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## “Away, come away”: Moving Dead Women and Irish Emigration in W. B. Yeats’s Early Poetry

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# “Away, come away”: Moving Dead Women and Irish Emigration in W. B. Yeats’s Early Poetry

Hannah SIMPSON  
University of Oxford

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## Abstract

Emigration and Ireland are closely entwined in cultural consciousness, yet little scholarly work addresses Irish emigration in W. B. Yeats’s poetry. I use the lens of Irish emigration to tackle another under-discussed phenomenon in Yeats’s early poetry: the physically moving, dead, female body. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, young unmarried women were emigrating from Ireland in historically unprecedented numbers, and this high emigration rate of Irish women parallels the recurrence of moving dead or supernatural women in Yeats’s pre-1900 poetry.

Keywords: Yeats, emigration, women, death, Ireland, Gothic

## Résumé

*Bien que l’Irlande et l’émigration soient intimement liées dans l’imaginaire culturel, peu d’études se sont intéressées à l’émigration dans la poésie de W. B. Yeats. J’utilise le prisme de l’émigration pour aborder un autre phénomène peu étudié dans la première poésie de Yeats : le corps féminin mort mais mouvant. Dans la deuxième moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, un nombre inédit de jeunes femmes célibataires quittèrent l’Irlande, et ce taux d’émigration élevé de femmes irlandaises peut se lire en parallèle de la récurrence de femmes mortes ou surnaturelles en mouvement qui peuplent la poésie de Yeats avant 1900.*

*Mots clés : Yeats, émigration, femmes, mort, Irlande, gothique*

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Emigration and Ireland are closely entwined in historical and contemporary public consciousness. Fintan O’Toole declares that Irish culture “is not just marked, but actually defined, by the perpetual motion of the people who bear it. Emigration and exile, the journeys [*sic*] to and from home, are the very heartbeat of Irish culture<sup>1</sup>”. Jim MacLaughlin laments precisely this romanticising style of discourse as sanitising the suffering that frequently lay behind historical emigration; he bemoans the tendency to treat emigration “as a cultural tradition

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1. Fintan O’Toole, “The Ex-Isle of Erin: Emigration and Irish Culture”, in Jim MacLaughlin (ed.), *Location and Dislocation in Contemporary Irish Society: Emigration and Irish Identities*, Notre-Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, p. 158.

and a ‘peculiarity’ of the Irish [...] simply as an expression of an institutionalised ideology” rather than a phenomenon frequently driven by historical hardship<sup>2</sup>. Despite the critical engagement with this cultural intertwining of the Irish and emigration, however, and despite the historically unsurpassed level of Irish emigration that occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century<sup>3</sup>, little scholarly work has been produced regarding W. B. Yeats and Irish emigration. This is perhaps because emigration is rarely approached directly in Yeats’s poetry, or indeed elsewhere in his writing.

However, Irish emigration can be located in Yeats’s early poetry by reading through the lens of another under-discussed phenomenon in Yeats’s writing: the physically moving dead female body. The high emigration rate of Irish women following 1853 parallels the recurrence of moving dead or supernatural women in Yeats’s pre-1900 poetry. Fifty-three per cent of Irish emigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century were female, and an increasing number of them were young unmarried women. The consequent public anxiety in Ireland concerning the rate of female emigration was routinely expressed in terms that bear resemblance to Yeats’s coding of posthumous or supernatural female movement in his early poetry. Public reaction frequently condemned the emigration of young Irish women as an unnatural decision based on aberrant sexual desire, which disrupted the social balance and robbed the country of its maternal figures. Emigration, then, was a young woman’s betrayal of her nation, and of Ireland’s next generation of citizens that she should have borne her country; her emigration coded the death of the nation itself. Patrick Ward notes that the emigration of both genders was discussed in nineteenth-century Ireland as “a form of living death” because it was “a journey from which they and their neighbours knew they would not return<sup>4</sup>” – but female emigration also suspended Ireland itself in a “living death”, the death throes of a now-infertile nation left without progeniture. Female migration was thus coded in contemporary discourse as a disruptive display of unnatural and ultimately fatal female sexuality.

The Irish Gothic tradition comprises an important informing background to Yeats’s moving dead or supernatural women, following Eoin Flannery’s identification of Gothic literature as “a space into which the manifold fears and vulnerabilities of civility were poured<sup>5</sup>”. The moving dead or supernatural female

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2. Jim MacLaughlin, “Emigration and the Construction of Nationalist Hegemony in Ireland: The Historical Background to ‘New Wave’ Irish Emigration”, in Jim MacLaughlin (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.6.

3. Andrew Kincaid observes, “Ireland is the only country in Europe to chart a decline in population every single year from 1840 to 1960, dropping from eight million to three million over that period”. Andrew Kincaid, “What They Left Behind – The Irish Landscape After Emigration”, in Marcus Bullocks, Peter Y. Paik (eds.), *Aftermaths: Exile, Migration, and Diaspora Reconsidered*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2009, p. 33.

4. Patrick Ward, *Exile, Emigration and Irish Writing*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2002, p. 112-113.

5. Eoin Flannery, “A Land Poisoned: Eugene McCabe and Irish Postcolonial Gothic”, *Literature & History*, Vol. 22 No. 2, 2013, p. 92.

figure is a recognisable Gothic trope, epitomised by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1871) and Lucy Westenra and the “Weird Sisters” of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Significantly, these incarnations of the moving dead or supernatural woman are linked to Ireland, and indeed to British-colonised Ireland. Le Fanu grew up in difficult financial circumstances in Limerick during the disorders of the Tithe War and the Irish Famine, and Jarlath Killeen among others has identified the influence of “his family’s isolation during the Tithe War” and of his opposition to Daniel O’Connell’s politics on his literary work<sup>6</sup>. Stoker’s Irish upbringing has led to *Dracula* and his female followers being interpreted variously as the Land Leaguers of the Irish Land War or the “gombeen men” of the Great Famine<sup>7</sup>, Charles Stewart Parnell and his followers<sup>8</sup>, “blood-gorged” Fenians<sup>9</sup> or the declining Protestant ascendancy<sup>10</sup>.

Within the Gothic context, however, Yeats’s moving dead or supernatural women bear a significant resemblance not only to other female figures within other Irish Gothic texts, but also to the British *fin de siècle* “monstrous metamorphic female figures<sup>11</sup>”, the women who seduce men to their doom. Glennis Byron observes that the *fin de siècle* English Gothic frequently evokes “the notion of the sexually aggressive female who usurps male strength as something alien and monstrous” and, still more frighteningly, the “pure woman” who inevitably “metamorphoses into the evil<sup>12</sup>”. The English monstrous female has thus commonly been interpreted in the context of anxieties over the increasing independence of the “New Woman” of turn-of-the-century Britain. Yeats’s Irish version can also be read in the context of Irish female emigration, the emigrating women who either lure men across the ocean with them to a living death, or who leave them stranded in a “living dead” Ireland.

Yeats’s early poetry, then, repeatedly returns to the sexually alluring yet menacing movements of the living-dead female figure who is associated with unsettling movement away from the domestic space, and the luring of the male figure away from its safety. While Yeats’s poems rarely approach a direct discussion of emigration, the movement of his enticing yet threatening living-dead or super-

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6. Jarlath Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction: History, Origin, Theories*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, p. 204.

7. Bruce Stewart, “Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*: Possessed by the Spirit of the Nation?”, *Irish University Review*, Vol. 29, 1999, p. 238-255.

8. Michael Valdez Moses, “*Dracula*, Parnell and the Troubled Dreams of Nationhood”, *Journal X: A Journal in Culture and Criticism*, Vol. 2, 1997, p. 66-112.

9. Joseph Valente, *Dracula’s Crypt: Bram Stoker, Irishness, and the Question of Blood*, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2002, p. 58.

10. Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 89-90; Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, Verso, 1995, p. 215-216.

11. Glennis Byron, “Gothic in the 1890s”, *A New Companion to the Gothic*, David Punter (ed.), Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2012, p. 193.

12. *Ibid.*

natural women evoke this constellation of anxieties – national, sexual, generational – that arose around the issue of female emigration from Ireland. Focusing on “The Ballad of Moll Magee”, “To an Isle in the Water”, “The Heart of the Woman”, “He Wishes his Beloved were Dead” and “The Hosting of the Sidhe”, I read the recurrent trope of the moving living-dead or supernatural woman in Yeats’s early poetry through the lens of social and political response to the wave of Irish women emigrating in the late nineteenth century.

### ■ Emigration and the Irish Woman in Contemporary Discourse

Emigration and supernatural death were recurrently connected in Irish discourse. Emigration was frequently coded as being “a form of living death<sup>13</sup>”, a journey from which one would not return. Yeats’s “The Dedication to a Book of Stories” in *The Rose* connects the unhappy “Exiles wandering over lands and seas” to a wish for full death rather than continued existence in the living-death of the emigrant state, “that some morrow / May set a stone upon ancestral Sorrow<sup>14</sup>”. In a letter of 1890 to Katharine Tynan, Yeats speaks of his own self-imposed exile in London in similar life-in-death terms: “When one gets tired & so into bad spirits it seems an especial misfortune to live here – it is like having so many years blotted out of your life<sup>15</sup>.” Later, Yeats records a peasant man’s conviction that his son who emigrated to America is in fact caught in the living-death, supernatural state of the Other: “It’s about a week ago, one night someone came into my room, and I knew it was my son that I lost, he that went away to America – Mike. He didn’t die, he was whipped away. I knew he wasn’t dead<sup>16</sup>.” The staging of the “American Wake” on the eve of an emigrant’s departure, a farewell gathering that mimicked the traditional Catholic funeral rites, offers another example of the connection in the contemporary public consciousness between emigration and death, and again specifically an unnatural death or a living-death.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, women were emigrating from Ireland in historically unprecedented numbers. While before the Great Famine (1845-1850) women had emigrated as part of family units, in the aftermath of the famine “young single women came to dominate the flow<sup>17</sup>”. What caused

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13. *Ibid.*

14. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume I, The Poems*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Richard Finneran, New York, Scribner, 1997, p. 45.

15. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume One, 1865-1895*, ed. John Kelly, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 231.

16. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume X, Later Articles and Reviews*, ed. Colton Johnson, New York, Scribner, 2000, p. 45.

17. Bronwen Walter, “Irish Women in the Diaspora: Exclusion and Inclusions”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 27, 2004, p. 370.

this wave of female emigration? Besides the general economic hardship that drove Irish citizens of all demographics to seek new lives outside Ireland, certain social conditions pertaining to female sexuality and their domestic role combined to make Ireland “a place that young unmarried women wanted to leave”, as Marjorie Howes notes<sup>18</sup>.

Mid-to-late nineteenth-century Irish women were expected to either be sexually chaste or contain their sexuality within the domestic sphere. As the Catholic Church provided aid and advice to families during and following the Great Famine, their influence over the Irish population increased, and with it their consequent capacity for imposing a conservative brand of sexual morality. Nationalist discourse also took up this cause, marking out “sexual purity as one of the essential markers of Irishness<sup>19</sup>”. Mary Douglas argues that the fetishisation of purity is characteristic of threatened minorities, whose concern with political boundaries is displaced into an obsession with bodily orifices<sup>20</sup>. British rule and occupation of the country, and the stirrings of rebellion and the coming civil war, rendered Irish concern with nationality particularly acute during the second half of the nineteenth century, and young Irish women felt the effect. The figure of the sexually pure woman was increasingly being used as a symbol of the Irish nation, to inspire patriotic pride: Cathleen ní Houlihan, the Sean-Bhean Bhocht, Badb and Mórrigan. As Howes observes, in late nineteenth-century Ireland, “Moral and sexual issues were more explicitly and more intimately bound up with actual or potential crises of national integrity and identity than elsewhere<sup>21</sup>”.

Aside from unmarried chastity, the other extreme available to the Irish woman was to fill the role of the fertile and self-sacrificing guardian of the domestic sphere. This ideal of woman was engaged in conceiving, bearing and raising the next generation of Irish citizens, ensuring “a natural and stable economy of wholeness, continuity and reproduction<sup>22</sup>”. While outside the state-sanctified domestic sphere of marriage, sexual purity was demanded of Irish women, inside marriage “sexual reproduction was a sacred duty to the Irish nation<sup>23</sup>”. However, Howes notes that the lack of marriage opportunity “rendered this ideal unavailable to roughly one quarter of the female population<sup>24</sup>”. Land and a dowry were

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18. Marjorie Howes, *Yeats’s Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 137.

19. Elizabeth Cullingford, “Yeats and Gender” in Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 179.

20. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 124.

21. Marjorie Howes, *Yeats’s Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

23. Seán Kennedy, “Abortion and Infanticide in Beckett and Yeats”, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, Vol. 22 No. 1, 2010, p. 80.

24. Marjorie Howes, *Yeats’s Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

considered necessary to marry and raise a family, but Irish land ownership – and the consequent income to supply a dowry – was limited in nineteenth-century Ireland. Several factors had combined to restrict available land for the new generation in a nation whose domestic income was derived primarily from agriculture. Most landlords were Anglo-Irish descendants of those who had been given Irish property following earlier English land confiscation; most Irish citizens came to exist as landless labourers or tenant farmers who rented land from often absentee landlords. For those who did still own land, the Penal Laws did much to weaken their hold on it: the Popery Act of 1703, for example, re-established the Gavelkind system of partible inheritance, enforcing equal subdivision of land between sons of Catholic families unless the eldest son converted to Protestantism, thus decreasing the size and influence of Catholic landed estates in Ireland. Consequently, there was limited land available to Irish citizens, and many lived on the edge of destitution on small patches on subdivided land.

The situation worsened as the nineteenth century progressed, as the Great Famine and subsequent periods of agricultural recession resulted in mass evictions of tenant farmers unable to afford their rent payments. Hilary Larkin notes that many landlords took advantage of periods of famine to present unwanted tenants “with the stark ‘choice’ of emigration or eviction<sup>25</sup>”. 70,000 families were evicted between 1846 and 1853, during the Great Famine and its aftermath<sup>26</sup>. Severe agricultural depression in the 1870s extended the hardship, and between 1880 and 1887 almost 30,000 families were evicted in total<sup>27</sup>. As a result of this land privation, marriage became a less and less feasible option for young women, and emigration frequently took its place. Larkin notes how “marriage patterns were affected – there were fewer than before” as land availability remained restricted: “Fathers held onto the land as long as possible and there was plenty of encouragement to extra children to leave the country and find a role for themselves elsewhere<sup>28</sup>.” The Land War and agitation by groups such as the Irish Tenant League and the Irish National Land League following the Great Famine resulted in constitutional changes that began the process of reclaiming Irish land, but parliamentary response was so slow and often so ineffective that significant increases in Irish land ownership were only being realised by the very end of the century<sup>29</sup>.

25. Hilary Larkin, *A History of Ireland, 1800-1922: Theatres of Disorder?*, London, Anthem Press, 2014, p. 101.

26. Fergus Campbell, *The Irish Establishment 1879-1914*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 41-42.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

28. Hilary Larkin, *A History of Ireland, 1800-1922: Theatres of Disorder?*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

29. William Gladstone's Land Act of 1870, which enforced the Custom of Ulster and instigated the John Bright clauses, was too vaguely constituted to enable any significant change in Irish land ownership, and in fact in many cases allowed further rent increases and consequently raised levels of non-compensated tenant eviction. The Second Irish Land Act of 1881 provided more tangible improvements by establishing dual ownership by landlord and tenant but, although it occasioned despite a short-term average national rent reduction, the Act still only produced 731 new Irish proprietors across the entire nation and, in fact, emigration numbers rose



Given the Church’s and State’s restrictions on roles appropriate or available to their female citizens, this lack of marital prospect rendered Irish women’s opportunities particularly narrow. With few opportunities for marriage, family or independent work, and Church and State discouragement of their sexual, personal and political expression, many young Irish women sought opportunity beyond Ireland’s shores.

However, women who emigrated from Ireland were frequently condemned as a threat to the Irish nation by those who feared “race suicide” because of the dropping birth rate and high emigration numbers. Consequently, they were “pathologised for leaving, for being attracted or lured away from the country where they rightfully belonged”, and to which they owed the next generation<sup>30</sup>. In nationalist discourse, the young female emigrant is marked as the menacing Other, threatening national death through her dangerous movement and desires. The discourse of race suicide, the “barren boughs of Éire” that Yeats identifies in “The Dedication to a Book of Stories<sup>31</sup>”, contrasted to the life-giving nature of nineteenth-century Ireland’s cult of maternity, recurrently connected the emigrant woman to ideas of national death, as well as the less specifically gendered discourse of emigration and living-death already observed.

This recognition of the contemporary anxiety surrounding female emigration illuminates the recurrent appearance of the moving, dead female body in Yeats’s pre-1900 poetry. Kincaid notes that following Irish emigration, “a trace remained in Ireland. These absences had their own presences, and they had to be dealt with<sup>32</sup>”; the dead body is one such way to “deal with” or at least express such an absence. Yeats’s moving dead women thus invoke the Gothic’s “confusion of the literal and the figuration: metaphors comes to life as literal fact”: here, the posthumously moving female body evokes and explores this popular evocation of emigrant-death and national death. The female Irish emigrant body undergoes what Sara Ahmed identifies as a “process of estrangement”, the process “whereby some others are designated as *stranger than others*” in the context of emigration specifically<sup>33</sup>. To code the female emigrant figure as a moving female corpse is to “other”

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from 7.7% in 1878 to 17.6% in 1880, and then hit a record high of 21.6% in 1883. The Purchase of Land Act of 1885 put in motion some further but limited government-subsidised land purchase, and the Irish Land Act of 1887 provided further government funding for Irish tenant land purchase but was once again so complex a piece of legal work that few Irish tenant farmers obtained any practical benefit, until several of the more unattractive clauses were modified throughout the 1890s. It was only with the Wyndham Land Purchase Act of 1903 that tenant purchase was made widely possible and absentee landlordism was significantly curtailed, and the Penal Laws were only fully repealed with the Government of Ireland Act in 1920.

30. Breda Gray, “Unmasking Irishness: Irish Women, the Irish Nation and the Irish Diaspora” in Jim MacLaughlin, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

31. W.B. Yeats, *Poetry*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

32. Andrew Kincaid, “What They Left Behind – The Irish Landscape After Emigration”, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

33. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, London/New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 94.

the agential Irish woman in a particularly extreme manner; Yeats puts his women through a very literal version of Ahmed's emigrant "process of transition". In social discourse and Yeats's poetry, the "real" Irish woman is replaced by an ideal or her horrific Other; death, movement and sexuality combine in the menacing-but-alluring, living-dead woman of Yeats's early poetry.

### ■ Yeats's Domestic Woman and "The Ballad of Moll Magee"

Yeats's pre-1900 poetry features several examples of the domestic Irish "woman of the hearth": the passive, reproductive, rooted figure that nationalist and Catholic discourse coded as crucial to the continuance and rectitude of the Irish nation. Yeats at several points in both his early poetry and his life seems to reflect this public construction of the conservative Irish woman "rooted in one dear perpetual place" as the later "A Prayer for my Daughter" puts it<sup>34</sup>. He discouraged Maud Gonne's involvement in politics and attempted to win her to domestic married life instead – a married life that he coded as one of peaceful stillness and passivity on the woman's part, rather than active struggle: "Oh Maud, why don't you marry me and give up this tragic struggle and live a peaceful life? I could make such a beautiful life for you<sup>35</sup>." He also exercised a corporeal restraint on Maud's movements; Jonathan Allison records him "physically restraining her, against her will, from joining a riotous Dublin mob during Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897<sup>36</sup>". Yeats seems at times to propagate the nationalist and Catholic ideal of the woman whose movements and sexuality are contained within the domestic space.

In "The Ballad of Moll Magee" in *Crossways* (1889), Yeats offers a cautionary warning against the disruption of the domestic female role, similar to that envisioned by contemporary nationalist and religious discourse. Here, the female disappearance from the domestic space is figured as physical movement, and this "emigration" is coded as exilic rather than chosen. Moll's husband has forced her from the domestic space because of her manslaughter of her child:

I lay upon my baby. [...]  
He drove me out and shut the door,  
And gave his curse to me; I went away in silence,  
No neighbour could I see<sup>37</sup>.

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34. W.B. Yeats, *Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 191.

35. Maud Gonne MacBride, *A Servant of the Queen: Reminiscences*, London, Gollancz, 1938, p. 326.

36. Jonathan Allison, "Yeats and Politics", in Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats, op. cit.*, p. 189.

37. W.B. Yeats, *Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 21.

The authoritarian patriarchal figure condemns the Irish woman who fails to provide the desired “future generations” of Ireland, “depriving the nation of its rightful national stock<sup>38</sup>”. Moll’s exile from the domestic space is not figured as a literal emigration in the poem, but it is coded as ceaseless, mournful movement, associated with death – “always, as I’m movin’ round [...] I’m think’ of my baby/And keenin’ to myself<sup>39</sup>” – and the loss of the domestic home space. Moll’s husband will not come to “fetch [her] home again,” and when she tries to return to her former home in Kinsale, she finds that “[t]he windows and the doors were shut<sup>40</sup>”. The only release lies in a natural death, when God “opens wide His door<sup>41</sup>”. “The Ballad of Moll Magee” combines a woman’s ceaseless movement, death (both literal and that of the future nation) and the maternal in a conservative caution against the Irish woman who leaves the domestic space that contemporary nationalist and religious discourse has designated her.

### ■ Domestic Space in “To an Isle in the Water”

However, Yeats elsewhere exhibits a suspicion of the contemporary domestic ideal – or rather, of the female figure who threatens its disruption from within through her intertwined deathly movement and sexual allure. The sustaining and containing family unit is “dependent on and threatened by female sexual choice<sup>42</sup>” – and on and by her sexual desire and allure more generally. The socially-sanctified family unit is vulnerable to the potentially disruptive sexuality of the ostensibly rooted and domesticated woman within it. “To An Isle in the Water” in *Crossways* (1889), for example, runs:

Shy one, shy one,  
Shy one of my heart,  
She moves in the firelight,  
Pensively apart.  
She carries in the dishes,  
[...]  
And lights the curtained room,  
Shy in the doorway  
And shy in the gloom;  
[...]

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38. Breda Gray, “Unmasking Irishness: Irish Women, the Irish Nation and the Irish Diaspora”, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

39. W.B. Yeats, *Poetry*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. Marjorie Howes, *Yeats’s Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

To an isle in the water  
With her I would fly<sup>43</sup>.

Superficially, Yeats seems here to evoke the idealised domestic Irish woman of contemporary discourse. The female figure is “shy”, quiet and timid, not accorded any voice of her own within the poem. She remains unindividualised, a “one” among a consequently suggested “many” female Irish figures. We see her engaged solely in domestic duties: tending to the hearth, laying the dishes and lighting the candles. Even while engaged in these domestic chores of her own hearth, she is coded as “helpful” and “of [the speaker’s] heart”; the husband-figure’s agency and ownership over the household, including the woman within, is suggested. The domestic space in which the woman moves is contained and orderly. Objects are laid carefully “in a row”, curtains shut off the discrete unit from the outside space, and the various domestic sources of light provided by the woman safeguard it from the “gloom” outside that threatens through the “doorway”: the menacing reminder of the unbounded outside space against which the discrete domestic arena is constructed.

However, the outside space intrudes upon the apparently safely contained domestic unit, because of the female figure’s association with movement into the dark. The woman moves in the half-light of the domestic room, the “gloom” of the “doorway”; she is on the threshold between the dark exterior and the lighted domestic space. Her presence lures the speaker towards this exterior dark; he declares his willingness to fly “[t]o an isle in the water” with his bride. Ashok Bhargava notes that Yeats associated water with sexual desire<sup>44</sup>; here, this impulse towards an aquatically-coded sexuality is linked to movement away from and destruction of the idealised domestic space. The “isle in the water” is still a contained unit, but one that is less clearly contained than the interior domestic room. The water that presumably laps the edge of the isle blurs any clear dividing line between discrete spatial unit and elsewhere, and the isle itself, while a recognisable single unit, is not protected from the dark exterior in which it exists. The darkness and the water with which the woman is associated threatens to extinguish the domestic lights of the hearth and candles; she retains the potential to destroy the domestic space that she herself creates.

Read thus, the speaker’s obsessive repetition of “shy” comes to seem like a self-reassuring construction on the male speaker’s part, belying a sublimated anxiety as to the female figure’s potentially “not shy”, more agential nature. This neurotic verbal repetition and the incantatory quality of the poem’s form suggests a performative conjuring-up in the poetic space of the same idealised domestic

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43. W.B. Yeats, *Poetry*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

44. Ashok Bhargava, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1980, p. 105.

female figure that contemporary nationalist and religious discourse was attempting to compel into being. By contrast, the recurrent /aɪ/ phoneme of the poem – “shy”, “my”, “fire”, “light”, “isle”, “I”, “fly” – phonetically reasserts the female “I” itself that lurks beneath the speaker’s voice, the individual woman with individual desires who threatens to contradict the male construction of her. Although not featuring an explicitly dead woman, “To an Isle in the Water” presents female movement towards an exterior darkness that is both sexually alluring and threatens the domestic space, and so lays important groundwork for the more explicit coalescing of female emigration and deathly female movement.

### ■ Leaving the Domestic Space in “The Heart of the Woman”

“The Heart of the Woman” in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) offers a comparable exit from the domestic space to the threatening outside world in “To an Isle in the Water”. The gender pattern of “To an Isle in the Water” is reversed in “The Heart of the Woman”, but the poem charts a similarly sexually motivated retreat from a warm and well-lit domestic space into a threatening gloomy exterior, and makes more explicit the association between the emigrant woman and a form of living death.

O what to me the little room  
That was brimmed up with prayer and rest,  
He bade me out into the gloom,  
And my breast lies upon his breast.  
[...]  
I am no more with life and death,  
My heart upon his warm heart lies,  
My breath is mixed into his breath<sup>45</sup>.

Like “To an Isle in the Water”, the allure to emigrant movement away from the traditional domestic arena is strongly present and coded in terms of sexual desire; however, it also leads to a threatening dark exterior space. The speaker offers her “hiding hair” as an unconvincing replacement for the walls of her abandoned home; the domestic woman who guards the boundaries of the domestic space is replaced by a more sexualised, alluring but fallible figure. Female sexual agency here destabilises the idealised domestic order very explicitly, and does so seemingly to her own risk; the Irish woman’s sexual desire sees her move from the domestic space into the dangerous, unbounded “gloom” of the outside world.

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45. *Ibid.*

Furthermore, the female speaker of “The Heart of the Woman” is aligned with a form of life-in-death when she exits the domestic space. “I am no more with life and death”, she observes; this is not even the natural death of the domestic space, but an unnatural state beyond either, a death-in-life or a living death, in which movement and poetic expression are still possible. The female speaker’s description of her sexually agentive body renders it similarly dead-yet-moving: “My heart upon his warm heart lies” suggests that the speaker’s own heart is not warm, that it lies cold and without beating upon his live heart; “my breast lies upon his breast” suggests simultaneously the woman’s sexually suggestive position on top of her lover and her lying slumped in death. Amid all this, she still has “breath” to mingle with her lover’s breath; the poem’s focus on the female figures shifts between continually alternating lenses of death and life, resulting in an unsettling liminal state somewhere between the two. Yeats’s poem again draws together female sexuality, female movement, rejection of the domestic and death, in a manner that replicates the contemporary discourse concerning female emigration.

### ▣ Restricting Female Movement in “He wishes his Beloved were Dead”

This pathologising of the emigrating Irish woman as a living-dead figure is rendered still more literal elsewhere in *The Wind Among the Reeds*. In “He wishes His Beloved were Dead”, the sexually alluring, physically moving young woman is explicitly described as dead within the poet’s construction of her. Alongside the now-expected model of the sexually alluring woman moving in a dark exterior outside the domestic space, this explicit coding of death at first renders the woman’s physical movement deeply disturbing in the poem. The dead female body here moves unexpectedly, even incomprehensibly. The poem opens with her first “lying cold and dead” and, presumably, interred in the ground<sup>46</sup>. Suddenly, she is no longer buried; she “come[s] hither” to the poet speaker<sup>47</sup>, in very literally posthumous physical movement<sup>48</sup>. Then, despite the reader being assured that the woman will not “rise” and leave the speaker, we next see her entwined by her hair “[a]bout the stars and moon and sun” in a conventional trope of death<sup>49</sup>. Finally, and again without any explanatory intermediate travel, she lies once again buried “[u]nder the dock-leaves in the ground<sup>50</sup>”. For the dead woman to move is itself

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46. W.B. Yeats, *Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 69.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

48. The word “posthumous” derives from the Latin “post” or “after,” and “humus” or “ground”; this female figure very literally moves posthumously, *after* having been buried in the *ground*.

49. W.B. Yeats, *Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 70.

50. *Ibid.*

unexpected; for her to follow this unpredictable and blatantly contradictory path renders her movements far more discomfiting. The reader who tries to track the reanimated body across the poem is thwarted at every turn.

However, alongside this disturbing rendering of the physical movement of an explicitly dead female body, there is simultaneously a sanitising and a controlling of the dead woman's movements that renders her less threatening than she might otherwise be. Firstly, she is not the avenging spirit of much other Gothic literature. The Beloved in Yeats's poem arises after death in order to forgive, rather than to haunt those whom she does not forgive. Still more significantly, however, she does not rise from death – and indeed, does not move at all – of her own accord. The male speaker who first wishes her dead next wishes her moving, and her movement remains grounded explicitly in his poetic imagination. He then wishes her still; the lover does not refuse to rise, does not decide to stay with her lover, through her own choice, but rather, she remains in her place because she knows her hair to be binding her there. When we next see the Beloved entwined in the heavens, we do not see her rise there triumphantly of her own volition, and the Beloved's hair being "bound and wound/About the stars and moon and sun" couches even her temporary ascension to the heavens in terms of physical restraint<sup>51</sup>.

We might recall here Yeats physically restraining Maud Gonne from political action in 1897; the male speaker poetically scripts and restricts his Beloved's movement in order to construct a docile woman who moves only with his blessing, who exists only to act as his lover, whose only identity is "his Beloved". This scripting of the female figure, and particularly of the female figure's movements, has social implications beyond a merely personal misogyny. Breda Gray records that nineteenth-century Irish emigration "was linked to a lack of territorial sovereignty and was held to be symbolic of the Irish people's lack of political control over their own nation<sup>52</sup>". Given the frequency with which the Irish nation was coded as female in the period, for the poem's speaker to retain such precise imaginative control over the movements of his sexually alluring lover – to the point of rendering her both dead and moving – offers a powerful poetic performance of Irish man regaining control of the sexual, political and migratory agency of the Irish woman.

As in "To an Isle in the Water" and "The Heart of a Woman", "He wishes his Beloved were Dead" employs the trope of deathly movement to code the sexually alluring, non-domestic Irish woman, but here it is qualified and controlled by the male voice. She moves in death, beyond the interior domestic space, and radically

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51. *Ibid.*

52. Breda Gray, "Unmasking Irishness: Irish Women, the Irish Nation and the Irish Diaspora", *op. cit.*, p. 210.

not only between nations but between heaven and earth. However, the emigratory potential of the Irish woman is conservatively limited by the male speaker's agency. The phenomenon of female migration is recognised, acknowledged, but rescripted into less threatening terms which reinscribes male dominance within a heterosexual relationship.

### ■ Menacing Allure in “The Hosting of the Sidhe”

For Yeats to link emigration with death in his poetry, then, is to follow an already established contemporary discourse of emigration as a form of living death. However, at moments in his pre-1900 poetry, Yeats redeploys this model to more sympathetic effect. In “He Wishes his Beloved were Dead”, Yeats curtails this agency of aligned sexuality and deathly movement; in “The Hosting of the Sidhe”, by contrast, he exaggerates and vaunts it.

In “The Hosting of the Sidhe”, the moving women are a supernatural menace, whose sexual allure threatens the male figure with both a decreased agency – “We come between him and the deed of his hand” – and a call “Away, come away” from Ireland into a supernatural, living-death existence<sup>53</sup>. Here, the ceaselessly moving, supernatural Sidhe are notably coded as feminine. Although Caoilte is briefly mentioned, the female Niamh's voice dominates the poem, and describes the Sidhe as having a distinctly feminine sexual allure – “our hair is unbound/ Our breasts are heaving” – and their victims as male: “We come between *him* and the deed of *his* hand,/We come between *him* and the hope of *his* heart<sup>54</sup>”. In Irish mythology, Niamh “led Oisín to the Country of the Young”, Yeats's notes record<sup>55</sup>, and thus her appearance here brings in a mythological context of the sexually enticing woman luring the man away from his nation into a supernatural existence beyond it.

Moreover, the Sidhe here are not merely supernatural, but notably deathly, pale of cheek and set in precise opposition to the “mortal dream” of man. The living death existence of the Sidhe and their positioning “twixt night and day” codes them in a liminal space, one of the “third spaces” that Piaras Mac Éinrí and Tina O'Toole identify as the nature of the emigrant who finds herself “balanced between country of origin and country of reception, unfixed, ascriptive<sup>56</sup>”. In “The Hosting of the Sidhe”, the fear of the agentially moving and sexual Irish woman who would destabilise the nation coalesces into the othering of both

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53. W.B. Yeats, *Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 51.

54. *Ibid.*, italics mine.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 634.

56. Piaras Mac Éinrí and Tina O'Toole, “New Approaches to Irish Migration”, *Éire-Ireland*, Vol. 47 No. 1 & 2, 2012, p. 7.



migrant and woman as supernatural force, what Ronit Lentin calls “the insidious positioning of sexually active” – and, I would add, emigrating – “Irish women as a danger to themselves, to men, and to the nation<sup>57</sup>”. Where “He Wishes his Beloved Were Dead” contains the living-death female movement within male control, “The Hosting of the Sidhe” releases it in an image of uncontrollable force.

However, there is crucially space to read “The Hosting of the Sidhe” as celebrating this radically untrammelled female movement, as well as reflecting contemporary anxieties concerning the emigratory and sexual potential of the Irish woman. The predominance of full rhymes and firm stresses within the poem quickens the beat of the poem into an exhilarating rush, and the first person plural structure of Niamh’s words – which, significantly, quantitatively dominate the poem – invite the reader into the host in a manner that somewhat negates the threatening “otherness” of the Sidhe. The image of the “rushing band” that infuses the poem with a sense of adrenaline-fuelled freedom accords a new inflection to the idea of Ireland’s “race suicide”. Here, the “racing” exemplars of the Irish “race” evoke self and national suicide both through their own dead-in-life existence and their childless, sexualised nature; this is race suicide inflected with an exhilarating sense of untrammelled liberty, that is depicted as literally trampling “over the grave” rather than succumbing passively to it.

The moving supernatural living-dead women of poems like “The Hosting of the Sidhe” thus resist the idea of the dead woman as passive or easily manipulated by the poet-figure. Instead, they present the image of a radically free and agential deathly female being, figuring the power of the Irish woman capable of surviving (as living dead) and thriving in emigration. Emigration’s living-dead women are here associated not with pathos and passivity but with a triumphant adrenaline. “The Hosting of the Sidhe” thus constructs a poetic version of the space that Ahmed describes as integral to the emigrant experience, “the process of estrangement [that] is the condition for the emergence of a contested community, a community which ‘makes a place’ in the act of reaching out to the ‘out-of-placeness’ of other migrant bodies<sup>58</sup>”. The Sidhe make up a supernatural community, unfamiliar to the speaker but familiar to each other. As Cullingford observes, “Yeats’s celebration of female sexual transgression [...] opens an imaginative space for women’s desire and pleasure in a culture that occludes them<sup>59</sup>”, a new freedom

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57. Ronit Lentin, “(M)other Ireland: Migrant Women Subverting the Racial State?”, in Julieann Veronia Ulin, Heather Edwards and Sean O’Brien (eds.), *Race and Immigration in the New Ireland*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, p. 61.

58. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

59. Elizabeth Cullingford, “The Historical Poetics of Excrement: Yeats’s Crazy Jane and the Irish Bishops”, in Karen Hohn and Helen Wussow (eds.), *A Dialogue of Voices*, 1994, p. 31.

against the traditional poetic passivity and the contemporary social condemnation. “The Hosting of the Sidhe” can be read as a significantly different presentation of female movement in living-death: one that infuses the women’s movement with an exultant energy, a vaunting of the sexual and geographical freedom of these beyond-mortal female figures. Following the connections between living death and emigration and the sexually agential, non-maternal female figure and the emigrating Irish woman, “The Hosting of the Sidhe” offers a remarkably more sympathetic evocation of female emigration than much other contemporary discourse.

## ■ Conclusion

Yeats’s pre-1900 poetry thus offers a range of varied depictions of the Irish femalehood in the context of emigration. We have examined here a misogynistic warning to the woman who seeks to leave Ireland as to the living death that awaits them, a similar warning to men who may succumb to the menacing sexual allure of such women, the poetic reinscription of this living-death movement under the male speaker’s imaginative control, and a celebration of female sexual and geographical freedom. I do not claim to reveal here any definitive statement concerning Yeats’s own sexual politics; I do not believe that any single definitive interpretation would do justice to the shifting grounds of Yeats’s own probing of contemporary questions of gender and its literary, political and cultural representation. I read these pre-1900 poems as part of Yeats’s vacillating exploration of political and sexual gender dynamics, an expression of the tension between what Cullingford identifies as his inheritance of “the male-dominated literary tradition of poetic love at a moment of crisis and change in gender relations<sup>60</sup>” in Ireland that included the Irish Gothic mode, and what Howes observes as Yeats’s own frequently progressive political stances, his “long history of attacking the sexual and political timidity of the Catholic middle class, and [...] Ireland’s sexual conservatism<sup>61</sup>”. The poet who wrote “He Wishes his Beloved were Dead” was also the poet who wrote “The Hosting of the Sidhe”, and both were also the politician who defended divorce and women’s right to work outside the home, and opposed censorship on material relating to contraception.

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60. Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 6.

61. Marjorie Howes, *Yeats’s Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.