

## A Critical Appreciation of 'Among School Children'

:- 'Among School Children' was written in 1926, and the poem appeared in the volume, The Tower. It is a remarkable poem of yeats. The poet visited the Waterford convent school and was received and conducted by a nun. She showed to him all the class-rooms and answered all his questions. The children were learning arithmetic, singing, history, tailoring etc. They were learning quite efficiently, and were taught through modern ways. The children stared at the poet with wonder, for he was an old man of sixty and was a smiling public figure.

As the poet casts his glance at the little girl-students in the school, he is reminded of another Ledaean-beauty, Maud Gonne, with well-chiselled Leda-like classic figure. He recalls that Maud Gonne, too, must have been a student once at school like the school 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 pretty incidents or sepssoofs from the teacher would cause great unhappiness to her, and would turn the entire day into a tragedy. The poet had listened to her narration, had sympathized with her, till their two souls had seemed to fuse and blend into one ~~the~~ like the ~~yolk~~ yolk and white of an egg. In other words, when she had told him of the incident, he had sympathized with her till the two had become as united as the yellow and the white parts of the egg are.

Having thought upon the sad event, the poet's thoughts keep sunning on the image of Maud Gonne. He looks upon these girls and imagines that Maud Gonne as a child must have been very much like that of Helen - the daughter of the swan. But even beautiful women have something common with plain women having ordinary features. The colour of the cheeks and hair of one of the girls remind him of the complexion of his beloved, his imagination runs wild and sees her as if she were actually standing before him.

The poet's thought and



Imagination continues to fix on Maud Gonne's image. He is reminded of Maud's looks in her old age. She was like a piece of Renaissance art although she had hollow cheeks, was old and decrepit and looked as if she drank only wind and had only shadows to eat. Still despite her old age, she was a fit object for a great work of art. The poet then begins to think of his own old age. Though he was never of the Ledaean kind, yet he, too, was quite handsome once and had pretty plumage as well. But now he has become a sort of scarecrow. It is no use of sighing over vanished youth and beauty. One must keep into smiling old age and death are grim realities. They must be accepted and one must learn to make the best of a bad bargain.

Decay and decline is the law of nature and no human efforts can alter this law. If mothers knew how ugly and decrepit their sons would look in their old age, none of them would like to take the trouble of bearing children. Educationists and philosophers have had different experiences and ideas of man and his culture, but have been unable to fight against old age. Plato explained the world as the shadow of ideas with God. Life to him was a bit of unreality, a mere



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shadow or reflection of the world of ideas. (Plato's 'Theory of Ideas'). Aristotle's philosophy is more realistic, practical, and weighty. Another great philosopher, Pythagoras also gave out that he was "golden thighed". But all the profound wisdom of these great philosophers was of no avail to them. It could not check the natural process of ageing. Despite philosophers, they became old and broken like a scarecrow, with the passing of time. None can fight against time. Hence, it is futile and useless to mourn over the loss of youth and beauty.

The poet continues

to reflect on the manifold illusions fostered by the human spirit. Passionate lovers, affectionate lovers and pious men, all worship illusions, mere phantoms. Their adoration of cherished images blinds them to the harshness of reality. The beloveds are never so good and beautiful as they are imagined; sons never so dutiful and handsome, and the gods never so just and merciful. Still this image-worship, this worship of illusions goes on. As a matter of fact these images symbolize glorious ideals which man sets before him, but which he is never



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able to attain. These ideals mock at all human efforts to attain them. They are mockeries of the heart, 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 last stanza, the poet says that life is made up of opposites like the chestnut - tree which is neither leaf, nor blossom, nor trunk but a sum total of all the three. As Dr. B. Rajan points out, the poem is not as Yeats called it, a curse upon old age; but it is also not a justification of old age or even of life. What it offers is not a solution but a response and the contrasts it presents between youth and age, the ideal and the actual, man's nobility and man's absurdity, are presented as roots of the blossoming conviction that without contraries, there can be no life. The poem is remarkable for its rich and complex imagery. Whereas the subject of the first two stanzas relates to the childhood and education, the last stanza to the old age, its anguish and inevitability.

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