

### **Academic Writing Sample:**

Maud Gonne, Pádraic Pearse and the Process of Becoming a Subject During the Irish Uprising (For Philip Wegner's "Introduction to Irish Literature" course, University of Florida)

#### ***Maud Gonne, Pádraic Pearse and the Process of Becoming a Subject During the Irish Uprising***

The existence of Subjects was imperative in the success of the Irish Uprising of the twentieth century. As it is Subjects who devote themselves wholly to a cause larger than themselves, it is also Subjects who are the "movers and shakers," if you will, in a historical context. In particular, Subjects such as Maud Gonne MacBride, Padraic Pearse and William Butler Yeats have made their mark both in history and literature, providing us with texts that chronicle the creation of a subject and the difficulties experienced therein. What marks the difference between an individual and a Subject? What separates Maud Gonne from other women of her time, or Pádraic Pearse and William Yeats from other men of their time? How does one become a Subject and what is the importance of Subjects to the Uprising?

"Till Ireland is free her people cannot be free or prosperous. Only in spasmodic moments do the whole people seem to realize this; a minority of them always do and to this minority Ireland as a nation owes her existence." (Gonne 117-118)

It is this minority that acts on their convictions, on their *fidelities*, that are the Subjects we will examine. They are the human beings whose dedication to a cause, or whose *fidelity*,

empowers them to forego comforts and desires for personal gain in favor of working towards their chosen cause. They are marked by a commitment to something larger than themselves and choose to spare little time or energy for the pursuit of anything else. An example of this can be drawn from Maud Gonne's The Autobiography of Maud Gonne: A Servant to the Queen, when William Yeats had written a play and wished Gonne to act in it. Despite having a love for acting she determined that she was ultimately grateful that a stage career had never developed.

“I loved acting, but just because I loved the stage so much I had made the stern resolve never to act. I was afraid it would absorb me too much to the detriment of my work.”

(Gonne 176)

Beyond that, Gonne illustrates her fidelity to the cause of freeing Ireland and her commitment to being a subject when she rejects personal comforts in order to bring more money to her cause, as when she expresses her desire to move to a smaller room in the Savoy Hotel in America, where she had been given a lavish set of rooms, in order to conserve money that she would rather see used to release political prisoners across the Atlantic.

Yeats's poem, *Easter 1916*, can also be read as an examination of what makes a Subject, as the poem names and describes such influential figures of the Uprising as Thomas MacDonagh, Pádraic Pearse, John MacBride and James Connolly.

“Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem

Enchanted to a stone.” (Yeats, Easter 1916)

The reference to a stone (which occurs twice in the poem) does more than just help illustrate the intense fidelities of the Subjects being discussed; it provides a connection to Donne’s work, in which she describes herself, whom we have already defined as a Subject, as “having been ‘one of those little stones’ on the path to Freedom.” (Donne 9)

To clarify, it is also beneficial to examine the difference between an individual and a Subject; for it is action, not simply a mere claiming of values or opinions that separates Subject from individual. Drawing on the work of another prominent figure in Irish literature, Sean O’Casey, we can find examples of individuals who, despite their lofty claims to a higher cause, are clearly not Subjects due to their inaction. In particular, one can look at Tommy from O’Casey’s Shadow of a Gunman, whose “sloganeering” and claims that he wants nothing more than to fight for Ireland (“ Mr Davoren, I’d die for Ireland! ... I never got a chance— they never gave me a chance— but all the same I’d be there if I was called on...” ) are clearly diffused when a raid takes place on the tenement house and he is no where to be found. (O’Casey 22)

Having defined what constitutes and what does not constitute a Subject, we can examine now the process of becoming a Subject, using Maud Donne, in particular, as an example. Donne’s fidelity, made obvious throughout her autobiography, is a political fidelity concerned with, above all else, the freeing of Ireland from the English. But how did she, an Anglo-Irish woman from the upper-middle-class, become an extremely influential revolutionary—become a Subject—while others of her status (for example, her sister) merely existed?

Throughout her autobiography, Gonne makes note of significant milestones and memories in her life that contributed to her becoming a Subject. One of the earliest memories she discusses Mademoiselle, the French governess (and “strong Republican”) who was in charge of her education. (Gonne 25) Gonne’s adulthood visit to her governess reveals the sort of values Mademoiselle kept, the sort she probably tried to teach Maud Gonne and her sister.

“Independence, *ma Cherie*, is the most precious of all things and everyone can be independent.” (Gonne 26)

Beyond her education, under a French governess whose values most likely differed from those of many Irish people, (“I heard someone say excusingly: ‘She was brought up in France.’” Gonne 30) her experiences with the upper class in Ireland, experiences her sister was not always included in as it was Maud who became the woman of the house, organizing dinners and making it a point to meet the generals and their wives since her mother had died, also shaped her opinion of Ireland and what must be done to better it. When Maud Gonne attended a dinner at the home of a “big landowner” and his wife, she was shocked at the landowner’s lack of compassion for the poor people in Ireland who were suffering. When the landowner saw his neighbor and his dying wife lying in a ditch on his way home, he did not help them, but instead told the man he would be responsible for his wife’s death, blaming their misfortune on their joining the Land League. (Gonne 42) This event is likely to have reinforced Gonne’s compassion for the poor and dying in Ireland, a compassion that would drive her for years to come.

While these events in her youth may have directed Gonne towards the beliefs and desire to improve Ireland, there was a conscious moment of choice in which she accepted the responsibility of becoming more than a mere individual— she accepted the responsibility of becoming a Subject. This moment came when she met Lucien Millevoye, a French politician, during her stay in Auvergne where she was trying to find health.

Millevoye and Gonne, after discussing the oppression of Ireland by the English and the seizure of Alsace-Lorraine by the Germans, made a pact to fight together against the British Empire.

“I accept this alliance, an alliance against the British Empire and it is a pact to the death.” (Gonne 65) It is not until after she had made this alliance with Millevoye that Gonne began to fully devote herself to working nonstop towards freeing Ireland. It was at this point in time, then, that Maud Gonne embarked on her path of becoming a Subject (I say *embarked* and not *became*, as it is only with action that one is truly a Subject—though Gonne’s life from that point forward was fraught with actions taken to further her cause, a testament to her being a true Subject).

Gonne’s commitment to being a Subject was a conscious decision, as is evident in the explanation of her refusal to marry William Yeats. When Yeats protested that he was not happy without her, she replied,

“Oh yes, you are, because you make beautiful poetry out of what you call your unhappiness and you are happy in that. Marriage would be such a dull affair. Poets should never marry. The world should thank me for not marrying you.” (Gonne 318-319)

Her assertion that poets should never marry ties in to the idea that Subjects, of which her and Yeats can both be considered (his fidelity being to art and poetry where hers is to politics), should be able and willing to put aside their own comfort and happiness. It is a Subject's duty then, as explained by a Subject herself, to commit themselves wholly to only one thing—their fidelity, whatever that may be. Gonne furthers her explanation:

“I am interested in the work I have undertaken; that is my life and I live, --while so many people only exist. Those are the people to be pitied, those who lead dull, uneventful lives; they might as well be dead in the ground.” (Gonne 319)

Becoming a Subject, then, is more than just a natural turn in one's life. It is a conscious decision to forsake the comforts of monotony, to rise above “mere existence,” and to devote oneself entirely to one's chosen fidelity. It is the events of one's life that creates likely fidelities, but the individual's conscious choice to *act* on behalf of that fidelity that allows them to become a Subject. Gonne's autobiography chronicles the process of becoming a subject and expresses the difficulties faced and comforts that must be given up in order to remain such a subject. In the case of the Irish Uprising, it was Subjects that kept the goal of freeing Ireland alive, through their devotion to art or literature, as in the cases of Pearse and Yeats, or through their political involvement, as in the case of Maud Gonne.