By Margaret Dunavant

W.B. Yeats: A Progressive Father

In defending “A Prayer for my Daughter” with its underlying sexism and static nature, understanding the historical context for the piece enables readers to lift the veil on Yeats the poet and rather empathize with Yeats the father. As a man conscious of his own shortcomings, his poem serves as a means to construct a more holistic model for Anne to imitate, and rather champions a more progressive form of parenthood focused on personal and moral excellence.

The Trouble with Parenting Manuals

Parenting conventions that existed in the early 20th century played a large role in governing a family’s desires for their daughter. Like most families in the Irish elite, the Yeats family was expected to adhere to the appropriate social mores of the time for their given class, which placed a heavy emphasis on stability and balance within a young woman’s life through marriage.

 “…As the prayer for his daughter represents a prayer for humanity, Anne herself becomes a symbol of Ireland: beautiful and unwavering, whose nascent spirit would inspire fathers like Yeats as she continued to grow, with a gentility and kindness which he vowed to preserve at all costs.”