

## ALIENATION, LABOUR AND AGE: A MARXIST STUDY OF W.B. YEATS' *THE SONG OF THE OLD MOTHER*

**Amna Zaka**

MS English, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Pakistan

Email: [amnazaka63@gmail.com](mailto:amnazaka63@gmail.com)

**Ali Furqan Syed**

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Pakistan

Email: [alifurqan.syed95@gmail.com](mailto:alifurqan.syed95@gmail.com)

**Azeema Iqbal**

MS English, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Pakistan

Email: [azeemaiqbal81@gmail.com](mailto:azeemaiqbal81@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*The study employs a Marxist analysis to highlight the themes of alienation, labor, and age in W.B. Yeats' poem, The Song of the Old Mother, as it portrays a working-class lady. While Yeats is not often regarded as a Marxist author, this study shows that his portrayal of the old mother critiques capitalist ideologies, primarily by emphasizing the exploitation of labor and the marginalization of older women in society. This study analyzes the poem via a detailed reading and the application of ideas from Karl Marx, Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, and Silvia Federici, revealing its connection to the economic and social transformations in early 20th-century Ireland. The adept use of imagery, diction, and structure by the elderly mother illustrates her estrangement from her former occupation and community, as well as her comprehension of her position in the world, exemplifying the neglect of aged workers in the contemporary economy. This chapter contributes to Yeats' scholarship by analyzing his early poems through a materialist lens and proposes a novel examination of his works on class, labor, and ideology.*

**Keywords:** alienation, labour, age, exploitation, materialism, Marxism, change.

### INTRODUCTION

W.B. Yeats is a poet from Ireland whose work graced the 20th century; he usually used his poetry to depict the tensions of his society (Kiely, 2020). While his poem *The Song of the Old Mother* might not be complicated, it says a lot about growing older, working, and different generations. By using an old woman's perspective, the poem shows the differences between their difficulties and those who just live aimlessly. Such a discrepancy invites a Marxist explanation, mostly concerning labor and feelings of alienation (Eagleton, 2011).

The purpose of Marxist literary criticism is to see how novels and poems reflect, confirm, or object to the economic and material life of their era. The subject area is particularly concerned with conflict between classes, various systems for producing commodities, and the isolation faced by individuals in capitalist societies (Marx, 1844; Williams, 2005). Marxist theory enables readers to observe in Yeats' poem the uneven distribution of labor, which shapes an individual's roles, social status, and interpersonal relationships. Looking at it this way, the mother's words criticize the idea in society that youth and beauty should be chosen over age and productive effort (Jameson, 1981; Federici, 2012).

Feelings of alienation are the main theme of this poem. Because her daily chores begin at dawn and go on until evening, the speaker represents the working class, who are both cut off from their benefits and society in general (Lukács, 1971). What she does is usually the same, rarely noticed, and sadly, barely appreciated. Meanwhile, these experiences shield the lazy young people who dream all day in bed. Given this discord, we can see the poem addresses the difference in value

paid to a worker, who is not expected to work or produce capital, as time goes on (Beaumont, 2020).

Even if he was not openly a Marxist, Yeats spent a lot of his writings focusing on the clash between ancient and modern ways of life in Ireland (McDiarmid, 2015). The changing labor era prioritizes youth over the older generation, thereby erasing the dignity of their work (Williams, 2005). Changes in society also weaken the identity and importance of the old mother, a subject Yeats examines closely (Eagleton, 2011).

In this article, we will consider *The Song of the Old Mother* using Marxist ideas, concentrate on the themes of alienation, and examine labor's impact on society. When you look at how the poem is organized, worded, and what themes are included, you'll be able to identify the way Yeats speaks about social classes and labor arrangements of his era. Additionally, the article will explain how and why the poem fits within Yeats' wider oeuvre and the environment of early 20th-century Ireland by providing fresh thoughts on the poet's thoughts on class, productivity, and human worth (Jameson, 1981; Griffith, 2022).

### Statement of the Problem

While W.B. Yeats' use of symbols and myths is often praised in literary studies, few have studied the economic influences underlying his writings from a Marxist perspective. While many read *The Song of the Old Mother* as a complaint about growing old, they often miss the text's criticism of class, work, and differences between generations. The poet seemingly shows the sense of isolation felt by working-class women whose efforts are ignored by society, which is now guided by capitalist and young people's attitudes. The poem's economic and ideological features often receive little attention, yet a Marxist perspective can shed light on them. Consequently, we need to investigate whether Yeats is directly or indirectly addressing ideas related to alienation and work in the era of changing jobs.

### Research Objectives

- To explore how the poem reflects the change from old ways of working to new capitalist beliefs regarding aging and conflict between generations
- To examine the portrayal of the old mother, meaning the excluded working class, and how her work caused her to feel and experience alienation

### Research Questions

1. What aspects of Yeats' descriptions of contrasting generations express his criticism of the social-economic changes in early 20th-century?
2. In what ways does the invisibility of the Old Mother was fit with Marxist ideas about reification and alienation?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1899, W.B. Yeats published *The Song of the Old Mother*, which looks closely at the ideas of labor, aging, and what separates the old from the young. You could look at the poem through Marxism to find out how capitalism leads to the exploitation and alienation of older women in work. By reading 2019–2024 academic works on Marxist literary criticism, Yeats's poetry, and the themes of alienation and labor, the review offers a base for analyzing the poem in its community context.

This approach closely examines literature to see how it mirrors the influence of social and economic settings. It investigates how literary works reflect, maintain, or challenge the beliefs about class struggle and how people work during their historical period. Terry Eagleton (2019) highlights that Marxists seek to explain stories and other texts by looking at their styles, forms,

and messages as shaped by the culture and world they came from. This way of reading helps interpret Yeats's poem because it allows for the study of early 20th-century Ireland's material reality. In her work (2019), Foley proves that using historical materialism, political economy, and ideological critique can help us understand literature in a Marxist analysis. Her research demonstrates why we should consider social and economic factors when looking at how literature is produced and welcomed and how to explore the themes of employment and detachment in Yeats's poems.

Karl Marx posits that alienation occurs when individuals become disconnected from their creations, their methods of labor, their collaborators, and their inherent abilities. Many literary critics analyze characters' lives using this concept to understand the nature of capitalist societies. To Yeats, the mother's unrelenting hard work and the failure to appreciate her are clear signs of alienation in her story.

Marcello Musto (2021) points out that many people have missed the detailed way Marx examined the phenomenon of alienation. Based on theory, Musto observes that the structure of capitalism causes separation between individuals. Looking at it this way, the poet suggests that the old mother's situation in the poem reveals how systems benefit at the expense of many people.

Jeffares (1984) points out in the study of 'Mother Courage' that Brecht uses his experience to demonstrate how capitalism can be dehumanizing. Just as above, the old mother in Yeats's poem is described as valuable for her labor, which results in her being ignored and away from society. Many of his poems deal with the clash between traditional ways and the new times, as well as the transformation of social and political life in Ireland while he was living. The story suggests that people worry about how traditional hard work is often overlooked as young people become more idle. It is commonly argued by researchers that Yeats's modern style often centers around the isolation of modern life. Yeats writes in 'Easter 1916' about how giving up everything can numb even the best people (ResearchGate, 2023). This topic affects the old mother because her ongoing labor brings her emotional detachment from others in society.

In addition, Yeats's writings on Irishness and nationalism regularly connect to his descriptions of workers and class. In this poem, he laments Romantic Ireland and attacks the materialist thinking spreading in his times (WordPress, n.d.). It matches the older woman's attitude toward the younger, reflecting a larger criticism of current trends and the weakening of well-established work beliefs. Capitalist ideology highlights the generational gap by emphasizing the productivity of young individuals over the wisdom of the elderly. As a result, capitalist ideology overlooks older people's careers and undervalues their individuality. Experts in Marxist criticism note that capitalist efforts to commodify creativity can separate individuals from their cultural traditions in Easterine Kire's poetry (ResearchGate, 2024). It is especially relevant for Yeats's poem because the focus on youthful holidays means the old mother's work and her place in their culture are ignored.

This idea that social relationships come to be considered those between things explains the invisibility of the old mother. Source Capitalism can make people feel less important, as this process shows in Marxist literary analysis. A Marxist examination of *The Song of the Old Mother* shows how labor, feelings of separation, and age are deeply connected within capitalism. The poem points out the harm done to old women in the workforce by unfair workplace conditions. By reviewing Marxist and broader Yeats criticism, this analysis points out that these themes remain relevant for understanding Ireland's changing economy during the early 1900s.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research analyzes W.B. Yeats's poem, *The Song of the Old Mother*, using an interpretive method inspired by Marxist theory. By studying the poem's words, pictures, mood, and form, we look for how they reflect larger issues in society and ideology. Using concepts from Marxism, such as alienation, classes, and labor, the study will look at the way Yeats presents the position of the old mother as society evolves. We will examine the poem about the wider historical and cultural conditions of early 20th-century Ireland, where rural life weakened, factories grew, and beliefs about relationships among different ages were altered. The study will use scholarly analyses of Yeats's poems, studies of Ireland's classes and labor forces, and important texts from Marx and subsequent Marxist scholars to strengthen its arguments. The study tries to figure out if similar themes related to materialism can be found elsewhere in Yeats so that he can include the poem in his ongoing thematic development. As a result, this research aims to draw out the underlying social and economic criticism present in the poem and complement the small number of Marxist studies about Yeats.

### Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Marxist literary analysis and an interpretative qualitative method to study W.B. Yeats's *The Song of the Old Mother*. Using Marxist principles such as alienation and class struggle, the framework looks at how Yeats's way of writing reveals the problems and contradictions that the Old Mother experienced. Against the background of 19th-century Ireland and its changing society, rural decline, the rise of capitalism, and changing generations, the poem is explored for both its reflection on and criticism of those times. When we study Marx and Yeats's general poems, we try to see how the poem addresses exploitation, aging working life, and forgetfulness in society, giving an overlooked perspective to Yeats's Marxist interpretation.

### ANALYSIS

Based on the method summarized earlier, this study uses the concepts of alienation, labor value, and class to analyze W.B. Yeats's poem *The Song of the Old Mother*. Analyzing the poem using a close reading approach, the poem's content, imagery, organization, and vocabulary are considered alongside changes in Irish economic and social life during the early 20th century. Unlike some who interpret her as a poetic symbol, Yeats depicts the Old Mother as an emblem of those made invisible by changing modern times. Moreover, the analysis studies the relationship of age, gender, and class in the poem while regarding each line as a place where different and opposing views are discussed.

At the start, the poem reads:

*"I rise in the dawn, and I kneel and blow  
Until the seed of the fire flicker and glow."*

The story begins by showing the reader just how difficult it is for the Old Mother to gather food. The constant effort required to keep a flame burning every day, in a sense, demonstrates what Marx (1867/1990) called the alienation that occurs in people's jobs. The novel's Old Mother is not at peace or calm in the morning but tending to her work like a machine. While her work is essential for her family's life, it gives her no sense of ownership, creation, or joy, just as other proletariats feel cut off from their productive work.

The lines,

*"And then I must scrub and bake and sweep  
Till stars are beginning to blink and peep,"*



This indicates that her work outside of her job is a continuous activity without an endpoint. Though this work goes unpaid, it makes it possible for a household to exist—something critics have pointed out for years (Federici, 2020). Such invisible labor contributes to the construction of capitalism, according to Marxist theory, since the majority of economic discourse views ordinary "women's work" as unimportant. Even with a few verses, the poem shows the path of a Mother's Day, which mirrors the difficult circumstances faced by many older working-class women.

The following lines highlight a clear distinction between generations:

*"And the young lie long and dream in their bed  
Of the matching of ribbons for bosom and head."*

Here, he presents the easy and pleasure-seeking concerns of the young man beside the Old Mother's unceasing labor. Young people, focused on trendy clothes and accessories, forget about the real world of work. Marxists interpret the song as a symbol of the division of classes. Privileged youth and employees in the new economy do not need to work for a living, which places them in a space untouched by the Old Mother. The criticisms here focus on capitalist modernity, showing that it severs the link between artistic and consumer desires and the work necessary to make them possible, which increases alienation and inequality.

Yet more evidence of alienation appears in the saying:

*"They sigh if the wind but lifts a tree."*

This work mocks young people's sensitivity and lack of mindfulness about their real lives. How small and unimportant their concerns appear points to their absence from the world of manual work. Marx's (1990) fourfold system of alienation aligns this tendency with the Old Mother's estrangement from those who should be closest to her. In the same house, she does not get emotional support but only indifference, which makes her still more isolated and supports capitalist society's lack of worth for aged helpers.

The line, *"While I must work because I am old"*, shows that age can be treated as a commodity. Marxism dictates that the value of something in a capitalist system hinges on its production capacity. Her advanced age makes it so that she must keep working instead of enjoying peace or respect. Housework narrows women's role in society, and this financial requirement robs them of real power in their lives. Marxist and feminist readings agree that being forced to take a job is an unfortunate outcome for many, with the elderly and poor seen most often in this situation.

The last line, *"And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold,"* symbolizes how much energy Alia was losing. The diminishing fire lets us know that both her day and life are now coming to an end. Marxist theory interprets this image as a symbol of a profound sense of isolation from oneself. Although her fire provides warmth and support to others, it simultaneously drains her own life—a clear illustration of how capitalism exploits individuals by reducing them to mere workers. Even though she keeps those around her filled with love, she does not find any comfort herself. The absence of a personal name for the speaker further bolsters the author's criticism. The poem refers to her just as 'the Old Mother.' Treating people in this manner exemplifies the reification effect Marx describes. She exists mainly to help the goals or projects of those in charge. She disappears from poetry and society, merely existing as a shadow of the labor force. Arguments against modern capitalism, which emphasize the loss of the laborer's identity and power, align well with this lack of visibility (Lukács, 1971).

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of *The Song of the Old Mother* confirms that it charges capitalism with valuing younger workers and their output while downplaying the value that elders, especially elderly women, play

in society. When we use Marxist interpretations of Yeats's verse, we find that alienation appears in social as well as economic ways. The language, pictures, and differences between generations in the poem expose how capitalism works, which makes it a helpful text for interpreting through a materialist lens. Applying this analytical method to Yeats's poems helps us see his work differently and consider the poem a reflection on the socio-economic turmoil Ireland faced in the early twentieth century. The study demonstrates why Marxist criticism should be included in Yeats' research, especially concerning labor, class, and invisible groups.

## REFERENCES

- Beaumont, C., Colpus, E., & Davidson, R. (2024). Introduction: everyday welfare in modern British history.
- Eagleton, T. (2011). *Marxism and literary criticism*. University of California Press. (Original work published 1976)
- Eagleton, T. (2019). *How to read literature*. Yale University Press.
- Federici, S. (2012). *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. PM Press.
- Federici, S. (2020). *Beyond the periphery of the skin: Rethinking, remaking, and reclaiming the body in contemporary capitalism*. PM Press.
- Foley, B. (2019). *Marxist literary criticism today*. Pluto Press.
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Cornell University Press.
- Jeffares, A. N. (1984). *W.B. Yeats: Man and poet*. Routledge.
- Kiely, D. (2020). *W.B. Yeats*. The English Association. University of Leicester. <https://englishassociation.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2.14.5.40-Publications-Bookmarks-Original-Bookmark-Series-WB-Yeats-Declan-Kiely.pdf>
- Kiely, R. (2020). *Incomparable Poetry: An Essay on the Financial Crisis of 2007–2008 and Irish Literature* (p. 163). Punctum Books.
- Lukács, G. (1971). *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics* (R. Livingstone, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1923)
- Marx, K. (1844). *Economic and philosophical manuscripts*. In *Collected works* (Vol. 3). Progress Publishers. (Various editions and translations)
- Marx, K. (1867/1990). *Capital: A critique of political economy* (Vol. 1, B. Fowkes, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
- McDiarmid, L. (2015). *Saving civilization: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden between the wars*. Cambridge University Press.
- Musto, M. (2021). *The rediscovery of Karl Marx's concept of alienation*. *International Critical Thought*, 11(1), 1–17.
- Williams, R. (2005). *Culture and materialism*. Verso.
- Yeats, W. B. (1991). *The Song of the Old Mother*. In R. J. Finneran (Ed.), *The collected poems of W. B. Yeats*. Macmillan. <https://poetryarchive.org/poem/song-old-mother/>