

'Among School Children'

by

W. B. Yeats

Part II (Contd...)

Stanza III

Reminiscing about the day when Maud Gonne's tender senses were hurt by a "harsh reproof" making her suffer with agony and rage, the poet looks upon the children in the classroom to locate her image among them. The "fit of grief and rage" suggests momentary feeling which passes and fails to pose any significant challenge to the heavy-handedness of the institution to subdue natural responses and imagination of children in the name of discipline.

The swan image emerges almost abruptly in the <sup>fourth</sup> third line of the stanza. It is as if the poet is in a reverie ~~being tossed~~ from ~~one thought to another~~ single following a trail of thoughts. This method of narration is called Stream of Consciousness. The reference to the "daughters of the swan" suggests Helen of Troy, who was born as a result of Leda's rape by Zeus. Helen was supposed to be the most beautiful woman of the mortal world but was notorious for her fickle nature. The reference to Helen instantly links with Maud Gonne's rejection of Yeats' proposal. Sharing a "paddler's heritage" evokes Maud Gonne's decision, like ordinary people, to devote herself to the revolutionary cause.

The sixth line, after the division of two lines in between, connects with the third line of the stanza. The poet's imagination is

in full swing and he is able to envision Maud Gonne's image in a child in the classroom with similar colour upon her cheek and hair. The poet's success at envisioning the image of Maud suggests that love and imagination are potent forces to battle the vagaries of age.

#### Stanza IV

After watching the image of Maud in her daughter reflected in one of the students in the classroom in the third stanza, the poet now imagines Maud in her present form as old as the poet himself and bereaved of the charms of childhood. The poet wonders if Quattrocento fingers have sculpted her present form.

Quattrocento is<sup>a</sup> movement that encompassed various genres of European art like painting, literature and architecture during early Renaissance. In this stanza it is used with special reference to sculpture. The movement was marked by imitation<sup>of</sup> Classical Greek and Roman art and it<sup>thus</sup> unfailingly evokes Leda. Perfection was the aim and defining characteristic of the Quattrocento movement and hence by extension Maud Gonne's present form perfectly reflects age. And in this way Maud is still perfect to accompany the poet: "A sixty-year-old smiling public man". The poet further explicitly reveals the workings of his mind in which he is still busy to prove himself worthy of her affection. He says that though he was never a match for the rough beast of the Ledaean myth, he did share some of its characteristics. For instance he too, like the Swan, had

pretty hair in his ~~youth~~ youth. Here the reverie of the poet breaks abruptly and he tries to accommodate with his real-life settings. The last two lines of the stanza are loaded with a sense of pathos. The poet being old and wise decides to play along with the artificiality of public life. He concludes that it is better to address the expectation of the masses rather than disturbing the status quo of the society by laying bare the emptiness of a gesture as sincere as a smile. The image of the scarecrow heightens the sense of helplessness and lack of agency to bring significant change. The issue becomes more tragic when one recalls that the poet is visiting the school as a lawmaker.

### Stanza V

In the fifth stanza the poem moves from the personal to the universal. The entire stanza is a single sentence and poses a rhetorical question about the meaning of life. The focus of the poet shifts from his beloved to his mother. He wonders what ~~would~~ her mother, <sup>would have</sup> thought if she would have seen him in his present degenerated state. Would she be content with the reward of the pangs of child-birth and the everyday struggle of raising a child? The poet leaves the question unanswered. The reader gets an impression that the "youthful mother" must have felt betrayed. Here "youthful" alludes to passion and inexperience which often fails to envision the future in the right perspective and is therefore deluded in the end. It serves as an oblique remark to the revolutionary fervour in the youth which usually leads them to disillusionment. Suffering of life is suggested in

"sixty or more winters" as winter has traditionally been associated with gloom and distress. "Honey of generation" refers to the blissful existence of the prenatal stage where the soul is still unaware of the vagaries of the mortal world. The poet in referring an infant as a "shape" expresses the meaninglessness of life and human form.

### Stanza VI

Yeats in this stanza tries to find answers regarding his doubts about the meaning of life from philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras. Plato believed that the entire living form on earth including humans is nothing but shadows cast by the immortal abstraction called Forms. For Yeats Plato's living, throbbing life is 'spume': foam on sea waves that are destined to disappear sooner or later suggesting the momentary nature of life and his Forms are "a ghostly paradigm of things" because of their abstract nature.

Aristotle in comparison was a soldier and believed that discipline through punishment can be a way towards meaningful existence. The reference to "king of kings": Alexander the Great suggests that for Aristotle the situation isn't entirely bleak and that meaningful change, though difficult, is not impossible.

Pythagoras introduced the doctrine of music of the spheres where he proposed that the Sun, the Moon and the planets move as music which though inaudible to the human ear is nonetheless harmonic. The terms seventh line of the stanza render Pythagorean philosophy fruitless and futile to the earthly beings. The last line of the stanza

reinvokes the image of the Scarecrow and suggests that high philosophy holds no water in dealing with the actual problems of the modern world. The dichotomy between mind and body and between thought and action manifests itself in this stanza.

### Stanza VII

Yeats opens the stanza by fusing two opposing images into one: the nun or virgin and the mother. Both of them worship images but whereas the images worshiped by the nun are forged in marble or bronze both of which are associated with coldness and hence death, a mother worships an animate image which contrary to the cold repose of the marble / bronze image is warm with passion, love and affection. It makes the reader revisit the fifth stanza in which a mother is destined only to suffer at the end of all her efforts at the right of a dwindling figure which was once cherished by her as her son and was an abundant compensation for her pains and struggles. But here the poet asserts that though at two poles of feminine existence, the nun and the mother unite in their suffering because the Gods too break hearts failing to console the agonised heart soul shocked at the destruction caused by a creature formed in the image of God. An apostrophe is used in the fifth line of the stanza. The poet directly invokes the Presences, the images revered by the lover (passion), the nun (piety) and the mother (affection). These presences symbolize the heavenly glory because being the products of imagination they are permanent and hence mock 'man's enterprise' which is transient in nature and degenerates with the passage of time.

## Stanza VIII

The poet challenges the established institutions and their teachings in the first <sup>two</sup> lines of the stanza where he asserts that all human endeavour can only seem fruitful when pleasure is allowed to reign supreme, where mind and body are in perfect unison, where one is not violently pulled from the other. The third line is a reference to the Ledaean myth where Helen is born of Leda's suffering. In the next line the poet possibly refers to himself and subsequently the infertile nature of wisdom. The last three lines provide two metaphors which express the theme of perfect harmony and unison. The poet uses apostrophe to converse with the chestnut tree. The tree is not separately its leaves, its flowers or its trunk. It can blossom only when all its parts work in unison. Similarly a dance is an expression of supreme pleasure, of exultation and therefore is possible only when the body is in unison with soul. The body cannot be separated from the soul if it is to function like the dance is impossible if its complement, the dancer is removed.

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by Ankur Tripathi

For B.A. II<sup>II</sup> (HONS)

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