

'Among School Children'

by

W. B. Yeats

(Part I)

'Among School Children' is one of the most famous poems of Yeats included in the collection The Tower (1928). The poem, like 'Sailing to Byzantium', is yet another expression of the poet's disconnectedness with the modern ways retrospectively looking at his own life. The poem was inspired by a senate-sponsored visit to a convent school in Waterford in the newly liberated Irish Free State to which Yeats as a senator was sent in the capacity of Inspector of Schools in 1926.

The poem consists of eight stanzas of eight lines each written in iambic pentameter. The poem is written in Ottava Rima - a rhyming stanza form of Italian origin introduced in English by Thomas Wyatt. The rhyme scheme of the poem is ABABABCC. Ottava Rima was traditionally used in epic poetry like Boccaccio's Il filostrato and Teseida. Lord Byron used this stanza form in Don Juan (1818-24), a mock-epic. The use of Ottava Rima in 'Among School Children' is suggestive of 'epic reflection' as the poem is interspersed with allusions to Irish mythology and folklore and scattered with Yeats' personal symbols.

The themes of dichotomy between mind and body, thought and action, innocence and experience, simplicity and wisdom and youth and age pervades throughout the poem

Stanza I

The poem opens with a subjective pronoun as if the poet is writing a report to be submitted to the authorities. The relaxed and agreeable atmosphere of the school is established with words like "kind", "old", "nun" and "white" which conventionally evoke a sense of order, peace, well-being and stability. The mundane and commonplace activities like ciphering, singing, reading, cutting and sewing in the backdrop of a recently concluded violent guerrilla war between Irish Republican Army and British forces indicate effective peace. The last two lines of the stanza deal with a perennial dichotomy between innocence and experience. The "momentary wonder" of children at the smile of a sixty-year old public man evoke a sense of ignorant bliss of children against the harrowing experience of an aged man and makes a reader apprehensive of the precariousness of peace and vulnerability of innocence in the face of mankind's capacity for violence. The "modern way", it seems is not the "best" way to raise and educate children.

Stanza II

The tone of the poem instantly changes from objective observation to personal recollection when "I walk" of the first stanza changes to "I dream" in the second stanza. The poet's mind at the sight of children still untainted with the ways of the "modern" world cannot help but recall his muse and love.

Maud Gonne. She, for Yeats, had a Ledaean body: a figure which spurred an irresistible desire in Zeus, the king of gods and led him to ravage Leda. Leda's tempting beauty was the cause of her defilement. Similarly the innocence of children can make it convenient for the forces of destruction and greed to lead them astray. Much of it was seen in the First World War where young soldiers were pushed to the battlefields to die for a purpose unknown to them and the pretext of serving the nation and the mankind. Maud Gonne too, like Leda, was too sensitive for her own good. She rejected an easy life for herself and consumed by revolutionary fervour devoted herself to Irish nationalism.

The image of Maud Gonne "Bent Abon a sinking fire" suggests tender moments of trust and camaraderie between her and the poet where she in a flash of companionship that they share told Yeats about a bitter disapproval and criticism she faced as a child which spoiled her day. This sharing of an intimate detail made Yeats bold enough to imagine himself tied to his beloved in an affectionate and warm bond of "youthful sympathy". Young couples in love can instantly connect with the feeling leaving a reader wonder if love is the panacea for age. The use of "sphere" may be a reference to the egg that Leda layed after she was raped by Zeus who took the shape of a swan to violate her. The myth has been detailed in Yeats' 'Leda and the Swan'. But whereas Leda's sphere was a product of violence, Maud the poet's sphere is a product of selfless love. Further, in the last lines of the stanza, the poet invokes Plato's Symposium in which he propounded the myth that Zeus in order to curtail the power of humans cut ^{them} the sphere or more accurately the

~~egglike shape~~ into two halves: a man and a woman. The passion and desire for the opposite sex is thus an attempt to regain the robbed unity. Here 'alter' is the key word as Plato's myth suggests that Zeus would make sure that to foil all attempts at reunification. But here the in poet's case the unity is not to claim lost powers but attain the bliss emerging from pure love. Reference to Plato also extends to the platonic love Yeats had for Maud Gonne where physical intimacy is not required to achieve a spiritual sense of belongingness to an individual. It must be noted that Maud Gonne had turned down Yeats' proposal for marriage owing to her revolutionary cause. But this rejection never affected Yeat's feelings for his beloved.

Structurally, the stanza uses run-on lines or enjambment. Enjambment or "a striding over" is the continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line, couplet or stanza. Enjambment is used to express the urgency and pressure of emotions in a verse.

(To be continued...)

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