

A Prayer for My Daughter: An analysis

Date _____
Page _____

A Prayer for My Daughter was written in February-June, 1919 soon after the birth of Yeats's eldest child, Annie Butler Yeats on February 26, 1919 and was published in the volume entitled Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921). It runs in to ten stanzas, and each stanza contains eight lines. The stanza form is the same as that of In Memory of Major Gregory. The poem echoes the mood of a former poem, The Second Coming, which was written only a month before this poem, and in which the poet had made a prophecy:

" Things fall apart; the centre can not hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The Ceremony of innocence is drowned."

This threatening background accounts for the poet's gloom mentioned in the first stanza of the poem. Dr. B. Rajan pertinently remarks, "Yeats's prayer for his daughter gains in strength against the threatening background which makes the appeal to custom and ceremony something more than mere nostalgia for an aristocratic past." There is a great gloom in the poet's mind, an "excited reverie" caused by the sad aftermath of the First World War, the fire of the Dublin Rebellion, and the emergence of a new age. Amidst the public wrongs, Yeats had also some personal difficulties. Fatherhood made him gentle, but it can't lessen his worries for the new-born child in a world of increasing anarchy. Hence, the poet is naturally gloomy, and the poem opens with the image of his child sleeping innocently through a howling storm, and the poet wishing and praying for the safety, protection and best settlement in life for her. The problem before him is how to protect his daughter from the wrath of the coming cruel tides of time which would bring a ruin upon civilization:

"Imagining in excited reverie
That the future years had come,
Dancing to a frenzied drum,
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea."

Visions of some approaching catastrophe possess him and fill his mind with gloomy forebodings. This storm within his soul finds its symbol in the storm which rages outside. The wind, "Atlantic bred", screams hysterically above "the flooded stream" reminding one of the Great Biblical Flood, and of the imminent inundation. The sense of the disturbance in nature, and of the destructive possibilities of the storm howling outside, is intensified by contrast with the cosy, peaceful picture of the infant sleeping comfortably undisturbed, either by the storm in nature or the sombre auguries of the poet-father.

Full of gloom and apprehension, the poet has walked about restlessly for an hour, and now he prays for the future well-being and happiness of his darling child. He wishes that she should have beauty which makes women vain and cruel, and which makes them unappreciative even of sincere and true love. Such excessive beauty drives them crazy and results in unhappiness for them, and for those who come in contact with them. This prayer draws its force and significance from the personal experiences of the poet. Maud Gonne had such "over-much" beauty, and the result was that she made him unhappy by rejecting his sincere and faithful love and devotion and then ruined her own life by foolishly marrying the unworthy John MacBride.

It is certain that beautiful women eat some such food which makes them crazy and ruins their happiness and peace. The poet supports his argument by citing instances from history and legend. Helen

eloped with Paris and caused the destruction of Troy. Venus also foolishly enough married Hephaestus, the lame ironsmith of the gods and then betrayed him. Hence the poet prays for his daughter:

"May she granted beauty and yet not
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught."

The poet attaches great value to courtesy and wishes that his daughter should grow up chiefly learned in courtesy. It is courtesy which enables even those who are not "entirely beautiful" to win the hearts of others. Many a fool who had wandered foolishly in pursuit of extreme beauty has been won over by courtesy and made wise and sensible.

The poet himself was won over by the courtesy of his present wife, and is now living with her a life of ease and contentment. Courtesy, therefore, is to be preferred to the perfection of physical charms:

"Hearts are not had as gift but hearts are earned
By those that are not entirely beautiful."

The poet further prays that the soul of his daughter may grow and reach 'self-fulfilment' like a flourishing tree. May cheerful and innocent thoughts cluster round her soul, as do linnets round a tree, and may she, like the song birds, spread sweetness, music and melody all round. May she herself be happy and contented and be a source of happiness for others. Her loves and her quarrels should all begin and end in gaiety. She should grow rooted in one place like a "green laurel tree".

The last stanza vividly brings out the poet's aristocratic bias. His disillusionment with the Irish masses, coupled with the kindness and sympathy he

he received from Lady Gregory, had made Yeats an enthusiastic admirer of the "big house tradition". He regarded the aristocracy as the guardian of the traditional culture and way of life and of the highest spiritual values. He, therefore, wishes for his daughter an aristocratic husband who would take her to a home where life is traditional and customary. Such a life alone is conducive to beauty and innocence, while the life of the common man, without its roots in tradition, is a life of hatred and arrogance:

"How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?"

Ceremony's a name for the rich born,

And custom for the spreading laurel tree ..."

Thus, the poet has fashioned an ideal of aristocratic life and would like his daughter to have it. The poem strikes the note of optimism. He thinks that though 'every windy quarter howl or every bellows burst', men and women can remain innocent if they destroy the seeds of hatred from their hearts and cultivate the state of grace.

The poem is adorned with a wealth of phrases and images that are suggestive and evocative much is implied and more is meant than strikes the ear. The poem is an amalgam of symbols, its richness of texture is remarkable, and its easy flow of ideas, more subtly linked than may at first appear, is a result of Yeats's increasing ability to make his concepts cohere.

The 'storm' howling symbolizes destruction and recalls the mere anarchy of the Second Coming. The flooded stream also recalls the havoc to be wrought in 'The Second Coming'. The murderous innocence of the sea recalls the images of 'blood-dimmed tide' and the violence of the Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen. However, the poem, A Prayer for my Daughter has been criticized on grounds of snobbery and triviality, for the poet has not laid down or desired for

daughter a way of life consistent with the highest religious and moral ideals.

