

## **Characters**

An elderly statesman (a possible mask for Yeats) whose musings begin with the seemingly perfunctory and meaningless ritual of a school inspection

The schoolchildren and their nun

A Maud Gonne figure, the "love interest" of the poem

## **SUMMARY**

### **Plot**

The poem is based on Yeats' vision of himself as an old man speaking to schoolchildren. The scene has an actual biographical foundation, as it was written in 1926 after a semi-official senatorial visit to the Waterford School.

The sequence of the poem is as follows: in the first stanza the speaker observes the above-mentioned children, asking questions of a nun (presumably their teacher). This physical description then moves (in the second stanza) to the metaphysical, as the speaker dreams of his childhood love. Physical and metaphysical are united in stanza three, as the woman seems to materialize before him as a young girl. In stanza four the speaker's mind carries him from youth to age as he envisions his love in her present state-as an old woman. This is followed by a general consideration of his own birth and aging (stanza five), and speculation about the futility of human attainment (stanzas six and seven). The speaker closes with an "answer" to, or at least a philosophical strategy for dealing with, the potential meaninglessness of existence.

### **Style**

#### **Style for Yeats Poetry**

Yeats is considered by many to be one of the quintessential modernist poets, as demonstrated by his thematic interest in disillusionment and the search for an overarching system of meaning. Stylistically, his influences also go back further than modernism. Yeats' early poetry is considered "post-Romantic," employing language associated with the Romantic tradition, and much of his work is characterized by the formal verse structures of the nineteenth century. Like many modernists, however, he was nonetheless interested in reconciling the language of poetry with that of ordinary speech, believing the perceived difference between them to be arbitrary, arguing, "We should write out our thoughts in as nearly as possible the language we thought them in, as though in a letter to an intimate friend" (Unterecker 7).

After 1900 Yeats' style changed radically as he worked toward simplicity, paring away ornate literary anachronisms, reducing the use of adjectives, and aiming for a harmony of metaphor, symbol, and diction as well as for a freer verse form. The resulting work [emerging first in *Responsibilities* (1914)] is arguably more natural, vigorous, and sincere, exhibiting an interesting

balance of syntax in which emotionally charged words stand out from the rest of the poem with startling emphasis.

Perhaps the most complex facet of Yeats' poetry is its linguistic subtlety and nondiscursiveness; he does not, in other words, "tell" the reader what to think, but aims to evoke meaning through particularly resonant imagery. Like many modernist poets, Yeats was influenced by the French Symbolists; consequently he endeavored to make every image have force not only as part of a complete poem, but on its own. Ultimately he wanted to communicate things too subtle for the intellect to express, and he asked the reader to move beyond the point of rationality into a "mood" of understanding. Further, Yeats' personal system of symbols reflected his belief in the subjective nature of art: "The great poets," he argued, "employed always 'personal utterance,' dramatizing - sometimes overtly - their own lives" (qtd. in Unterecker 7).

In Yeats' poetry, all stylistic and thematic elements were ultimately meant to work toward each poem's intrinsic wholeness. In an essay on poetics Yeats stated that "[a] poem is best seen as an organic whole, an 'architectural' structure" (qtd. in Unterecker 29). For Yeats, then, ideas, imagery, and language all interact in a constructive dynamic that pushes toward an overall resolution and, in turn, supports the poem as a complete entity.

### Style for "Among School Children"

"Among School Children" has a tight structure comprised of eight separate stanzas. Its verse form is called *ottava rima*: each stanza contains eight lines each, and all the stanzas conform to an *abababcc* rhyme scheme. In this form, the standout nature of the final couplet, which breaks the rhyming pattern, "has a special witty snap to it" (Abrams 2589) and often serves to either propel the "narrative" of the poem, or to provide a summation of the preceding lines. Many lines are strictly iambic (consisting of five two-syllable beats in which the first syllable of each beat is weakly accented and the second syllable is strongly accented); others vary slightly in stress, and can be considered "loosely iambic."

This poem was first published in *The Tower* (1928); this highly praised collection is an example of his most mature work.

### Themes and Motifs

- **Unity of Being:** The central theme of Yeats' poetry is the conflict between the ideal and the real. In *A Vision* Yeats outlined his philosophical response to this dualistic problem, a response that depends in large part on the symbol of the sphere. For Yeats the sphere represents the unity of being, or a unified "truth" beyond the chaos of opposition (in other contexts Yeats referred to this transcendent stance as "tragic-joy"). The sphere symbol is comprised of pairs of interpenetrating gyres (also called cones or vortexes), and these are in a state of continual conflict with one another while simultaneously emerging from one another. The gyres stand for the continual opposition between the basic elements of existence; e.g. the sun and the moon, day and night, life and death, man and woman, permanence and change. Unity of being is a state of enlightenment that is simultaneously involved with the turmoil of the mundane; in other words, unity of being is paradoxically both transcendent and manifest in the world.
- **The Collective Unconscious:** Yeats wrote of his belief in three doctrines: (1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy; (2) That the borders of our

memories are shifting, and that our memories are a part of a great memory, the memory of Nature herself; (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols (qtd. in Dyson 25). Another way of thinking about this philosophy is to identify it as a kind of "collective unconscious," a concept that plays an important role in Yeats' poetry. This term refers to the Jungian idea that all human beings share, at an unconscious level, a basic vocabulary of images, or "archetypes," that help to give meaning to experience. For instance, "The Second Coming," with its apocalyptic vistas, employs images that are archetypal in this sense (consider for instance the circling "desert birds" of line 17). The collective unconscious, which lies beyond individual consciousness, is also an important symbol of the interrelatedness of human life, and thus is closely aligned with Yeats' Unity of Being.

- **Magic:** Yeats' belief in the supernatural—a belief originating in the Romantic revolt against scientific, hyper-rational conceptions of the world—provides an alternative to conventional forms of rationality and a response to the modern loss of meaning. Yeats was convinced that change was imminent in the modern world, and that we would develop an understanding that "natural and supernatural are knit together" and thus construct a "new science" to explain the workings of our universe (Dyson 25). His theory was to culminate in his book *A Vision*.
- **Art:** Yeats espoused a comprehensive theory of art that embraced all forms, including the visual and the musical. Expressions of this theory abound in his work; for instance, the diction, rhythm, and rhyme of his poetry are meant to consciously evoke music. Further, the poet frequently treats the subject of art itself, seeing in it, as did his Romantic precursors, a permanence that often satisfied his philosophical search for unity and balance (in that art can transcend the conflict of opposites in mortal existence), and occasionally even functioned as a replacement for the imperfection of life.
- **Alienation and the Search for Meaning:** A Modernist poet, Yeats was concerned with the existential crisis in society and the search for new foundations of meaning. In the early twentieth century the Western world had been shaken by events like the First World War and the growth of secularism, and by new advances in scientific, philosophical, medical, and other fields of knowledge. Traditional values and systems of truth had been questioned by thinkers like Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche, and the intelligentsia was in the process of reevaluating definitions of self, knowledge, and morality. The result was general disillusionment and uncertainty, and Yeats, like other modernists, spent much of his career searching for alternative definitions of truth, and alternative means of transcendence.
- **Symbolic Systems:** Symbolism is crucial to Yeats' work. His symbols can be thought of as many-sided crystals, which "grow slowly from solutions of traditions, from the dissolved thoughts of many minds" (Henn 146). They are contexts of meaning, allowing for multiple interpretations and variations within themselves. Yeats relies on them so much because for him they compensated for the modern loss of spirituality; Yeats felt it was the artist's role to reinvest tired symbols (some of his most common include the sun, the moon, towers, masks, trees, and birds) with transcendent meaning. When properly utilized, they could also work together to create the mystical "unity" that Yeats strove for in his work. As Unterecker puts it: "when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion" (Unterecker 32).
- **Historical Repetition:** Yeats viewed history as cyclical. By observing nature he posited an endlessly repeating pattern of twenty-eight phases (corresponding to the phases of the moon). Yeats described this view in detail in a prose work entitled *A Vision*, where he conceived of a great wheel with twenty-eight spokes that correspond to all things. For Yeats the cycle of history included a movement from the "primary" to the "antithetical": the "primary" is associated with primeval darkness and the coarseness of the first day of

creation, the "antithetical" with refinement and light. The abovementioned "gyres" (see "The Search for Unity of Being") correspond to the historical cycles. As one age begins to decline, so the next age is born within the dying spiral of the previous gyre; thus, thesis and antithesis are continually in simultaneous progress.

## HIGHLIGHTS

### The Title

The title of the poem refers to the event that inspired the poem. The speaker visits a school and begins to reflect on his life and the issues of age and youth.

### Stanza 1

The speaker of the poem is an elderly public figure (a persona of Yeats himself) that performs the perfunctory ritual of inspecting a school and observing its children at work.

Traditionally, the idea of the poetic persona is not meant to indicate an alliance between the speaker of a poem and the poet (the homoerotic overtones in some of Shakespeare's sonnets, for instance, are not meant to be taken as "evidence" of Shakespeare's homosexuality). With Yeats, however, biographical details are deliberately incorporated as elements for artistic manipulation, in line with his attempt to transcend the limitations of personality and ego. Thus we may argue that the "sixty-year-old smiling public man" of this poem (Yeats was indeed in his sixties when it was published) refers more or less directly to Yeats as an elder statesman.

A clue to the essence of the poem is given in the first line: "I walk through the long classroom questioning" (1).

Although the "questioning" of the first line is ostensibly directed toward the nun who runs the classroom, the opening line sets the tone for the searching attitude of the rest of the piece, in which the speaker explores the purpose of life and the phenomena of aging. In the first stanza, this curiosity is also reflected back upon the speaker by the children, whose stare of "momentary wonder" (almost as if they had never seen an old man) causes him to smile.

**Alienation and the Search for Meaning:** The first stanza also points to the shortcomings of an educational environment focused more on form than content. Note for instance how the children learn to "be neat in everything / In the best modern way" (5-6). The "best modern way" here seems to be a pejorative reference to the "science" of pedagogy and the dehumanizing routines of mass learning made popular during the industrial revolution. Such dehumanization is perhaps ironic, considering the religious affiliation of the school (an affiliation signified by the presence of the nun). Although the students have not been completely stifled by this system, note that the "wonder" that they are still capable of is nevertheless "momentary."

Note how Yeats adds formal balance to the lines "The children learn to cipher and to sing, / To study reading-books and histories, / To cut and sew" (3-5, emphases added); the repetition and symmetry reinforces the sense of a classically-derived, rote pedagogy.

What is the tone of this opening stanza? Is Yeats' critique of the schoolroom severe, affectionate, or neutral? Is there a critique at all? What words, phrases, or formal elements of the poem help to create this impression? Is there a sense in which the poet is hiding behind the mask of his public persona (the "smiling public man") in order to pursue his questioning activity?

## Stanza 2

The second stanza opens with the lines: "I dreamt of a Ledaean body [ . . . ]" (7), moving on to describe a relationship between the speaker and this female dream character.

Note the sudden shift from the external, material, mundane world of the classroom to the interior, abstract, idealized world of the poet's imagination. In this poem, the ideal and the real are continually in a process of opposition, comparison and, eventually, resolution.

The language of the second stanza is arguably more intense than that of the first, reflecting the interior shift referred to in the previous learning device. In comparison with the commonplace words and images of the first stanza ("long schoolroom," "kind old nun," "reading books and histories"), the language of the second is provocative and yet metaphysical, referring to a body "bent / Above a sinking fire," the changing of a "trivial event" to a "tragedy," and the idea of "two natures blent / Into a sphere."

According to Greek mythology, Zeus, in the form of a swan, raped a beautiful mortal woman named Leda. Their union resulted in the birth of Helen, who would become Helen of Troy; Helen's abduction would instigate the Trojan War and the fall of Troy. Like many poets in the western tradition, Yeats was very impressed by the cycle of destruction and rebirth associated with this myth, and so incorporated it into his work; hence his reference here to a "Ledaean body." (See also Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan.")

**Symbolic Systems:** Leda in this poem is generally associated with Yeats' love, Maud Gonne. The most obvious connection is that Gonne, like Leda, was for Yeats an idealized image of femininity. The fact that Leda was also a tragic figure resonates with Yeats' inner turmoil over his relationship with Gonne, particularly the latter's denial of him (the "harsh reproof" of line 11). This "bittersweet" Gonne appears in a similar way in much of Yeats' poetry.

**Symbolic Systems:** The image of the "sinking fire" in this stanza seems to refer to the reduced passion of old age. It is accompanied by a feeling of sorrow because the memory of youthful love is so strong.

Note that the rhythm and diction of this stanza reflects the elderly statesman's tortured consideration of his lost youth. For instance, the prominence (through line placement and repetition) of the word "Told" (in lines 11 and 13) places his recollection irrevocably in the past, while the dash dividing the stanza in half creates the impression that Yeats is "interrupting" his own train of thought.

The poem describes the relationship in an important metaphor: "and it seemed that our two natures blent / Into a sphere from youthful sympathy" (13-14).

**Unity of Being:** The above lines refer to a perspective simultaneously within the parameters of the everyday (consider the reference to "natures") and outside of it (the "natures" are able to blend into a sphere, suggesting a kind of transcendence of physical reality). The sphere is a symbol of Yeats' mystical unity of being. It represents the complexity of the unity of opposites, as movement / passion become stillness and stillness simultaneously evolves into movement / passion. This symbol will be explicated in greater depth when we come to the final stanza of the poem.

**Unity of Being:** The egg represents a similar resolution of opposites and a transcendence of both temporality and eternity. Simply put, an egg is a unified whole, while it is also composed of two separate parts (the yolk and the white). "Plato's parable" refers to a speech from the Symposium, in which love is considered as a search for one's perfect other half, a half from which one has been separated as a yolk and white can be separated (Plato 26). Here Yeats envisions the two halves

reunited in "one shell," again illustrating a reality that simultaneously includes and transcends opposites.

### Stanza 3

The recollection of an early rejection ("that fit of grief or rage") is followed by the speaker's return to the classroom environment; he compares the children around him to the love of his youth.

**Unity of Being:** The third stanza creates a melding of the contexts of the first two, and thus a synthesis between the opposite poles of material reality and metaphysical speculation. This synthesis is literally embodied in the final line of the stanza, as the speaker's young love seems to materialize before him.

How has the speaker's mood evolved by this point in the poem? In other words, how would you characterize Yeats' emotional state as he straddles the past and the present at this moment? (Note for instance that he says, in line 23, that he is "driven wild.") Is he guilty of maudlin self-pity, or is there a deeper poignance to his observations? Support your answer by specific references to language from the text.

### Stanza 4

The speaker moves from the childhood image of his love to an imagination of her now-aging face. He compares her to a realistic Renaissance sculpture by Quattrocento.

**Art:** The artist Quattrocento was known for his realism and his quest for artistic perfection. The comparison is made between the aging human figure and the relative permanence of art.

The stanza continues with a meditation on old age and death.

Note the multilayered imagery here: "Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind / And took some mess of shadows for its meat" (27-28). These lines imply a kind of horror at the effects of aging. Line 27, for instance, suggests a sunken, emptied-out physical presence ("[h]ollow of cheek"), while simultaneously implying the gasp of a dying breath ("drank the wind") and the fleeting nature of life ("wind"). In line 28, human flesh is referred to as "meat" (a statement on the frailty of life, or even the meaninglessness of physical existence), and has lost its substance, becoming ephemeral (like "shadows").

These images also echo the larger question that continually hovers in the background of the poem: namely, what is the purpose of life?

### Stanza 5

The speaker asks: "What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap / Honey of generation had betrayed, / [ . . . ] / Would think her son, did she but see that shape / With sixty or more winters on its head" (33-38).

The phrase "honey of generation had betrayed" seems to be a complex reference to both the pleasures and the pain of life. "Honey" is of course an image of sweetness, and it has erotic overtones as well; thus it could suggest the urges of procreation. On the other hand, the child (or "shape") has been "betrayed," because from the moment it begins to live it is also destined to die—a point driven home by the reference to the old man in the last lines of the stanza.

**Alienation and the Search for Meaning:** This stanza refers to Yeats' concern for existential meaning. In considering the mother's trauma of giving birth (a process in which it is possible she must "sleep, shriek, struggle to escape / As recollection or the drug decide"), the speaker asks whether, if that mother could see the old man her child was to become, she would consider it a fair "compensation for the pang of his birth, / Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?" The possibility that simply coming into the world was all for naught, and the consequent search for some other basis of meaning, is a characteristic Modernist concern effectively captured by Yeats here.

**Unity of Being:** Just as the third stanza provided a synthesis of the material and the metaphysical, it is possible to argue that the fifth neatly encapsulates the antitheses of youth and old age, in that it begins with one and ends with the other. More to the point, however, note how at the end of the stanza, we are in some sense at the beginning once again, as the speaker returns to the idea of birth and the "uncertainty of setting forth" (40).

## Stanza 6

Moving into a historical mindset, the speaker reviews important figures of Western philosophy, hoping to answer his questions about aging and mortality. He refers to Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, and concludes the stanza with a statement about "[o]ld clothes upon a stick to scare a bird" (48).

Plato saw answers in what he called the Ideal Forms, which Yeats refers to as "ghostly paradigms"; Aristotle was teacher of Alexander the Great ("taws" refers to a thong teachers used for punishment); while Pythagoras was the inventor of numerical philosophy and mathematics. Yet the speaker seems to be suggesting that the life's work of these illustrious figures nevertheless amounted to nothing more than "[o]ld clothes upon a stick to scare a bird" (48). In other words, mere theories and intellect cannot solve the most pressing and common of problems: determining the significance of life.

"Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird" is a poetic description of a scarecrow. Yeats had introduced this image earlier in the poem, in the last line of the fourth stanza ["Better to smile on all that smile, and show / There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow" (31-32)]. Why does Yeats repeat the image? Has the context for it changed at all? What are the differences, if any, between each repetition?

## Stanza 7

The speaker expands on his argument in the next stanza, continuing his exploration of the hope that humanity places in images and ideals. Referring back to stanza 5, he states that the images worshiped by both mothers and nuns are similar. Their similarity lies in the fact that they are "mockers of man's enterprise" (56).

While a mother worships the image of her child, the nun worships religious icons in marble or bronze. But both images "break hearts," leading to eventual disappointment-perhaps because each is a temporal expression of human needs, and thus susceptible to death. This is a very strong expression of Yeats' philosophy that truth resides outside of human endeavors; it could also be seen as a critique of institutionalized religion.

Do you think that Yeats is being overly pessimistic at this stage of the poem? Is it possible to argue that his commentary borders on nihilism? After all, he seems to be suggesting that there is no purpose to human endeavor. Bear in mind the Yeatsian conception of history as eternal cycles of inevitable destruction and rebirth (e.g., as referred to in an above point about the rape of Leda

and the birth and fate of Helen of Troy, and seen as well in poems like "The Second Coming" and "Lapis Lazuli").

## Stanza 8

The poem's final stanza attempts to provide an answer to the existentialist questions posed earlier. In the first line the speaker states: "Labour is blossoming or dancing where / the body is not bruised to pleasure soul" (57-58). The final four lines pick up on the imagery expressed in the first. First, "blossoming" is connected to the image of a chestnut tree.

**Unity:** The question that Yeats asks in lines 61-62 is rhetorical: "O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" A tree is an entire organism that cannot be subdivided into leaf or root without sacrificing the sense of its overall identity as a tree; on the other hand, a tree is composed of separate parts. This image is very similar to the analogy of the egg in stanza 2, and serves, again, to resolve dualistic thinking by allowing for the coexistence of a whole and its parts. As we try to assimilate the apparent contradiction between the tree as a single holistic element and the tree as a collection of separate parts, the mind opens up a third possibility, which is the realization of transcendence in the unity of being.

Next, "dancing" appears again in the reference to a body performing this act. The speaker concludes with a final question: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (64).

**Unity of Being:** This question might be rephrased as a statement: Yeats may be referring to the problem of separating an action (such as dancing) from an actor (a dancer). Again, considering his philosophy as we know it, such a division would be missing the point of existence. On a more intuitive and artistic level, we become aware that the dance and the dancer are at once both different and the same thing.

Again, consider the issue of poetic tone: what is the speaker's mood at the end of the poem? Is he still pessimistic? Is he more hopeful? How does the tone of this stanza fit with the overall trajectory of emotion in the entire poem? Refer to specific instances of language in your answer.

Note that while, according to our analysis, this final stanza provides a kind of resolution of the issues of the poem, it also ends with not one but two interrogative statements. This suggests that the "answer" provided is complex and open-ended.