



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2010

Love, beauty, and Yeats's "Anne Gregory"

Bicknell, Jeanette

Suggested citation:

Bicknell, Jeanette (2010) Love, beauty, and Yeats's "Anne Gregory". *Philosophy and Literature*, 34 (2). pp. 348-358. ISSN 1086-329X Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1415/>

Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.

The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at repository@ocadu.ca.



PROJECT MUSE®

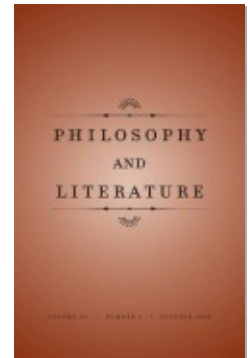
Love, Beauty, and Yeats's "Anne Gregory"

Jeanette Bicknell

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 34, Number 2, October 2010, pp. 348-358
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2010.0011>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/395663>

JEANETTE BICKNELL

LOVE, BEAUTY, AND YEATS'S "ANNE GREGORY"

NEVER shall a young man,
Thrown into despair
By those great honey-coloured
Ramparts at your ear,
Love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.

SO BEGINS "FOR ANNE Gregory," published by W. B. Yeats in 1933. It is surely one of his most charming poems.¹ The poem's lilting rhythm and affectionate tone effectively soften—even disguise—what is arguably a dark and dismaying message. Anne is destined to be loved not for herself alone, but for an accidental physical attribute—her blond hair. Why do I claim that the poem's message is dark? Why should it dismay Anne if she is loved for the beauty of her hair? Is that not better, after all, than not being loved in the first place? And what would it be to love Anne for herself "alone"? Love Anne for her sweet disposition; for her ability always to say the right thing; for her kindness; but for her yellow hair? Reflections on these questions take us to the heart of some of the most crucial philosophical problems of romantic love. Can one draw a neat line between rational and irrational (or at least, non-rational) motives for loving another, or for pursuing love? We might call this question the "Anne Gregory problem."²

In the Western tradition the origins of philosophical reflections on love, as of so many other things, can be traced to the works of Plato. The account of love offered in the *Symposium* is hierarchical, taking the form of a ladder. The love of the beauty of a particular boy is but a first step that is to be ultimately transcended by a love of beauty itself. Interpreters disagree as to whether love for that first individual is cast

aside in the ascent up the ladder, or whether it is more correctly the intensity of the lover's initial passion for a particular individual that must be transcended.³ Whatever the outcome of this question, it may strike us as bizarre that the love of a particular individual is seen as an inferior stage that must be surpassed. What is love, if not love for concrete others? There is something unseemly about considering one's beloved or oneself as steps on a ladder of philosophical fulfillment. Yet the vision of love offered in Yeats's poem, in which the love of an individual is seen as secondary to a love of one of her physical attributes, should strike us as equally unsatisfactory.

Platonists or not, we seem to have conflicting intuitions about love and rationality. On the one hand, love is considered non-rational because it is not subject to volitional control. Cupid is often depicted as blindfolded, so that his arrows fall where they may with little regard to the appropriateness of their targets. We love some people and not others, and that is all there is to it. Imagine hearing a single friend describe a meeting with a potential romantic partner; he recounts the many good qualities of the person he has met, yet concludes that he has no wish to pursue a relationship or see that person again. Even if our friend cannot offer a reasoned justification of his reluctance, we would not conclude that he is behaving irrationally. Other things being equal, we would probably accept both his assessment of the meeting and his decision not to seek further involvement. The non-rationality of love is even more evident in the case of familial love. Parents love their children simply because they are their children. They do not love the children because of specific qualities the children possess, although the character and quality of parental love may be responsive to such qualities. Harry Frankfurt has offered the most robust philosophical defense of the view that love is non-rational.

On the other hand, we also seem to think that love (and the withholding of love) can be responsive to reasons. Philosophically, this type of view is associated with David Velleman and Niko Kolodny. Reasons for love may be grounded in the qualities of the beloved or of a shared relationship. For many months in 2007, one of the most emailed articles from *The New York Times* website was a list of questions that couples were advised to ask one another before agreeing to marry. The questions very reasonably covered such practicalities as expectations about children and social roles within the marriage, and also about attitudes to financial matters and sexuality. Clearly many believe that rationality has a role (or should have a role) in romantic love. We wonder why put-upon

or abused spouses continue to stay with their partners, reflecting that they have perfectly good reasons to end such relationships. Familial love seems no less amenable to reasons. We expect familial love to take hold and endure, except in the face of overwhelming reasons why it should not. Parents who fail to bond with or seem indifferent to their children's well-being seem strange, if not contemptible. Is the parent-child connection itself not reason enough for love?

There is room for a different response to the "Anne Gregory problem." I shall argue that rationality can have a place here, but not in the way one might expect. Recent philosophical reflections on love and rationality share a crucial oversight. In focusing on the rationality of lovers they have overlooked the beloved. Whether or not loving someone admits of reasons, and whatever the nature of these reasons, the lover is only one of the possibly rational agents. We can also assess the rationality of the beloved, and the reasons he or she might have for accepting or resisting love. The rationality of love can be assessed in terms of what it is reasonable or appropriate to be loved *for*. Someone who is content to be loved for the yellowness of her hair, and who expects this love to form the foundation of a reciprocal relationship, is not rational.

I

Yeats's poem ends on a playful note, at once reinforcing and undercutting Anne's anxieties about the source of her lovability. The poet gives himself the last word, while doubly removing himself from the responsibility for those words:

I heard an old religious man
 But yesternight declare
 That he had found a text to prove
 That only God, my dear,
 Could love you for yourself alone
 And not your yellow hair.

The upshot of the final stanza is that it is humanly impossible to love Anne for herself and not for her blonde hair. To do so would require a superhuman effort. Perhaps the poet—in invoking the old religious man and the text—means us to take the reply as humorous. Perhaps he means to make Anne smile and set her at ease. One philosopher—Amelie Oksenberg Rorty claims that the poet's reply to Anne, although

sad, is sage and truthful (p. 399). This assessment is of a piece with her skeptical attitude to the possibility of offering general philosophical reasons for loving another. Although reasons may be given, they can only be particular and relational, not abstract or general (and hence not philosophical).

According to Rorty love is individuated by the character of the subject who loves, the object that is loved, and the relation between them, and it shares these features with a number of other psychological attitudes. One's love for a spouse is not the same as the love one feels towards one's parents or children, yet "love" may be the correct term for the feeling in each case. Love, together with a number of other psychological attitudes, share a feature which Rorty calls their "historicity." What she means is that these attitudes are not static; they arise from and then are shaped by dynamic interactions between the subject and object. The love one person has for another is the product of a distinctive, and in some cases on-going, dynamic interaction. The beliefs and behaviour of the beloved arouse beliefs and behaviour in the lover. Dynamic, interactive and historical psychological attitudes have a number of features in common. They take as their proper objects persons, rather than characteristics of persons. They are "permeable"—both the subject's character and actions may be changed by details of the character of the beloved. Finally, these attitudes have a specific narrative history.

The historicity of love allows it to be sensitive to changes in the characters and situations of the individuals involved, but it also arouses worries about love's constancy. A love that is dynamic and responsive to changes in the object is also a love that can turn to indifference or worse, depending on changes in the object. Rorty interprets the desire of Anne in Yeats's poem to be loved "for herself alone" as an expression of anxiety about love's constancy or endurance. She sees such concern about love to be a recent historical phenomenon that has arisen in a specific cultural context, and claims that there are two reasons why contemporary lovers are so concerned with love's constancy. First, we feel ourselves to be vulnerable in the world. Second, we are aware of being constituted by the perceptions of others. If others—especially those closest to us—fail to perceive us aright and fail to be sensitive to changes we might undergo—this may have adverse consequences for our self-image and well-being.

Rorty concedes that love and the other psychological attitudes which share the quality of historicity may be sometimes voluntary and intentional; however she resists classifying them as voluntary or responsible

actions. "Interactive attitudes," she writes, "are not necessarily caused by intentions or under voluntary control" (p. 400). Moreover, the historicity of these attitudes does not threaten their possible rationality. Indeed, because of the connections among rationality, human thriving, and the possible corrigibility of our psychological attitudes, it is worth thinking about the possible role for rationality in love. But there is a problem here: The lovers must perceive one another accurately, and their "attunement" to one another must be appropriate. Yet what conduces to the continuity of their love might not serve either of the lovers as individuals. Furthermore, whatever contributes to the development and thriving of one of the lovers might not contribute to the harmony between the two of them. All of these depend on factors that are specific or tied to the historicity of each particular relationship. So there is a limit to what we can say *in general philosophical terms* about love and rationality. As Rorty herself puts it, "It is only the details of their particular situation that can determine what would be rational, what would be appropriate, what would constitute (whose?) thriving" (p. 411).

Is Rorty's skepticism here justified? While it seems correct that love has a historicity in something like the way she describes it, does it really follow that little can be said in general terms about love, rationality, and thriving? Rorty seems to be led to her skeptical view by the decision, at the outset, not to classify love together with voluntary and responsible actions. In doing so, she risks collapsing a distinction between desire, which may be completely one-sided and unrequited, and the love which forms the foundation of a loving relationship. (And it seems clear that Rorty's concern is with this kind of love, rather than with desire alone, since her examples in the article are of love within continuing relationships.) While desires may be involuntary and may overcome us without our consent, romantic love is at least in part elective. This is not to say that we can choose whom we love, anymore that we can choose to believe in God. But (as Pascal realized long ago) religious feelings can be encouraged or depressed by one's actions; feelings of love and desire are similarly subject to behavioral modification. Love need not be pursued. Romantic relationships can be initiated or ended at either individual's whim. Most people do not pursue every person whom they desire—practicality, time and existing commitments being only some of the likely constraints.

II

D. W. Hamlyn, another philosopher to address the “Anne Gregory problem,” defends an equally cautious, though less skeptical position. Hamlyn considers the limits of the intelligibility of the terms “love” and “hate” where beliefs about their objects are missing, and frames the question thus: “If one does love X, what beliefs must one have about X, and how must one see or regard X if it is really to be love?” He answers that love (and hate) can be considered rational and justified when their objects have certain appropriate qualities. Yet if such qualities are lacking, it does not necessarily follow that the love or hate is irrational, even if we might want to say that it is non-rational. Loving someone is compatible with having no respect for him, finding him distasteful, or recognizing in him significant character flaws. Hamlyn concludes that there is no particular belief that the lover must have about the object of love. However while such beliefs are not a necessary requirement for love, it would be “odd” if love and hate always lacked appropriate beliefs. Human love and hate could not universally be like that. So love must, *in general*, make some place for rationality, even if we cannot say exactly what that place is.

What Hamlyn says about the rationality of love seems correct, but misplaced. Whether or not a lover has adequate and appropriate beliefs about the beloved is only part of the story. Hamlyn’s “epistemology” of love is one-sided and thus inadequate. We see this clearly when we turn to the beloved; in this case to Anne.

III

We know that Anne finds the poet’s claim that she will not be loved for herself “alone” to be troubling because of her reply to him, which comprises the second stanza:

But I can get a hair-dye
And set such colour there,
Brown, or black, or carrot,
That young men in despair
May love me for myself alone
And not my yellow hair.

The philosophers who have discussed or alluded to Yeats's poem are mostly concerned with the first and third stanzas and pay little heed to the second. This is unfortunate. If the second stanza is ignored or (as Hamlyn does) paraphrased hastily then Anne is rendered as mute and anonymous as the beautiful boys who are the initial objects of love on Plato's ladder in the *Symposium*. As many have argued, the notion of reciprocity and relatedness are crucial to romantic love, and indeed to many human interactions. Romantic love for another person, as distinguished from unexpressed yearning or longing or from love for a person's memory, is intrinsically dialogic. Yeats acknowledges this in giving Anne a voice.

There are several reasons why Anne might find the poet's words dismaying. First, there is the matter of exclusivity as opposed to fungibility.⁴ Anne might reasonably expect that if her young man loves her truly he will be willing to forsake others. She probably also wants to feel that she is special in the regard of the young man; she does not want to feel that she could be the substitute for another woman, or that another woman could be readily substituted for her. But if what the young man loves in Anne is her blond hair, will he also love this property when it is manifested in any other woman? That is, is Anne loved merely as an exemplar of a blond woman—is she loved simply *qua* blond woman rather than *qua* Anne—and might her young man thus love any and every blond woman he encounters? Might he even be rationally constrained to do so?⁵

Yet the poet's words are more careful (and more crafty) than I have suggested thus far. It is Anne who is loved; not her hair. Thus the distinctions among loving universals, loving particular properties, and loving properties as manifested in specific individuals, need not concern us very much. The opening stanza presented the reader with a paradox. Anne is loved, but she is loved for a feature that she and others might regard as accidental, incidental, and trivial. Nonetheless she is truly loved, or so the poet claims. Is Anne truly loved if she is loved simply *for* her beautiful hair, and not for *herself*? Typically we demand of romantic love, if it is true love, that it be for the whole person, the whole self. The proper object of love is seen to be persons, not their physical manifestations, and certainly not their hair. This issue of the proper object of love is closely connected with the ideal of love's durability or longevity. We want love to endure, and physical beauty (and hair color) are transitory. In the words of another poet, "But beauty vanishes, beauty passes; / However rare—rare it be."⁶ Most human beings, men and women, outlive the

period of their greatest physical attractiveness. Persons or selves are the proper objects of love, partly because these are thought to endure, setting aside brain-transplant operations, episodes of the fugue, and other traumatic breaks. To be loved for beauty alone is to be doomed to be unloved when that beauty passes. That is another reason why the poet's words to Anne are so dark and so troubling.

Yet so far we have not reached the crux of the matter both as to why Anne is dismayed and why it is rational that she be dismayed. There is another reason, aside from their relative durability, why selves are the proper object of love, and not just of romantic love. This has to do with personal identity. In a tradition that begins with David Hume and Adam Smith in the eighteenth century, continues with George Herbert Mead, and influences the work of contemporary feminists and others, the self is seen as at least partly constituted by others, and by our relations with others. We can say this without also making metaphysically dubious claims to the effect that the lover and the beloved are united to form a "super entity," a worry expressed cogently by Deborah Brown. For better or worse, our selves are constituted by the many relations we enter into on a daily basis, loving and otherwise. Part of the "work" of any loving relationship—be it between romantic partners, friends, or parents and children—is the reinforcement of one another's personal identities. This is true both of the particular roles that each of us plays every day and of our more general sense of persisting as a person in the world. This mutual identity-constitution takes place among family members, intimates, casual acquaintances and strangers hundreds of times a day. Many of these interactions will be quickly forgotten, yet others will have profound and lingering effects.⁷

If young men love Anne for her blond hair, there is a possibility that they relate to her not as a full person, but merely as an exemplar of a blond woman. If this is so then we can imagine deleterious consequences for Anne's identity—her image of herself as reflected back to her by others. Anne may realize that she has beautiful hair. She may even be proud of her hair. But it does not follow that her hair is the cornerstone of her identity, or that she should want others to relate to her as though it was. Anne, clearly, *does* want to be loved for her self alone and not for her hair. She regards her hair color as inessential to who she is; it is something easily changed. Her words express the anxiety of a beautiful woman who is perhaps wary of her own beauty.⁸ She is willing to alter what others regard as her most beautiful feature in order that they not love her on account of this feature, but for what she regards as her

essential self. Anne's assertion of control over her hair color is also an expression of desire to control how others see her. In controlling the image that others have of her, she seeks to have them reinforce those aspects of her personal identity that are more salient to her than the color of her hair. We already know, from the poem's final stanza, that any attempts Anne might make in this direction would be futile. While she might have control over her hair, she has at best limited control over others' desire.

It would be unproblematic for us and for Anne if she was *desired* for her blond hair; difficulties arise because the poet tells her she is *loved* for it. Can the love of a person's physical attributes be so strong as to eclipse love of the self "alone"? The poet is clear that Anne is loved; but she is loved for her beautiful hair. Are we to accept that beauty can be so alluring as to arouse love, in addition to desire? Alexander Nehemas has argued that to love someone is to find him or her beautiful. While this may be true surely the contrary need not hold. To find someone beautiful is not necessarily to love him or her. Perhaps the besotted young man will be disappointed when he gets to know Anne. Perhaps he will not like her very much in the end. So why is the poet so confident that Anne is truly loved? The answer is obvious, but easily overlooked. He knows Anne, even if we do not. He knows all about her lovable qualities. That is why he can be so confident that others will love her too.

Must we believe the poet? Perhaps he has simply collapsed the difference between love and desire. Perhaps he tells Anne that she is loved, concealing (out of propriety?) his actual belief that the young men lust for her because of her hair. Indeed the phrase "young men in despair" suggests thwarted desire. Love and desire are often contrasted with one another. Desire may be unruly and wildly particular; we hold it accountable to few rules. It may be completely one-sided and unrequited. A person need not even ever know that he or she is an object of desire. There is nothing wrong or mistaken in the desires of a person who is especially attracted by those with blond hair, or any specific color hair. The person who is attracted only to blondes does not do some kind of injustice to brunettes and redheads. We accept the particularity of desire. Rightly or wrongly, we seem to take a different attitude to love, setting aside the accepted and occasionally irrational love of parents for their children. I believe that we should resist this suggestion that Anne is desired rather than loved and accept at face value the words of the poet that she is loved. If Anne is merely desired on account of

her beautiful hair then there is no problem to be addressed, and the poem can no longer be appreciated for its exquisite balance between a dark content and the sunny expression that alleviates it.

I have stressed the ways in which lovers constitute and reinforce one another's identity, and the corresponding importance of allowing oneself to be loved for qualities that one regards as properly pertaining to one's self "alone." This is not just a matter of what Rorty discusses as the importance of correct perception attunement between lovers, and what Hamlyn calls correct beliefs about the object of love. The rationality of love is not just a matter of deciding what is or is not truly loveable or of "drawing a line" between rationality and irrationality. It is also about allowing oneself to be loved for certain qualities, and thus allowing oneself to be constituted by others in certain ways. But which qualities and in which ways? Is there anything general philosophical to be said here, or must we be satisfied with Rorty's particularism?

Although it is tricky, we can respect the historicity of each loving relationship and still say something of general import. The key here is agency. An important part of the kind of love that forms the basis of committed relationships is the desire for reciprocity. We want those we love to love us in return. This is ordinarily true of both familial love and romantic love. Reciprocity requires agency. In allowing ourselves to be constituted by others, we must resist those who would constitute us in ways that are not conducive to the formation and continuation of reciprocal relationships. Loving Anne for her beauty might be something like loving her as an art object. Such an attitude would hardly be conducive to reciprocity because it denies the loved one agency. We can love artworks and other beautiful objects, but they do not love us back.

Desire may be non-volitional; we may not be able to choose whom we are attracted or who is attracted to us. But the love that is intrinsic to human flourishing is typically held to more stringent standards of rationality. It may not be irrational to love Anne for her yellow hair. One may not have a choice in the matter. But it would be irrational for Anne to allow her lovers to relate to her in such a way that her identity is constituted as being lovable for the color of her hair.

I am grateful to Alice MacLachlan and Ian Jarvie for comments and suggestions.

1. I will refer to the main speaker of the poem as “the poet” to distinguish him from Yeats, the author of the poem, and I will refer to the woman addressed in the poem as “Anne,” to distinguish her from the historical Anne Gregory.
2. I have benefited from reading and thinking about the following philosophical discussions of love: Deborah Brown, “The Right Method of Boy-Loving,” in *Love, Analyzed*, ed. Roger E. Lamb (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 49–63; Ronald de Sousa, “The Rationality of Emotions,” in *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 127–52; Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); D. W. Hamlyn, “The Phenomena of Love and Hate,” *Philosophy* 53 (1978): 5–20; Niko Kolodny, “Love as Valuing a Relationship,” *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 135–89; Rebecca Kukla, “Holding the Body of Another,” *Symposium* 11 (2007): 397–408; Roger E. Lamb, “Love and Rationality,” in *Love, Analyzed*, pp. 23–47; Alexander Nehemas, “‘Only in the Contemplation of Beauty is Human Life Worth Living’ Plato, *Symposium* 211d,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 15 (2007): 1–18; Martha Nussbaum, “Love and the Individual: Romantic Rightness and Platonic Aspiration,” in *Love, Analyzed*, pp. 1–22; Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, “The Historicity of Psychological Attitudes: Love is Not Love Which Alters Not When it Alteration Finds,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 10 (1986): 399–412; Laurence Thomas, “Reasons for Loving,” in *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (Laurence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), pp. 467–76; and J. David Velleman, “Love as a Moral Emotion,” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 338–74.
3. Compare Nehemas on this point with Gregory Vlastos, “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato,” *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 3–34.
4. Rorty finds the issue of exclusivity to be Anne’s main worry. See de Sousa for a discussion of love and fungibility.
5. For extended discussion of the general issues, see Brown, Nussbaum, and Lamb.
6. Walter de la Mare, “An Epitaph.”
7. For example, Laurence Thomas has written powerfully about how those in socially marginalized groups may be downwardly constructed by others. See “Moral Deference,” *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992–93): 233–50.
8. A similar anxiety is expressed in Yeats’s “A Prayer for my Daughter”: “May she be granted beauty and yet not / Beauty to make a stranger’s eye distraught / Or hers before a looking-glass.”