That's slightly overstating the case, but not by too much.

*Being high and solitary and most stern* ? Now these attributes of 'high, and solitary, and most stern', the way the sentence is constructed, you could believe that the thing which is high, and solitary, and most stern, is an age like this. It is the age like this that is *High, and solitary, and most stern*. But it's not. That doesn't fit in with the rhetoric of the rest of the poem. The thing which is *High, and solitary, and most stern* is Maud Gonne, Maud Gonne's beauty. Now this is a fascinating way to describe someone's beauty. Her beauty is *High, and solitary, and most stern*. It's almost as if he's talking about her as a dominatrix. Not as a woman that he is very much in love with.

I'll read that second question through again. *What could have made her peaceful with a mind that nobleness made simple as a fire, with beauty like a tightened bow, a kind that is not natural in an age like this, being high and solitary and most stern?*

And then Yeats gives us the penultimate question.

*Why, what could she have done, being what she is?*

What other options were open to her? Maud Gonne, being what she is, which we'll look at in a minute. We know she's high, and solitary, and most stern, we know she's so beautiful, her beauty is like the statues of old, and dangerous. But *what could she have done, being what she is?*

*Was there another Troy for her to burn?*

Now, what Yeats means in this final question, *Was there another Troy for her to burn?* is that Dublin is no second Troy. It is not a place where heroes are going to be made. It is not a place where legends are going to form. The people of Dublin are too stupid, lazy, and cowardly to follow Maud Gonne. They want to, but they're just too lazy to do it. They're too lazy to follow Maud Gonne and oust the British from Ireland. And if I paraphrase this rather flippantly, basically what he's saying is, 'What else had Maud Gonne to do with her life, because the people of Dublin weren't up to the task of ousting the British from Ireland, so she had to contend herself with messing my life up.'

Now that sounds very flippant, but Yeats says, *Why should I blame her that she filled my days with misery? Was there another Troy for her to burn?*

Maud Gonne is a second Helen of Troy, but the people of Dublin are not up to the task of being the heroes that she could make them. According, of course, to Yeats.

Now, let's have a look at the form that Yeats uses for this poem, and some of the ways that his arrangement of lines in the poem seeks to influence the way we read it. And there are some beautiful examples of Yeats' form enhancing content in this.

The poem itself is what we call a 'douzaine'. It's a twelve-line Shakespearean sonnet, mostly in iambic pentameter. If you look at it, it's basically the Shakespearean sonnet with the final couplet at the end removed. But most of it is in iambic pentameter, except where it's not. Now where it's not, there is an effect created. We can either say that this is an accident of construction, or we can say that it's deliberately constructed by Yeats to create certain effects. Let's see if I can convince you that where this poem deviates from iambic pentameter it is done so because Yeats wants to draw certain attention to what is happening at the point where it deviates from iambic pentameter. The poem starts off with

*Why should I blame her that she filled my days*

iambic pentameter.

*With misery, or that she would of late*

*Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,*

Now there are twelve syllables in that line. But as an interesting example of the way we read iambic pentameter, we know that once we recognize the form of a sonnet - the sonnet box is what this is constructed in - we tend to almost try to read it to iambic pentameter. When we sub-vocalize this poem, we hear

*Why should I blame her that she filled my days*

*With misery, or that she would of late*

*Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,*

Now I know that 'ignorant' and 'violent' have three syllables in them. But we tend not to hear it like that when we read it.

*Or hurled the little streets upon the great.*

*Had they but courage equal to desire?*

*What could have made her peaceful with a mind*

*That nobleness made simple as a fire.*

For years I said 'fire' with two syllables. It's 'fire', it's one syllable.

*With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind*

*That is not natural in an age like this.*

I know you can say 'na-tu-ral', but you say 'na-tural' to make it hit the iambic box. Now, this is where it gets interesting. The next line begins,

*Being high and solitary and most stern?*

Now I can't make that hit iambic pentameter. Because it starts with a two-syllable gerund. 'Being'. You've got to stress that first syllable.

*Being high and solitary and most stern?*

*Why, what could she have done, being what she is?*

*Was there another Troy for her to burn?*

So twice the poem deliberately opts out of iambic pentameter quite conspicuously, and both times it's on the same word, and the word is 'Being'. So what Yeats achieves here is

he draws attention to the word 'Being'. When we read it out loud, or we sub-vocalize the poem, that word 'Being' attracts our attention.

Why?

Well, I think what Yeats is questioning here, or introducing into the argument, is what we now call the idea of the nature-nurture argument. Is Maud Gonne like she is because she has been nurtured that way - she's like she is as a result of her upbringing - or was she just born that way, 'being' what she is? And whether *we* believe this or not, it seems that Yeats believes that she was just born like that. She was just born as a reincarnation of Helen of Troy. She was born to be this fantastic person who could lead the Irish people. Maud Gonne herself often saw herself as an Irish Joan of Arc. 'Being what she is, what else could she have done? The people of Ireland weren't up to the job of following her, so she's messed my life up instead.' And note how much attention Yeats draws to himself here. The four questions which Yeats asks are all about what Maud Gonne could have done with her life, and what she *has* done is set upon his happiness.

There's another interesting example of specific wording I'd draw your attention to here in the use of the word 'Why' in the last but one line of the poem.

*Why, what could she have done, being what she is?*

And when we hear the 'Why', don't we hear it with a sort of shrug? As if Yeats is saying, *Why, what could she have done, being what she is?* as if he is resigned to the fact that this has been and is going to be Maud Gonne's effect on his life. I don't think he's happy about it, you can still be sad about something and resigned to it at the same time. But I hear a nice shrug in that *Why, what could she have done, being what she is?* And I think Yeats expects me to hear that. I don't think it's beyond the realms of talent for a poet who pays as

much attention to what he is writing as William Butler Yeats does to be able to create these effects.

Yeats, incidentally, would often write his poems out in prose first, and then find a way to inveigle what he had written into verse. It's quite an interesting way of constructing a poem, I think. You know exactly what you want to say before you've actually tried to worry it into posy.

If you were to dislike this poem, particularly if you were Irish, and you've never come across it before, you wouldn't be the first person to dislike it for what it says about the Irish people pre-Easter 1916 uprising. Yeats is very much caught unawares by the actual uprising of Easter 1916. As this poem shows us, he has very little respect for the actual working people of Ireland, and one of the problems of the piece concerns the morality of the poem - and this is not to impinge it in any way as a piece of art or wonderful piece of love poetry - but don't we find that the poem itself takes no account of the actual human consequences to the actual people of Dublin, or has them doing what Yeats would have them do. In other words, to paraphrase this rather flippantly, 'Because the people of Dublin have not hurled themselves on British bayonets for the deification of my girlfriend, she's had to be content with messing my life up.' Now, as flippant as that sounds, that's not that far removed from what the poem is saying. When the people of Dublin did do exactly this, Yeats was confused.

And he captured this confusion in a poem written shortly after the uprising of Easter 1916 called *Easter 1916*. I'll read the opening stanza of *Easter 1916* to you because it's a very interesting one to contrast with *No Second Troy*, the poem written before the uprising of 1916. To understand this poem you need to know that 'motley' is what clowns wear. It's that type of uniform that clowns used to have, that criss-cross. *Easter 1916* begins:

*I have met them at close of day*



*Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses.  
I have passed with a nod of the head  
Or polite meaningless words,  
Or have lingered awhile and said  
Polite meaningless words,  
And thought before I had done  
Of a mocking tale or a gibe  
To please a companion  
Around the fire at the club,  
Being certain that they and I  
But lived where motley is worn:  
All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.*

And once again, what a fabulous last line that is. *All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.*

They have become heroes, they have transcended the ordinary. *A terrible beauty is born.* Because this is what Yeats loves. Anything that can rise above the ordinary, everyday life, and turn life into the stuff of legend, the stuff of myth. The stuff which an artist is worthy of giving his attentions to. Dublin becomes a second Troy. Maud Gonne becomes Helen of Troy. But in 1912, this was not to be. Or Yeats thought this was not coming.

Okay. I'll read the poem through one more time for you. So this is William Butler Yeats' *No Second Troy*.

*Why should I blame her that she filled my days  
With misery, or that she would of late  
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,  
Had they but courage equal to desire?  
What could have made her peaceful with a mind  
That nobleness made simple as a fire,  
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind  
That is not natural in an age like this,  
Being high and solitary and most stern?  
Why, what could she have done, being as she is?  
Was there another Troy for her to burn?*

Thank you. I am Dr. Andrew Barker. That was the Mycroft Lecture on William Butler Yeats' *No Second Troy*.

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