

## Re-evaluating Lady Gregory in Modern Irish Literature: A Feminist Ethics Study

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### ABSTRACT

Women's subordinate status in twentieth-century Irish literature has come under criticism in recent years. Irish women's subjugation becomes apparent when we compare W. B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory. Whereas Yeats has been universally acknowledged in the past few decades as the spokesman of the Irish Literary Revival and an icon of modern Irish literature, Lady Gregory was ridiculed by George Bernard Shaw as the helping maid of the Abbey Theater. In this paper, a textual analysis of Lady Gregory's plays is brought into discussion with Carol Gilligan's and Nel Noddings's feminist ethics to further explore the role women played in modern Irish literature. This paper aims at clarifying the nature of female writing as exemplified in Lady Gregory's works. Unlike traditional studies on Lady Gregory and her plays, which focus on women's subjugation in the male-dominated Irish society around the early twentieth century, the main findings of this research help shed new lights on the value of women in Gregory's plays via an ethical feminist approach. The implication of this study is that women, who are apparently disempowered in traditional male-oriented moral thinking, are much more valuable and powerful when they are evaluated from ethical feminism.

**Keywords:** Lady Gregory; Irish literature; Carol Gilligan; Nel Noddings; feminist ethics

### INTRODUCTION

While Yeats has been universally recognized in the past few decades as the spokesman of the Irish Literary Revival and an icon of modern Irish literature, Augusta Gregory was once ridiculed by George Bernard Shaw as the "charwoman of the Abbey Theatre" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1996, p. 1115). Although well known, her impact on the Celtic Revival in the early twentieth century has not been well researched. In fact, it was Lady Gregory's devotion that made possible the popularity and prosperity of the Abbey Theater, an influential theater which helped nurture many leading Irish playwrights in the twentieth century. Even though she was a prolific, qualified writer and translator, her works have not been adequately investigated. Although many anthologies and collections of critical essays on Yeats, such as Marjorie Howes's and John Kelly's *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats* (2006), have been compiled, few studies on Lady Gregory can be found. Regrettably, even books on Irish women's writing such as Patricia Coughlan's and Tina O'Toole's *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives* (2008) give only very limited space to discuss her use of keening in her play *The Gaol Gate* (Conrad, 2008, pp. 52–54). Although Lady Gregory composed many plays (for example, *Rising of the Moon*, 1904; *Spreading the News*, 1904; *Kincora*, 1905; *The Workhouse Ward*, 1908) and edited some Irish mythologies (e.g. *Gods and Fighting Men*, 1904; *Visions and Belief in the West of Ireland*, 1920), her body of work has not been thoroughly explored. Eglantina Rempert's *Lady Gregory and Irish National Theatre* (2018), in which John Ruskin's influence on Gregory and her contemporaries as well as Gregory's aesthetic and social ideals are discussed, is a rare case in recent years which more thoroughly evaluates Gregory's "far-ranging achievements as a playwright, a theatre director, and a social reformer" (p. 14).

The omission of Lady Gregory's works is by no means a singular event. Irish women's achievements in different areas of theater since the early twentieth century have "so long [been] subsumed within a skewed historical perspective" (Sihra, 2016, p. 545). This neglect of Lady Gregory's importance was observed decades ago by Sean O'Casey (1983), a prestigious modern Irish dramatist and critic who argues that "it was Lady Gregory who opened to the poet [Yeats] the warm welcome, spiritual and practical, of an Irish soul" (p. 7). Aiming to do justice to Gregory's writing, O'Casey (1983) remarks: "Lady Gregory, if not a great writer, was a first-class one, and a prolific one, too" (p. 7). Given these misrepresentations and under-research, the aim of this paper is to re-evaluate Lady Gregory and her plays. It is expected that the discussion of the relevant socio-historical aspects of her writings, textual analysis of her plays, and application of the theory of feminist ethics proposed by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings can help clarify the nature of female writing as exemplified in Lady Gregory's plays and establish her commitment and contributions to modern Irish literature.<sup>1</sup>

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ETHICAL FEMINISM IN PERSPECTIVE**

An ethical feminist perspective is adopted in this study because most male-centered approaches fail to evaluate the nexus between women and their literary productions. In her seminal book on ethical feminism, *In a Different Voice* (1982), Carol Gilligan argues that moral philosophy in the West has been dominated by male-centered approach, which features its emphasis on independence and autonomy. As a consequence, abstractions such as goodness, justice, and rights are favored, while more personal attributes such as emotions and relationship are cast into doubt. This is unfair for women because, according to Gilligan, women are prone to endorse an ethics of care which emphasizes relationship, while men are more likely to rely on an ethics of justice which stresses rights and morality. Responding to Freud's idea that men rather than women have a better developed sense of morality, Gilligan comments that, for Freud, women "show less sense of justice than men . . . are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life . . . are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 7). This notion of women's closeness to emotions as Freud argues results in the fact that women are slower than men in developing their sense of morality. Accordingly, women are not as moral or civilized as men (p. 7). Traditionally, most philosophers discuss morality from this perspective, coming to the conclusion that women are morally inferior because of their inherent flaw in moral reasoning.

In opposition to this belittlement of women, ethical feminists such as Gilligan and Noddings, who are opposed to traditional moral standards by which women's development as moral beings are questioned, are committed to drawing people's attention to emotions and caring, salient characteristics that better mirror women's ways of being and knowing. As Gilligan's research findings demonstrate, the moral imperative recurring throughout interviews with women is their injunction to care, and their responsibility to see and alleviate the troubles in this world. In contrast, the moral imperative emphasized by men appears to be an injunction to respect the rights of others and to prevent interference in the rights to life and self-fulfillment (Gilligan, 1982, p. 10). Similarly, Noddings (1984) argues that men and women approach moral issues differently: men focus on "terms such as justification, fairness, and justice," but women on "human caring and the memory of caring, and being cared for" (p. 3).

As Gilligan suggests, from a masculine, justice-oriented perspective, the self as the moral agent stands as the center of a web of social relationships, judging the conflicting claims of the self and others against the standard of equality or equal respect. In contrast,

from a feminine, care-oriented perspective, relationships become the center defining self and others. Within the context of relationships, the self as a moral agent perceives and responds to needs. This shift in moral perspective is manifested in the change from asking the moral question “What is just?” to “How to respond?” (Gilligan, 1987, p. 23). In *Women and Evil* (1989), Noddings contends that evil is a concrete reality manifested in three ways: inflicting pain on others, inducing the pain of separation, and carelessly or deliberately causing helplessness. In other words, as people contribute to suffering, helplessness, and separation from other people, they succumb to evil. In general, Noddings argues, women are more capable of withstanding evil than men (Noddings, 1989, pp. 221–222). According to Noddings, men are more likely to be evildoers because they tend to view themselves and their connections with others through symbolism and abstraction, paying little attention to their affiliations with the people surrounding them. Consequently, men often fail to evaluate different cases relationally and appear to be unforgiving and relentless. As Noddings (1989) argues, “seeing each other and ourselves as symbols is ... part of what sustains our capacity to inflict suffering” (p. 211). In comparison, women’s ability to think relationally makes them better sympathizers and givers of assistance.

Notably, ethical feminism can help investigate the peculiar ways female writers and the woman protagonists in their works interact with the outside world. According to ethical feminisms, humans are not rationally isolated individuals but emotionally interdependent beings and consequently pay attention to both substantial particularities and abstract universals. In stark contrast to masculine thinking that values logic, rationality, independence, intellect, and domination, women tend to be associated with virtues such as community, connection, sharing, emotion, trust, and interdependence (Vetterling-Braggin, 1982, pp. 5–6). The ethics of care “understand[s] moral agents as deeply and inextricably embedded in networks of ethically significant connections and conceive of caring as exercising responsibilities and virtues that maintain and positively influence relationships” (Whyte and Cuomo 2017, p. 235). Women’s association with care, emotion, and interdependence may arise from their generally deeper involvement in child-rearing and care-giving in their everyday lives. In this paper, the feminist ethical theories proposed by Gilligan and Noddings are adopted because though sexually biased in a sense, their ethics of care can shed new light on the role women play in Lady Gregory’s dramatic works. Given the fact that women’s perspectives have long been dismissed in male-dominated societies, it is especially appropriate because these theories can help us unearth women’s long silenced voices.

### **“WE ARE BUT WOMEN”: RE-CONSIDERING LADY GREGORY VIA W. B. YEATS**

Due to centuries of experience as the colony of England, Ireland as a nation had been marginalizing women because nationalism is inherently a patriarchal philosophy. Therefore, as a place dominated by nationalism, Ireland remained a man’s world even for most of the twentieth century. Anti-colonial revolutions feature equalities of all human beings; however, ironically the equality of both sexes proves to be a mere myth. Tamer Mayer’s argument in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism* testifies to this irony: “Despite its rhetoric of equality for all who partake in the ‘national project, nation remains, like other feminized entities— emphatically, historically and globally—the property of men” (2000, pp. 1-2). In addition to political nationalism, Irish women’s marginalization is evidenced by cultural nationalism popular in the early twentieth century. The Gaelic League and the Irish Literary Theater led by Yeats and Lady Gregory are salient illustrations. Yeats’s poem “Easter 1916” showcases how male warriors are highly regarded while women are excluded from matters of pivotal importance. As Catherine Nash comments, “while the idea of woman remained the

embodiment of the national spirit and the allegorical figure for the land of Ireland, this land now became the domain of the overly masculine” (1993, p. 47). Nonetheless, feminization of the land is mainly utilized by chauvinists to elicit the Irish people’s sympathy and consequently sacrifice for their motherland and to help liberate Ireland from colonization. This image of women’s subordination and their ostracism from politics is also depicted in Yeats’s “No Second Troy,” in which women are discouraged from being involved with politics and violence. This socio-historical context helps illuminate the plight of Irish women during Lady Gregory’s lifetime.

A comparative study of the relationship between Yeats and Lady Gregory yields telling information about women’s subordination. Yeats has enjoyed international acclaim as the spokesman of the Irish Renaissance and an icon of modern Irish literature in the early twentieth century, whereas Lady Gregory has been ridiculed by George Bernard Shaw as a helping maid of the Abbey Theater (Gilbert & Gubar, 1996, p. 1115). Throughout the history of Irish literature, her importance in the Irish Renaissance has been relentlessly suppressed. Seeking to do justice to her crucial contribution to the revival of Irish culture, Sandra M. Gilbert (1996) argues that, along with Yeats, George Moore, Edward Martyn, and John Millington Synge, Lady Gregory contributed to re-establishing an indigenous culture. Her efforts to collect Irish folktales and legends were a pivotal step to reinvigorate the lost traditions of Ireland (1996, p. 1115). But for Lady Gregory’s dedication, the establishment and maintenance of the Abbey Theater would have been substantially impaired. Indeed, without her support, financial and spiritual, Yeats may not have been able to dedicate himself to poetic creations.

The relational commitment typical of women, as proposed by Gilligan and Noddings, manifested not only in the female characters in Lady Gregory’s plays but also her personal relations with acquaintances. As Yeats recalled in his *Autobiography*, she was always ready to offer help whenever it was urgently needed: “Lady Gregory, seeing that I was ill, brought me from cottage to cottage to gather folk-belief, tales of the fairies, and the like, and wrote down herself what we had gathered” (Yeats, 1999, p. 283). Her relational qualities are best described in Yeats’s following recollection.

She knew Ireland always in its personal **relationships, associations** . . . [She] never lost her sense of feudal responsibility, not of duty as the word is generally understood, but of burdens laid upon her by her station and her character . . . “She has been,” said an old man to me, “like a serving-maid among us. She is plain and simple, like the Mother of God, and that was the greatest lady that ever lived.”

(Yeats, 1999, p. 307; emphasis mine)

Notably, as Yeats indicated, Lady Gregory did not approach the world by adhering to abstract ideals such as duty. Instead, her relationships with her friends were much more casual, personal, and relational, as suggested by the ethical feminist view on women’s particular way of interacting with their surroundings and the people around them. Lady Gregory’s approachable nature and relational commitment rendered her “the Mother of God,” “the greatest lady that ever lived” on earth to many of her friends.

Yeats praised Lady Gregory on many other occasions. In “Cole Park, 1929,” for example, it is her “powerful character” that keeps everything in order (Yeats, 1996, p. 243). In a similar fashion, Yeats stressed the grandeur of her house in “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”: “But in that woman, in that household where / Honor had lived so long, all lacking found” (Yeats, 1996, p. 320). In another poem entitled “Friends,” he praised again Lady Gregory.

And one because her hand  
Had strength that could unbind  
What none can understand,  
What none can have and thrive,  
Youth's dreamy load, till she  
So changed me that I live  
Laboring in Ecstasy.

(Yeats, 1996, p. 24)

Lady Gregory influenced modern Irish literature as she not only shaped certain aspects of Yeats's literary career but also committed herself to promoting Irish identity through works such as *Spreading the News* and *The Rising of the Moon*. However, she has not been given due credit for her role as a writer, and her creative and editing work scarcely recognized. In contrast to critically acclaimed writers such as Yeats and Synge, Lady Gregory is de facto a writer of the second sex. Elizabeth Coxhead (1966), a biographer of Lady Gregory, laments that since her death, she has been all but forgotten except as Yeats' patron and friend. Coxhead even censures Yeats for showing ingratitude to Lady Gregory by neglecting her works in *Dramatis Personae* (1966, p. vi). Additionally, James Pethica, a well-known Irish critic, contends that, compared with Yeats's more serious plays, Lady Gregory's dramatic productions have been unfavorably derided as light and piddling by many academics (2004, p. 70).

In addition to providing relational care that enabled her Abbey Theater colleagues to dedicate themselves to their dramatic creations, Lady Gregory herself was a good writer worthy of the name. As Yeats maintains in his *Autobiographies* (1999), "[w]hen in later years her literary style became in my ears the best written by women, she had made the people part of her soul" (p. 307). This eulogy from a friend is echoed in Yeats's preface to Lady Gregory's re-telling of Irish myths and legends in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. The poet laureate praised the book as "the best that has come out of Ireland" in his own time, or perhaps "the best book that has ever come out of Ireland" (Gregory, 2009, p. 11). This recognition of Lady Gregory's artistic talent did not come early for her because, as Yeats acknowledges in *Autobiographies*, her genius was under-evaluated. Nonetheless, Yeats did retrospectively re-discover the merits of her writings.

Our theatre had been established before she wrote or had any ambition to write, and yet her little comedies have merriment and beauty, an unusual combination, and those two volumes where the Irish heroic tales are arranged and translated in an English so simple and so noble may do more than other books to deepen Irish imagination.

(Yeats, 1999, p. 285)

Unlike well-acclaimed writers such as Synge in the early twentieth century, Lady Gregory's gift for writing has long been overshadowed and even rendered invisible. This is partly because amid the male writing traditions of Irish literature and the male-dominated nationalist context, woman writers were always obscure, and their achievements dismissed.

### **WOMEN, NATION, AND CARE ETHICS: *RISING OF THE MOON AND THE GAOL GATE***

The subordination of women during the nationalism popular in the early twentieth century clearly appears in Lady Gregory's plays. Crucially, these plays both participate in and expose this disempowerment. Women's great interest in realizing "the ideal of national autonomy" is palpable in the early-twentieth-century works of female writers, such as Lady Gregory, Mary Colum, and Alice Milligan (Leeney, 2016, p. 270). Ann Saddlemyer (2009) argues that Lady

Gregory was so preoccupied with writing for Ireland that nationalist concerns dominated her plays: “Involvement in the idea of national theater, however, increased her nationalism still more, and where Yeats subordinated his ideals of art to no country, she avowed her determination to work principally for ‘the dignity of Ireland’” (p. 451).<sup>ii</sup> For instance, *The Rising of the Moon* prioritizes patriotism and neglects depicting women and their particular problems. The play recounts an Irish rebel leader’s escape from a British prison with the help of an Irish sergeant, alluding to the liberation of Ireland from British control. The encounter between the Irish sergeant and the revolutionary comprises the majority of the play, in which the sergeant is repeatedly urged to work for his motherland: “Sergeant, I am thinking it was with the people you were, and not with the law you were, when you were a young man” (Gregory, 2009, p. 55).<sup>iii</sup> The revolutionary resorts to imagery of Ireland as a mother to arouse the sergeant’s sympathy and identification. The revolutionary attempts to reinforce this pity by singing:

As through the hills I walked to view the hills and shamrock plain,  
I stood awhile where nature smile to view the rocks and streams,  
On a matron fair I fixed my eyes beneath a fertile vale,  
And she sang her song it was on the wrong of poor old Granuaile.

(Gregory, 2009, p. 54)

This song describes Ireland as a fecund land and breathtaking views, which are especially enchanting to the Irish. Wittingly or unwittingly, this beauty of nature reminds viewers of Ireland because shamrocks, an important emblem of Ireland, are closely associated with Irish nationalism and national identity. Singing about the maltreatment of poor, old Granuaile recalls the figure of the fair, old lady, particularly the hag popular in the Hag of Beare poetry, a sub-genre of ninth-century Irish poetry that feminized the land as a crone needing rescue by men. This description of a wretched woman is not meant to spur questioning and discussion of women’s inferiority but to re-ignite the sergeant’s sympathy and empathy for Irish nationalists. Adorable and fecund yet miserable, Granuaile becomes a metonym for Ireland. By identifying Ireland with beautiful nature and this poor woman, nationalists can effectively muster their fellow countrymen’s undivided commitment and full support.

Maternal imagery of Ireland proves to be useful for nationalists. Aware of this advantage, the escaping revolutionary in *The Rising of the Moon* endeavors to arouse the Irish sergeant’s sympathy to aid his escape. The revolutionary sings:

Her head was bare, her hands and feet with iron bands were bound,  
Her pensive strain and plaintive wail mingles with the evening gale,  
And the song she sang with mournful air, I am old Granuaile.  
Her lips so sweet that monarchs kissed.

(Gregory, 2009, p. 54)

Destitute and restricted by external obstacles, old Granuaile cannot help but mourn her misery. Coupled with her inner suffering, her outward situation exacerbates her plight as a poor woman. At the same time, however, her lips are so fragrant that monarchs never fail to kiss them. In such circumstances, she is doomed to perpetual melancholy and perceived as a sexual object. Her fate resembles that of Mother Ireland, a feminized image of impotence unfairly concocted throughout the history of Ireland (D’hoker, 2016, p. 142; Valente, 2011, pp. 11–14). Old Granuaile, the embodiment of Mother Ireland, is impoverished and grief-stricken but simultaneously fantasized as sexual and attractive. If monarchs come from abroad (England), Irish men are responsible for protecting their women (Ireland) from foreign invasion. By appealing to the Irish sergeant’s latent sense of kinship with his

compatriots, the revolutionary eventually succeeds in escaping from the quay with the aid of the sergeant's deliberate negligence. This is a success for Irish nationalists but a failure for Irish women because nationalists again deploy imagery of Ireland as an impoverished, feminized land to achieve their political goal. Women's vulnerability is reiterated, and their inferiority is consolidated.

Many critics argue that nationalism is inherently bound up with male domination. For example, Robert Young (2001) contends that "it was men who made empires, and that the empire was a field for the exercise, or imagining of all sorts of forms of masculinity" (p. 360). Accordingly, women's existence is marginalized, and they are excluded from politics. This hierarchical contrast between a grand narrative of nationalism and the discourse on women as a minority recalls the critique of ethical feminists. For ethical feminists, the moral ethical tradition of the West centers on male-oriented concerns, such as logic, utility, reason, and justice. Males have occupied positions of power and influence, enabling them to judge others' morality. This male-concocted ethics of abstract and universal principles dismisses the different nature of women's reasoning, and, therefore, is problematic, as is evidenced by Gilligan's moral theory.

Driven by an impulse to serve his country, the revolutionary in *The Rising of the Moon* is clearly a male who has embraced the values of action, justice, and violence to the extent that he is willing to risk his life to engage in political activities. Despite the absence of women in these political campaigns, he resorts to maternal imagery, as exemplified in old Granuaile, to emotionally connect the Irish to their fellow citizens and their motherland. In the colonial context, men's active pursuit of equality, justice, and independence from colonial control is highlighted, whereas qualities associated with women, such as care, empathy, and compassion, are aroused to maximize the effects of the revolutionary's political commitment. In sum, qualities related to both women and men play pivotal roles in the play and serve Irish nationalists' decolonization endeavors. Women are not as invisible and impotent as traditionally imagined.

Beyond this lack of attention to women's subservience as evidenced in *Rising of the Moon*, two garrulous and defenseless Irish women appear in Lady Gregory's *The Gaol Gate*. In this play, Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin, visit a jail, hoping to secure the release of Denis Cahel, Mary Cahel's son who has been falsely accused by neighbors. Talking to Mary Cushin, Mary Cahel opines that only women would be so evil as to divulge the false accusation: "There is nothing that is bad or is wicked but a woman will put it out of her mouth" (Gregory, 1909, p. 184). To these female characters' great amazement, they find that Denis Cahel was executed a day earlier. Overwhelmed by the unexpected, bad news, they complain, bewail, and moan. Unable to face reality, Mary Cushin expresses her grief at this injustice and worries about the future: "What way will I be in the night time, and none but the dog calling after you? Two women to be mixing a cake, and not a man in the house to break it!" (Gregory, 1909, p. 191). The women in *The Gaol Gate* cannot live alone without the support of men. Their situation illustrates the dilemmas of many Irish women, constantly conditioned within the family so that they become incapable of handling matters in the absence of men. As these women anxiously seek men's assistance, the hierarchical dichotomies of man and woman, center and margin, reason and emotion seem to be reiterated.

However, when viewing the text from an ethical feminist perspective, these women's behaviors make good sense because, according to ethical feminists, qualities associated with women, such as sympathy, caring, mercy, and emotional bonds, are equally important as traditionally masculine characteristics, such as ambition, bravery, and perseverance. In *The Gaol Gate*, Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin are concerned less with equality, respect, and justice than with care, love, and connection. Maintaining close relationships with family members, not gaining admiration and respect in society, is their priority. Therefore, these

women characters, although disempowered in the male-centered world, are real heroes from the ethical perspective of ethical feminists such as Gilligan and Noddings, who view their emphasis on emotional relatedness as admirable. Additionally, Noddings argues that inducing the pain of separation on others and thus causing other people's helplessness is evil and that women are less likely to commit errors in this regard because women, who inherently think and behave more relationally, are better sympathizers and providers of assistance (Noddings, 1989, pp. 221–222). Reading Lady Gregory's *The Gaol Gate* from this light, we find that female characters such as Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin are morally strong even when physically and financially underprivileged. Forcibly separated from Denis Cahel in this male-dominated political context and bearing the pain of losing her son, the women characters demonstrate praiseworthy emotional intensity. Thus, unlike the impoverished women depicted in traditional readings, Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin emerge as morally superior, while the unidentified men inflicting the pain of separation on women are morally degenerate.

**WOMEN, MORALITY, AND CARE ETHICS:  
SPREADING THE NEWS, THE TRAVELLING MAN, AND THE  
WORKHOUSE WARD**

Superficially, Lady Gregory's creative works seem to insufficiently discuss women's problems and misrepresent women. *Rising of the Moon* focuses on the revolutionary's efforts to arouse the Irish sergeant's nationalistic sentiment but gives not a single word by or about women. This is a man-dominated world, reflective of the exclusion of women from the nationalistic campaign. *The Gaol Gate* depicts presumably incompetent female characters who face doom when their male relative upon whom they depend dies.

Moreover, the women in Lady Gregory's three other plays, including *Spreading the News*, *The Travelling Man*, and *The Workhouse Ward*, are either marginal or noxious figures. For example, in *Spreading the News*, rumor spreads that Bartley Fallon has killed Jack Smith, Kitty Keary's husband, to elope with his wife, a silent female character hidden behind the scenes throughout the play. Male characters, such as Fallon, Smith, and the Magistrate, are caricatured due to their comic involvement in this scandal. However, the real victim of the rumor is Keary, the woman who makes the cuckold possible. Whereas Fallon has the opportunity to defend his innocence, Keary remains silenced. Many other women in the play are ignorant, loquacious, and chorus-like minor characters who spread gossip. In brief, all the women who appear on stage seem to be negatively portrayed and thus unfairly presented.

However, reading the play from the perspective of care ethics reveals that the hierarchal contrast between men and women is not so stable. Crucially, the male characters in *Spreading the News* are consumed with delivering justice and upholding the law and take great interest in enforcing the law by bringing the murderer to justice. This obsession with law, order, and justice is best exemplified by the male characters, such as the Magistrate and the Policeman, who are intent on securing a conviction for the murder. For example, the Magistrate tells the Policeman, "Put on the handcuffs. We have been saved some trouble. I knew he would confess if taken in the right way" (Gregory, 2009, p. 46). By contrast, the female characters are more concerned about their relationships with friends and family members. Take, for example, Mrs. Fallon. When informed about the murder, she only cares about her relationship with Mr. Fallon and fears that her husband will elope with Keary to America as the rumor holds. Put briefly, as Gilligan and Noddings argue, whereas men think logically and abstractly, women interact emotionally and relationally. Accordingly, instead of being rationally indifferent like their male counterparts, inflicting the pain of separation on others, thereby engendering evil, in Noddings's view, women demonstrate a capacity to

affectionately relate to others, thereby avoiding evil. Despite their underprivileged status, financial, social, and political, women are morally laudable.

Different from the gossipy women prevalent in *Spreading the News*, *The Travelling Man* is a miracle play which focuses on the apparent stupidity and irrationality of an undiscerning woman. As the play opens, the mother tells her child a story about how on a Samhain day seven years ago, she, then a maid, was driven out of her house but saved from her great desperation by a kind-hearted stranger: “a very tall man, the best I ever saw, bright and shining that you could see him through the darkness” (Gregory, 1909, p. 167). At that time, she was convinced that he was not a common man but the King of the World. His timely help dramatically changed her fate. Led by the stranger, she came to a house where her future husband lived alone after the death of his wife. Their subsequent marriage brought her shelter and safety, making her into a good wife and a good housekeeper.

This story twice reveals women’s subordination. First, the assistance from the male stranger is emblematic of male patronage. Within the Irish context, the male stranger, the King of the World, represents Jesus Christ or the holy God in Catholic worship. Omnipotent and omniscient, this divine King of the World came from the Golden Mountain to save the ill-fated woman from destruction. Second, she gains male protection and deliverance through marriage. However, the benefits of marriage are accompanied by drawbacks because she is also constrained by her duties as a responsible wife and a good housekeeper. The 1937 Constitution of Ireland legally prohibited women from working outside the home to the neglect of their primary obligations as housewives.<sup>iv</sup> The woman in *The Travelling Man* conforms to this law and limits herself. In this sense, the play’s title gains greater significance: while men travel freely, women tend to stay put, hoping to secure help and protection from their male counterparts. Traditional binary oppositions such as man/woman, outside/inside, action/silence, and protection/reliance are consolidated. Consequently, it is difficult for women to escape the constraints pervading patriarchal society.

This negative presentation of women in *The Travelling Man* persists. Over the years, the innocent woman’s gratitude and admiration for the male stranger have turned into impudence and hatred. She has forgotten the stranger who saved her in her earlier distress and, in the present, acts contemptuously toward a stranger who plays with her son. Trying to expel the stranger from her house, she yells:

Mother: (taking up the jug and throwing the branch on the floor.) Get out of this! Get out of this, I tell you! There is no shelter here for the like of you! Look at that mud on the floor! You are not fit to come into the house of any decent respectable person!

(Gregory, 1909, pp. 177-178)

In this final part of the play, the woman appears insolent and insane. Not recognizing the stranger, she expresses irrational disdain. Her indebtedness to the stranger who aided her when she desperately needed it seven years ago has been replaced by snobbishness now that she is mistress of the house. Her meanness and ingratitude epitomize a general impression of women—which she, too expresses, questioning the stranger’s character: “The worst of people it is likely they are, thieves and drunkards and shameless women” (Gregory, 1909, p. 178). At face value, the female speaker seems to be contemptuous and hostile toward women, but viewing this play from an ethical feminist perspective transforms her from an ungrateful woman into a responsible mother. As Noddings argues in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), women prefer to consult their needs, feelings, impressions, and personal ideals rather than a set of moral axioms. Women’s ethics centers on particular relations, so caring is not impartial but rather based on particular relationships with the caring agent (Noddings, 1984, pp. 3-4). Rather than sticking to abstract ideals such

as freedom, justice, and loyalty as men do, women seek to maintain personal relationships with their family and close friends. When outside forces threatened these connections, women strive to preserve them. Interpreting *The Travelling Man* from this perspective, we understand that the mother treats the stranger this way in a bid to protect her family from potential risks and harm. Out of her strong attachment to her family, she exercises extreme caution in defending them against the unidentified, encroaching forces represented by the travelling man, which may pose a threat to the survival of those close to her.

In *The Workhouse Ward*, Lady Gregory depicts another woman who is characterized by emotional and relational qualities. The play tells of Mike McInerney and Michael Miskell, two male paupers imprisoned for life who always argue over trifle matters. Their boring, ridiculous conversation about nonsense establishes a bond of brotherhood, but this special fraternity is soon challenged when Mrs. Donohoe, Mike McInerney's sister, arrives to get him out of prison after the death of her husband. Mrs. Donohoe is a seemingly evil character who offers irresistible temptations, such as freedom and wealth, to Mike McInerney. His decision to stay with his ill-fated comrade after the refusal of his request for them to leave together appears admirable. By contrast, Mrs. Donohoe seems to be "unnatural" and "disobliging," as her brother claims (Gregory, 1909, p. 159).

Nonetheless, when reading the play from an ethical feminist perspective, Mrs. Donohoe's actions can be well justified. In stark contrast to the male characters who engage in verbal fighting, she prioritizes her connections with her family members. Although this emotional attachment is not necessarily limited to her family or acquaintances, it is different because, as Noddings (1984) argues, the ethics of care focuses on specific relations based on "a set of ordered pairs generated by some rule that describe the affect—or subjective experience—of the members" (pp. 3–4). The relationship between the "one-caring" and "the cared-for" is not universal but particular (Noddings, 1984, pp. 5-6). This helps explain Mrs. Donohoe's insistence on bringing only her brother: "Well, take your luck, or leave it. All I asked was to save you from the hurt and the harm of the year" (Gregory, 1909, p. 158). Cruel as she appears when refusing to save Michael Miskell, Mrs. Donohoe is not morally inferior under Nodding's care ethics. She simply tries to do her duty as a sister and the one-caring for the benefit of her associates.

## CONCLUSION

As a woman writer, Lady Gregory has not received critical acclaim in the history of twentieth-century Irish literature due, in part, to the male-centered context of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Ireland that was notoriously unfriendly to women. Reflecting the colonization and decolonization campaigns, political issues such as nation and national identity are deeply interwoven into and seem to dominate the fabric of Lady Gregory's plays. Simultaneously, the female characters in her plays appear to be ignorant and wicked and are not well regarded.

However, this paper has demonstrated that despite this negative depiction, the women in Lady Gregory's plays are less wicked, fragile, and immoral than traditionally believed. *The Rising of the Moon* exposes women's subordination by male-dominated nationalism. In a similar vein, the woman characters in *The Gaol Gate* seem to be ungracious and inhumane, and this poor image of women apparently recurs in other plays, such as *Spreading the News*, *The Travelling Man*, and *The Workhouse Ward*. The women in these plays appear to be negative characters because readers tend to read them from a rationalistic perspective and pay little attention to the ethics of care and relationships that better represents women's interactions with others. This distinctive caring was also evident in Lady Gregory's involvement in the Celtic Revival and recorded by Yeats in his *Autobiographies*.

Taken together, the plays discussed previously help challenge the stereotype of women as impotent and immoral. This paper suggests that reading Lady Gregory and her plays from an ethical feminist perspective sheds new light on the peculiar qualities of women that have often been dismissed and, instead, gives women due credit. The findings contribute to our better understanding of some less well discussed aspects of women in Lady Gregory's plays and add critical varieties to the existing research. As this study implies, although women appear to be subjugated in traditional male-dominated moral thinking, they are more positive and admirable when evaluated from ethical feminism. This attention to women's characteristics paves the way for our further exploration of some other women's writing in the future.

#### END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> While preparing this paper, the writer was influenced by research on women's writings and drew inspiration, in particular, from Asl's and Abdullah's (2017, 57–62) Foucauldian reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction *The Namesake* (2003), decoding the way American nationalism is used along with patriarchal capitalism in the capitalistic context. In addition, Joodaki's and Elyasis's (2015, pp. 173-176) study on Shahrnush Parsipur's *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (1989) from a psycho-feminist perspective aids the reflection on how female characters are not only constructed but also deconstructed by the dominant patriarchy.

<sup>ii</sup> According to A. Norman Jeffares (2014), Lady Gregory's obscurity in Irish literature, which is partly due to Yeats' popularity, has changed in recent years because an increasing number of academics have come to value her works such as *Cuchulain of Muirtheine* (1902) and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904).

<sup>iii</sup> The quotations from *The Rising of the Moon* and *Spreading the News* are drawn from John P. Harrington, ed., *Modern Irish Drama* (New York: Norton, 2009).

<sup>iv</sup> See <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/upload/static/256.pdf>.

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