

B.A. (Eng. Hons)

Part - III<sup>rd</sup>

Paper - VI

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## Critical Appreciation of "Among School Children"

"Among School Children" is a remarkable poem of W.B. Yeats which appeared in the volume entitled 'The Tower' in the year 1926. It was occasioned by Yeats's visit to Waterford Convent School on an inspection as a member of the Irish Senate at the age of sixty. As the poet entered, he was conducted through the classes by a kind old nun. The children were at their work. They looked at him with open-eyed wonder. But memories soon crown in upon him and he is reminded of Maud Gonne as she must have been as a child at school. 'A stifled nostalgic sigh works as the prevailing undertone and gives a tragic solemnity to the whole picture.' He recalls that Maud, too, must have been a student once at school like the little girls that stand before him at that time. The past is thus linked up with the present. The image of Maud reminded him of a particular day when she had told him how, while at school petty incidents or reproofs from the teacher would cause great unhappiness to her, and would turn the entire day into a tragedy. Further, the poet thought of Maud Gonne's present looks - hollow of cheeks; the poet thinks of his own body also; once upon a time,

he also was handsome, but now he has become a kind of scarecrow. One must make the best of a bargain and keep a smiling face, whatever he may feel within. The fifth stanza, however, sees Yeats immediately returning to such self-analysis. This time, however, he considers it from the mother's perspective: If these mothers knew how shrivelled and ugly their young ones would look at the age of sixty or thereabouts, none of them will perhaps agree to bear children and undertake the troubles of starting them on their careers. Then, the poet mocks at the great philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, who, despite their best efforts, could not find out any solution for age. Their bodies also decayed like those of the poet and his beloved:

"Plato thought nature but a spume that plays  
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things:  
Soldier Aristotle played the faws  
Upon the bottom of a king of kings:  
World-famous golden thighed Pythagoras  
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings  
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:  
Old clothes upon old sticks to scarce a bird."

The seventh stanza then shifts back to mothers, and indeed, to nuns. Both mothers and nuns worship 'images': the mother, the image of her child, and the nun, a religious icon or statue, such as that representing Jesus or the Virgin Mary. As a matter of fact, these

images symbolize glorious ideals which man sets before him, but which he is never able to attain. They are mockeries of the least, just as great philosophies are mockeries of the mind. None of them can alter the facts of life or influence the course of nature. Despite them, youth and beauty must perish.

In the eighth and final stanza, Yeats turns to the question of 'labour': The poet finds refuge in the general philosophical balance of soul, mind and body. As a tree is a tree because of the union of the root, the stem and the leaf, so is the human body a union of soul, mind and body. It is in harmony and balance that human life is perfect. Hence, soul and body are not at variance, as the dancer is not at variance with his dance. Thus, the poem ends on a note of mystical acceptance of the world as it is.

The poem is remarkable for its very rich and complex imagery. 'Ledaen body', the alteration of 'Plato's parable in to the yolk and white of the one-shell', 'daughters of the swan' is a famous and oft-repeated images of Yeats. The 'peddler's heritage', 'honey of generation' are images from everyday life where as 'chestnut tree', 'the blossom or the bole' are from Nature. Yeats also makes use of philosophical resources in Plato with a ghostly paradigm of things, the soldier Aristotle and the golden thighed Pythagoras.

Through out the poem, Yeats realizes that life as we know it is meaningless. A mother's anxiety for her coming son is meaningless when you consider that the son ages and dies eventually. The mother's expectations of

her son even when he is alive never come true. Beauty, no matter how much, fades; education does not teach you the important lessons you need to go through life. Yeats poem clearly shows the reader that life, and all that you do in it is meaningless. The poem is divided into eight stanzas of eight lines each. words are chosen very appropriately. The poet has successfully presented his ideas regarding life, beauty, emotions etc in the poem.

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