

Lady Gregory: Exalting Folklore and Dialect as National Identity

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Lady Gregory is one of the key figures of the Irish Celtic Revival at the beginning of the 20th century. She devoted her entire career to Irish nationalism, by elevating the oral literature of Ireland into a canon for a new nationalist establishment.

From birth, she was exposed to the Gaelic language and Irish folklore by her Gaelic-speaking nurse in Roxborough. Before her career contributing to Irish literature, she dedicated her time to works of charity in small villages where the Irish folklore was an integral component of everyday life. Celtic beliefs survived, especially in the Western coasts of Ireland, and were preserved in colloquial Gaelic. Owing to Ireland's isolation from the other European nations and their development, it was possible to preserve these beliefs. According to what Stephen Coote wrote in *W.B. Yeats, A Life*, "beliefs preserved the consciousness of an Iron Age civilization at once local, poetic and pre-Christian" (19). Spending her days with people of the lower social classes, Lady Gregory found herself in the midst of a contemporary world saturated with devotion to an ancient Celtic culture.

Though as a girl she was given little access to education, she decided to collect folklore after Yeats's visit to her house in Coole and after reading one of his works, *The Celtic Twilight*. Reading this book, which was focused on the Sligo legends and myths, she began to think about her own Galway and the legends of her neighbors - this became Lady Gregory's main interest and also the subject of her future literary works. In

collecting the myths and legends of Galway, she became aware of and was surprised to discover how fully folklore was ingrained in people's minds and how strongly people believed in a supernatural world. Lady Gregory found work to do for her country, as folk history, tales and poems became fundamental to her plays and works.

To promote and revive the Irish language through the heroic tales of Ireland, Lady Gregory wrote a literature that strengthened the awareness of the national identity, the emotion of rebellion, and the will to be free and independent. Her aim was to arise nationalist feeling through an emotional call for Irish unity because she considered the Irish people a great race with a great past and also a great future. A cultural revolution started in Galway which then spread to all Irish-speaking places, where people came together around the poems and songs they knew, both old and new, leading to the discovery and rediscovery of a historic culture centered around ancient traditions.

Mythology had a social and cultural role that history could not provide because it marked beginnings. Mythology related ancient history and origins — the primordial reality of a culture with archetypes to emulate. These models were retold and handed down orally from one generation to the next, as people learned about their origins set in the places that surrounded them. The Irish mythological world was once national for the island: spoken in the Gaelic language, their practices were pushed from Eastern Ireland to the western coast where it survived in oral form. This faith of Irish folklore was used by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and other contemporary writers with an educational purpose. Through their works, they reproduced ancient and positive values, such as honesty, loyalty and bravery, which were disappearing in the nineteenth century, where only rationalism and physical science prevailed. Writers could write about Irishness without

mentioning politics - they could talk about their homeland through a national literature evading direct commentary. In avoiding contemporary politics, the authors depicted an ancient Ireland, characterized by strong and fighting Gaelic men and their epic heroism, which appeared nobler and more honest than the evolving homeland they inhabited.

Lady Gregory was the first Irish writer to use the Irish peasant language in written works. Through her groundbreaking use of dialect that was previously regarded as belonging only to peasantry, Lady Gregory recasted the values and social markers that were associated with the lower classes. In her work *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920) she gathered folklore and retold it in a dialectic framework, broadcast on a national stage. She dedicated other works, such as *Gods and the fighting men* and *Cuchulain of Murthiemne*, to the Irish people by writing in their own language. She stated in her autobiography, "I have told the whole story in plain and simple words, in the same way my old nurse Mary Sheridan used to tell stories from the Irish long ago, and I a child at Roxborough" (Adams 49). When she gathered Irish folklore, she tried to write them faithfully using the dialect, a mixture of Irish and English. She explained why she used this dialect in her works:

When I went looking for the stories in the old writings, I found that the Irish in them is too hard for any person to read that has not made a long study of it. Some scholars have worked well at them, Irishmen and Germans and Frenchmen, but they have printed them in the old cramped Irish, with translations into German, French or English, and these are not easy for you to get, or to understand, and the stories themselves are confused, every one giving a different account from the others in some small things, the way there is not much pleasure in reading them (Coxhead 61).

During these wanderings and searches of Irish folklore, Lady Gregory and Yeats were surprised by the power of the contemporary language. Lady Gregory studied the form and literary style of spoken Irish and described a new written dialect, Kiltartanese, a term that

derived from the village Kiltartan near Coole, where she lived. Yeats himself defined Lady Gregory in his autobiography as “the founder of the Irish dialect literature” (Adams 25). Lady Gregory wrote narrations as she gathered them and was able to bestow prestige upon Irish culture and identity, which were in danger of extinction under British hegemony.

The blend of Irish used in literature became a topic of heated debate. Yeats was uncertain about the right language to use for Irish folklore in his literary works, and he dreamed of finding a style that was closer to the distinctive dialect of Sligo peasants. But learning it would take research and time, Yeats continued writing in English. Yeats thought that Irish people could learn from other foreign literatures, including the English one, without losing their national identity. On the contrary, other Irish writers could not accept the use of a foreign language. Douglas Hyde, who later became the president of the Gaelic League, gave a lecture on *The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland* stressing the importance of emboldening contemporary Irish language in order to build a real national literature.

Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit for being English in language? [...] Let us make these books the books of our older writers known among the people and we will do more to de-Anglicize Ireland than by longing to recall the Gaelic tongue and the snows of yester year. Let us by all means prevent the decay of the tongue where we can, and preserve it always among us as a learned language to be a fountain of nationality in our midst [...] (Phillip 17).

Writing in the English language, the re-elaboration of the folklore gathered by Yeats provokes different experience than Lady Gregory’s work. The stories he wrote were elaborated as an inflated text which could not be based on real experience; he modified the sets, plots and characters while also supplementing the tales with his own reports of

supernatural experiences. Yeats believed in the supernatural and reported the proofs of folklore in his works trying to convince the reader of the truth in the tales. Yeats's are editorialized versions of Irish legends that seem to follow the course of his own imagination more than they follow the sequence of the common telling. Yeats appears more interested in his prestige as a writer than in an act of devotion for his country.

On the contrary, Lady Gregory wrote the narrations as first person experiences grounded in reality, in less glorifying prose, leaving the reader to imagine they are receiving testimony from actual witnesses rather than narrators of fiction. Lady Gregory was interested in the material she collected, but she was more interested in how the tales were told rather than in attempting to force the reader to believe in folklore. In her own words, "when I began to gather these stories I cared less for the evidence given in them than for the beautiful rhythmic sentences in which they were told" (Gregory, *Visions* 4). The use of dialect and style were the actual focus of her writing, the power of the living Irish language itself reaches the reader. By elevating their language faithfully from spoken word to written prose, Lady Gregory demonstrated that the Irish people knew their roots and identity, but they needed to be aware of their personal worth. The subject of her literary works was perhaps not Irish folklore, but rather the Irish people themselves through their language. In both message and method, Lady Gregory's writing constitutes a call to devotion for Gaelic identity.

Through her work in literature and playwriting, she upended the perception of the island's folklore, from a disdained tradition of Celtic fables told in backward tongues, into a sort of high-culture underpinning a new Irish identity. With Yeats she co-founded the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in order to spread Irish culture and promote a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. As Lady Gregory claims in her autobiography, *Our Irish Theatre*,

We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be

written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. [...] We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us (4).

The Abbey Theatre gave the possibility for a continuing tradition of Irish literature, extending from the ancient folklore through to the present and the future. Young playwrights could send their plays to be read and performed, and for years Lady Gregory and Yeats read every play that was sent to the theatre. Yeats wrote advice to those playwrights who had sent a play that showed skill in construction or dialogue not suitable for the Abbey theatre:

The Abbey Theatre is a subsidized theatre with an educational object. [...] A play to be suitable for performance at the Abbey should contain some criticism of life, founded on the experience or personal observation of the writer, or some vision of life, of Irish life by preference, important from its beauty or from some excellence of style; [...] we do not desire propagandist plays, nor plays written mainly to serve some obvious moral purpose [...] (Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* 52).

Neither Yeats nor Lady Gregory wanted to interact with politics directly through art, for they felt that art should serve the Irish national identity but not the political discourse.

Lady Gregory's devotion was addressed not only to the Irish people on the island, but also toward those who were forced to leave their mother country. Yeats and Lady Gregory exported this new Irish literature to English speaking theatres from London to New York, including the Court theatre in London. After the first act of *The Playboy*, Theodore Roosevelt made a short speech stating that he admired them and he believed that they were doing a great deal to increase the dignity of Ireland, that he even envied Lady Gregory's devotion for America.

This cultural diaspora both exported the new Irish culture and drew those who belonged to the Irish identity back to their folkloric heritage. Synge himself said that he had not done good work until he came back to Ireland, where he found all that he needed and wanted in fables, emotions and style. His experience matched Lady Gregory's, who asserted that whatever she had written that was 'worthwhile' had come from her own surroundings, her own parish, her own home.

In its own right and in comparison to her contemporaries' work, Lady Gregory's writing was the greatest physical act of devotion and reverence. Whereas some writers crafted new characters, belief systems, and situations, as if from a vacuum, Lady Gregory faithfully adopted Ireland's folklore as a prevailing theme in her writing. At the same time, she elevated Ireland's living tongue from the small town of Kiltartan to the international stage. Her written career was a devotional demonstration strengthening an Irish identity she helped craft. Lady Gregory was a pioneering devotee of what has become a lasting global movement for Irish nationalism.

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