Among School Children

SUMMARY

I

I ask the teacher questions as I walk around the classroom. The teacher, who is a nice old nun wearing a white hood as part of her uniform, answers my question. The young students are learning to do math and to sing, to read and to study books about history, to cut and sew clothing, and to generally be tidy in the most up-to-date way. As I walk, the children look at me with temporary astonishment, because I'm a smiling, 60-year old politician.

II

Meanwhile, I daydream about a woman who had a body as beautiful as the mythological Leda. I remember a moment when this woman was bent over the fire as she told me a story about some harsh scolding she received, or some other similar event that would seem negligible to an adult but which caused a child's day to be filled with sorrow. And as she told me this story, I felt as if our two personalities merged into a single orb of understanding born of sympathy. Or to put it another way, and change the story that the philosopher Plato tells, it was as if we become the yolk and white of a single egg.

III.

Thinking about this woman's story of sadness or anger, I look at this or that child and wonder if the woman I'm thinking of stood like these children when she was their age. After all, even the half-god daughters of Leda and Zeus (who took the form of a swan when he raped Leda) can share some traits with common people, just as all swans share some similarities. I also wonder if the woman had the same color in her cheek or hair as some of these children do. Suddenly, my heart is filled with excitement: one of these children is the spitting image of her.

IV.

Now I think about how this woman looks these days. Did an Italian Renaissance painter craft her face? In her old age, her cheeks are so gaunt it looks like she drinks only air and eats only shadow. And though I was never as beautiful as a character from mythology, I was pretty enough once. But enough of these thoughts. I should concentrate on the present moment, smile at these children smiling at me. I should show that them though I look like an old scarecrow, I'm a kindly one.

V.

Imagine a young mother with a baby on her lap. This baby has drunk the "honey of generation" in its mother's milk, a mythological drug that will cause the baby to forget its existence as a soul in heaven before it was born. The child must either fall asleep or cry out and try to resist the drug—either to remember its life in heaven or to forget. Would such a mother would think that her son—if she could see him with white hair at more than 60 years old—was worth the pain of childbirth, or all the anxiety of raising him and sending him out into the world?

VI.

The philosopher Plato thought that visible reality was like the foam of wave, while the true nature of the world was what lay beneath that wave: an unchanging realm of abstract truths. On the other hand, the philosopher Aristotle believed that physical objects were what was most real. As tutor to the famous conqueror Alexander the Great, Aristotle would punish the young Alexander by spanking him with a strap of leather. Meanwhile, world-famous Pythagoras, who supposedly had a thigh made of gold, claimed that the movement of stars in the sky created music (which the Muses, goddesses of poetic inspiration, overheard). Pythagoras then played this music on musical instruments. But this music, and all these theories, only amount to this: a raggedy scarecrow.

VII.

Both nuns and moms worship things they can see. But while nuns worship paintings or statues of saints by candlelight, mothers worship their living children. For nuns, religious sculptures made of marble or bronze have a sort of aloofness to them. Yet these statues can also affect people deeply. Oh mysterious beings present in such art, which humans recognize through passion, religious intensity, or love, and which symbolize all the beauty of heaven. Oh such beings are immortal, they created themselves, and they seem to make fun of how the activities of humans are so full of change, death, and interdependence.

VII.

Good work is when people bloom or dance without hurting their bodies in order to please their minds, and where beautiful things don't need suffering in order to be created, and when gaining wisdom doesn't require ceaseless toil all through the night. Oh chestnut tree, with your powerful roots and beautiful flowers, are you your leaves, your flowers, or your trunk? Oh dancing body, oh eyes filled with pleasure, how can we separate a dance from the person dancing it?

THEMES

LIFE AS CONTINUAL MOVEMENT AND CHANGE

As the elderly speaker of “Among School Children”

contemplates life, he begins to understand that there is beauty in life's *process*: in the ongoing "blossoming" of the here and now. Life isn't some static product, in other words, but rather a kind of continual movement from one moment to the next. Change (including the change entailed by growing older) is inseparable from life itself.

In the poem's famous final line, the speaker asks, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" A dance just is the motions of a dancer, and someone is a dancer only when they're dancing. Dancer and dance are thus inseparable. In the same way, people are inseparable from the lives they live. (This line also might suggest that people *are* what they *do*—that their actions, their "dancer's steps,"create their identity.)

A dance isn't some stony, remote statue, either. It's an art made of fleeting movements; it's there, and then it's gone. And that, the speaker suggests, is what the beauty of life is—not its stillness, but rather its motion and change. Life is beautiful *because* it's constantly shifting (and, the poem implies, because it eventually ends).

The speaker explores this idea further by mentioning the parts of a chestnut tree: the "leaf," "blossom," and "bole" (trunk). Just as a tree is composed of *all* these parts, a human life is composed of *all* its phases, from childhood to old age. And since all of life is part of this process of growth and change, if follows that even old age—a phase the speaker laments at first—can bring its own kind of satisfaction and "blossoming"; if life is a process like a dance, then the end is no less beautiful than the beginning. The speaker ultimately suggests that life's beauty is found not in isolated moments or unchanging forms, but in the continuous movement of life as a whole.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 25-32
- Lines 33-40
- Lines 57-64

INNOCENCE VS. EXPERIENCE

In "Among School Children," the speaker—an 60-something senator visiting a school—feels the intense contrast between life as an old man and life as a young person. Old age, this speaker feels, is a decline from the beauty and freshness of youth. Yet he also comes to understand that, while youth has the advantage of innocent loveliness, experience brings with it invaluable wisdom and knowledge.

The poem begins with the speaker discussing his acute awareness of his old age as he visits young children. The speaker watches as the schoolchildren stare at him "In momentary wonder." He can tell that he seems to them like some strange creature—almost like a member of a different species. That difference isn't just because he's an impressive adult with an important job, but also because his body is so different from theirs: he's become an "old scarecrow," a decrepit, raggedy figure. In comparison, the children are vibrant and full of life as they learn to read, sing, and sew.

The speaker emphasizes that old age is a phase of life distinct from youth not just physically but also mentally. But this, the speaker says, is actually one of the good things about old age: it leads to wisdom. For instance, while the children are busy learning how to read and sew, the speaker is occupied by memories of that beautiful woman, thoughts of sacred art, and philosophical theories. In other words, the speaker has the mind of an adult, which is distinct from the mind of a child. In this sense, age is not all decay. As an old man, the speaker has a wealth of learning, experience, and wisdom at his disposal.

For the speaker, age beats down the body and wears away beauty. Walking among children, the speaker becomes all the more conscious of this decay. However, old age also has its strengths. Ultimately, the speakers sees age and youth as aspects of life with their own unique virtues and powers.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 25-32
- Lines 33-40
- Lines 57-64

ACCEPTING THE REALITY OF AGING AND DECAY

One of the speaker's guiding lights is the search for the "ideal," or the most beautiful and permanent form of something. Yet reality always falls short of this ideal, as even great beauty fades and, the poem suggests, the ravages of time come for everyone. To be alive is to grow old and fade away, in other words; aging and decay are simply part of being human, and the speaker suggests that anyone who wants to live fully must embrace these earthly realities.

For the speaker, aging entails an inevitable loss of beauty. While the speaker "Had pretty plumage once," for instance (meaning he was a good-looking young man), now his handsome youth is long gone. The speaker also spends part of the poem thinking back on the former beauty of a woman he loved. Despite remembering her as akin to a mythological goddess, she has grown "Hollow of cheek" and withered. She, like the speaker, looks ravaged by time, having proven just as vulnerable to mortality as he. Her erotic, youthful beauty has vanished, and the speaker's idealization of her former self does nothing to

preserve her.

These thoughts of ideal beauties leads the speaker to thoughts of to Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, three ancient Greek thinkers who presented theories about the ideal form of things. Plato, for instance, argued that an abstract realm exists where the truest and purest forms live. Yet even the philosophers of the ideal eventually became "Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird": they too were human, subject to mortality and decay just like everyone else. No amount of philosophizing could stop this.

Finally, the speaker contrasts the "marble or a bronze repose" of religious sculptures with actual human beings. These sculptures are aloof, unchanging, inaccessible, the speaker argues. Their sacred, otherworldly beauty allows them to "break hearts," or affect people deeply, yet such sculptures are also "mockers of man's enterprise." In other words, this stony and unchanging religious art seems to look on the constant motion of human activity as if mocking it. Life here on earth can never achieve the everlasting ideal represent by such religious art.

At the end of the poem, the speaker comes to term with the realities of aging through images of trees growing and dancers dancing. These images present beauty as something takes shape *through* time and change—through motion and growth—rather than trying to stand up against it. A life fully lived, the speaker finally concludes, must embrace the reality of development and change rather than forever fruitlessly seeking a frozen, statuesque ideal.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-16
- Lines 25-32
- Lines 41-48
- Lines 49-56
- Lines 57-64

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-6

I ...
... best modern way—

The poem begins with the speaker on a visit to a public school. In real life, Yeats was an Irish senator who did in fact have to make such visits to schools. As a result, although the speaker isn't explicitly Yeats himself, there is a close connection between the two.

The speaker walks through a classroom, questioning the teacher, who is a nun. This is a convent school—in Ireland, public schools and religion were closely linked, so that it was common for there to be classes taught by nuns. The speaker sees children being taught "to cipher," or do arithmetic, as well as to sing, study history, and sew. These lines set the scene for the poem. As the poem moves on, this scene will provide a contrast to the drift of the speaker's thoughts.

"Among School Children" is written in a loose iambic pentameter (a meter in which each line as five feet in a da-DUM rhythm), as is characteristic of Yeats's poetry. The meter is loose in that many of the lines deviate from this exact pattern. Yeats does this on purpose, as it gives the poem the feeling of spoken language as well as a distinct texture. Rather than feeling entirely predictable and smooth, there's a thorny, knotty texture to the poem. This texture captures the feel of the speaker's own thoughts, doubts, concerns, aspirations, and observations.

Here, for instance, is the first line:

> I walk | through the | long school- | room ques- | tioning;

The uneven rhythm of this line suggests a kind of awkwardness to the speaker. Contrast this highly irregular line with the speaker's description of the students:

> To cut | and sew, | be neat | in ev- | erything

Here, the perfect iambic pentameter of the lines captures the prim and proper activities of the students, who are "neat in everything," contrasting it with the awkward thorniness of the speaker's own internal narration.

LINES 6-8

the children's eyes ...
... smiling public man.

At the end of the second stanza, the speaker describes how the children react to his presence. As he walks by them, their "eyes / In momentary wonder stare upon" the speaker. In other words, each young student glances up at him in amazement. That's because the speaker is a "sixty-year-old smiling public man." The speaker, as an old senator, is conscious of the wonder he provokes among the students.

There are several thematic ideas bundled into this observation:

1. First, there is very clearly the age gap between the speaker and the students. Throughout the poem, the speaker will be preoccupied with the dramatic changes that come with getting older. His experience in the classroom provides a clear example of how vast the gap is between young and old.
2. Second, there's the fact that the speaker is a senator. He's not just any old adult, but rather an

important one who would perhaps be imposing—except for the fact that he's smiling.
3. More specifically, the speaker calls himself a "public man." He is "public" in that he serves the public in the national government, and must often face the public in various capacities, such as visiting schools. This means that there's a very extroverted element to the speaker's life. This extroverted side of the speaker will contrast with his deeply interior thoughts in the following stanzas.

Having reached end of the stanza, the poem's rhyme scheme becomes clear.The poem is written in ottava rima, a form consisting of eight-line stanzas rhyming ABABABCC.

This rhyme scheme only dimly reveals itself in the first stanza, partly because of the stanza's many slant rhymes. For instance, there's a half rhyme between "upon" and "man" at the end of the stanza. There's also an implied eye rhyme between "eyes" and "history." Clearly these words don't actually rhyme, but the poem plays off an old tradition of rhyming words that end in "y," even if they don't actually sound the same—they just look like they do. By employing such subtle, sometimes dissonant rhymes, the speaker contributes to the tangled feel of his language. The subtle rhymes make the poem sound a little more spoken, rather than carefully crafted, and sometimes a little more purposefully awkward.

BETWEEN LINES 8-9, LINES 9-12

II ...
... day to tragedy—

The second stanza is a big leap from the first. At first, it seems totally disconnected from what has come previously in the poem. "I dream of a Ledaean body," says the speaker. Yeats is alluding to Leda, a character in Greek mythology.

- As the story goes, the god Zeus found Leda so beautiful that he turned into a swan and raped her. As a result of this horrific assault, Leda gave birth to children, one of whom was Helen, regarded as the most beautiful woman in the world. Eventually, men fighting over Helen led to the infamous Trojan War, as recounted in *The Iliad*.
- The story of Leda was an important one to Yeats, which he addressed directly in his poem "Leda and the Swan." He viewed it as an example of how people are swept up in events beyond their control, a confluence of beauty, mystery, horror, and the sacred.

Here, the speaker is saying that the woman he's remembering is incredibly beautiful, beautiful even to the gods. He then recalls a moment when he watched this beautiful woman stand over a fire, adjusting it. She told some story from her childhood in which she was harshly scolded, or some other "trivial event" ruined her day. As a young person, this woman felt that the day had been turned into a "tragedy," childishly exaggerating how bad things were.

The word "tragedy" plays ironically off the speaker's earlier reference to Leda. Leda's story is a *true* tragedy, a rape that leads to a war that costs countless lives. Here, then, the speaker implicitly contrasts the everyday details of normal people's lives with the fantastical and dramatic events of mythology.

In these lines, the poem's rhyme scheme becomes clearer: "bent" and "event," and "she" and "tragedy," each have perfect rhymes. Moments like these allow the reader to get a grasp on the form. Yeats doesn't want to give the reader a headache by making them scour the lines for a rhyme scheme. Rather, he just wants to show how flexible he can be with rhyme, from eye rhyme to full rhyme, depending on what effects he wants to create. Here, the clean rhymes create four nice clear lines, which prevents the transition from the last stanza from being too jarring.

It should also be noted that the beautiful woman depicted in this poem is commonly interpreted as Maud Gonne, Yeats's muse and unrequited love, whom he became friends with in his early 20s and who refused his marriage proposals several times. Although this biographical detail isn't necessary to understand the poem, it is one that crops up frequently in scholarly criticism of Yeats' work. Gonne was a huge influence and presence in Yeats's life.

LINES 13-16

Told, and it ...
... the one shell.

In the second half of stanza 2, the speaker describes how the woman's story makes him feel a very strong connection with her. As with the first half of the stanza, he uses an allusion to describe this feeling.

Specifically, the speaker alludes to a "parable" from a text by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato.

- According to this story, humans were originally "sphere[s]" composed of two individuals existing in perfect harmony. Later, humans became separated, but they still longed for that harmony.
- When people are in love, according to this story, it's as if they've returned to that earlier state of existing as a two-person sphere. Plato's vision of this harmonious love is where the term *platonic love* comes from.

Here, the speaker says that he feels that he feels such a deep connection with this woman that it's as if they blend together into a single sphere.

Sometimes, the phrase *platonic love* suggests that two people have a strong connection without being sexually attracted to teach other. However, that's not necessarily the case for the speaker. As the first line of the line stanza makes clear, where the speaker describes the woman's beautiful body in mythological terms, the speaker is physically attracted to this woman. What matters, though, is that in this moment his most powerful feeling is one of total emotional and intellectual connection to this woman.

In this final line of the stanza, the speaker invents his own metaphor for this feeling of connection: "the yolk and white of the one shell." It's as if they have become one egg. Incidentally, eggs bring sex back into this metaphor, calling to mind fertilization and reproduction. By using this comparison, the speaker hints at his sexual desire for this woman.

BETWEEN LINES 16-17, LINES 17-21

III ...
... every paddler's heritage—

In the third stanza, the speaker links his memory of the beautiful woman with his observations of the schoolroom. He wonders if any of the children in the room resemble the woman when she was their age.

The speaker begins by referencing the "fit of grief or rage" the woman told him about in her story, when she was scolded for something as a child and got really upset by it. Trying to imagine what the woman looked like as a petulant child, the speaker looks around at "one child or t'other," at this or that student, to see if he can imagine her standing like any of them.

Here, he continues his allusion to the story of Leda and the swan, saying "even daughters of the swan can share / Something of every paddler's heritage."

- The phrase "daughters of the swan" refers to the children of Leda and Zeus, who took the form a swan when he raped her. The speaker is particularly thinking of the mythological Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world (a.ka. "Helen of Troy"). Daughters of the swan, then, are beautiful half-gods.
- Meanwhile, normal people are the children of other "paddler[s]," common swans, ducks, and geese.

In other words, the speaker is being playful with this allusion. He suggests that beautiful people are descended from divine swans, while everyone else is descended from common waterfowl.

Yet, the speaker says, the "heritage" of those with divine ancestry and regular mortals is not totally separate; they "share" some overlapping heritage. All this to say: the speaker thinks that though none of these children may have the divine beauty that this woman does, they still might have something in common with her, perhaps a certain way of standing.

Notice that the sentence in this stanza keeps going on as the speaker tacks on one subordinate clause after another. This is hypotaxis, a device that use grammatically intertwined phrases to extend a sentence for a long time. Here, it captures the slow unwinding of the speaker's thoughts and observations, as he weds his image of this woman with the sights in the classroom.

LINES 22-24

And had that ...
... a living child.

The speaker has been wondering if any of the children in the schoolroom look like the beautiful, "Ledaean" woman did when she was a child. In the first half of the stanza, the speaker wondered if she "stood" like any of these children when she was their age. Now, he wonders if she had the same "colour upon cheek or hair" as any of these kids—that is, if she had the same hair color or complexion.

Suddenly, the speaker imagines that one of the children looks just like this woman did when she was a kid. It's as if he's been transported through time so that he gets to see that woman as a young girl, so that "She stands before me as a living child." The speaker loves this woman very much: his thoughts have been occupied by her this whole time he's supposed to have been inspecting the school. So when he imagines that he sees her as a child, his heart skips a beat: "my heart is driven wild."

The end of this stanza unifies the two sides of experience in this poem. On one side is the speaker's "public" experience in the classroom—his observations of the world around him. On the other side is the speaker's private experiences as thinks about this beautiful woman. When the speaker imagines that this woman suddenly stands in front of him as a little kid, he gets so excited partly because now his imaginative life and his public life have overlapped or fused.

This feeling of fusion is captured by the strong rhyme of "wild" and "child" at the end of the stanza. This is the first CC rhyme not be a slant rhyme in the poem, solidifying the speaker's feeling of excitement. Since this rhyming couplet fuses two lines with a single rhyme sound, it also mimics the kind of overlap between worlds that happens here.

Additionally, as noted in the previous entry, this stanza employ hypotaxis. Curiously, lines 17-23 form a single unit: they are all grammatically inseparable. Line 24, however, can stand on its own as an individual sentence. As a result, this final line has the feeling of summing up the speaker's winding thoughts and observations in a single, clear statement.

BETWEEN LINES 24-25, LINES 25-28

IV ...
... for its meat?

In the previous stanza, the speaker's imagination seemed overlap with his observations of the world around him. Now, he

returns to his imagination. Instead of dwelling on memories, however, he thinks about the present. The "present image" of the beautiful woman "floats into the [speaker's] mind." He thinks about how she looks now, rather than how she used to look.

The woman's appearance has changed over the years. Like the speaker, she is now old, and her faced has grown so thin that her cheeks look "hollow." In fact, she looks so gaunt that the speaker imagines all she drinks is "wind" and all she eats is "a mess of shadows." In comparison to the lush description of platonic love in stanza II, there's a certain to austerity or harshness to the woman now. The speaker refers to her face as "it," creating a feeling of distance and inaccessibility between them. He and her are no longer "blent" together as one.

That said, the speaker still finds the woman beautiful, but in a different way. Now, she looks as if her face could have been painted or sculpted by a "Quattrocento" artist—that is, a sculptor or painter from the Italian Renaissance. This also hints at the speaker's feeling of distance from the woman: now she's more like a painting than a real person to him. As the speaker continues in the next half of the stanza, it becomes clear that he's not just describing something particular to the woman, but a general effect of aging, a feeling of distance from one's own physical appearance.

The dark and austere imagery is matched by the dissonant slant rhyme and eye rhyme of this stanza. The subtle slant rhymes of "mind"/"wind" and "it"/"meat" reinforce the feeling of things being not quite right. They contrast with the mostly clean and full rhymes of stanza II, when the speaker described the woman as a younger person.

LINES 29-32

And I though ...
... of old scarecrow.

Having reflected on the appearance of the beautiful woman, the speaker now reflects on himself. Again riffing on his allusion to the story of Leda and the swan, he says that he "Had pretty plumage once." That is, he had pretty feathers—metaphorically comparing good looks to the beautiful feathers of a swan or duck. However, the speaker also makes it clear that he wasn't beautiful in the same way as the woman. She was as beautiful as a goddess; he was just good looking in a normal sort of way.

The syntax is a little confusing here, but it can be made clearer by adding some punctuation:

> And I[,] though never of Ledaean kind[,]
> Had pretty plumage once [...]

Or, by rearranging the sentence "And I had pretty plumage once, though never of Ledaean kind." In other words, the speaker's "plumage," his good looks, weren't Ledaean—they weren't the divine beauty that Leda and her children had.

Next, the speaker basically tells himself to snap out of it: "enough of that." He decides to stop wallowing over the past and the loss of beauty. He decides to focus on the present. He tells himself "to smile on all that smile"—that is, to return the smiles of the children and the nuns in the school. He acknowledges that as an old man he doesn't look how he did when he was younger; he looks like an "old scarecrow." He even senses that his presence as an old man might be frightening or intimidating to the children. That's why he makes a conscious effort to be "a comfortable kind of old scarecrow," to show the children that he is nice and friendly.

The speaker tries to acknowledge who he is in this present moment, and to live up to the expectations of that moment. That is, he is no longer a lovelorn youth just starting out on a promising writing career. Instead, he is an old national senator. By this point in his life, Yeats himself was married and had won the Nobel Prize in Literature. He was a successful elder writer and statesman. Here, he tells himself to behave accordingly.

BETWEEN LINES 32-33, LINES 33-36

V ...
... the drug decide,

The speaker makes another big leap in terms of the poem's subject. This stanza marks the second half of the poem, and the speaker departs from his meditation on the beautiful woman. Now, he thinks about motherhood, childbirth, and raising children. He frames these thoughts through an allusion to the ancient Greek philosopher Porphyry.

Inspired by Porphyry's text "The Cave of the Nymphs," Yeats came up with the idea of the "Honey of generation," a mythological drug present in a mother's milk that causes children to forget their existence as souls in heaven before they were born. Next, Yeats imagines a "youthful mother" holding her newborn infant after nursing it. The infant appears as a "shape upon her lap." Either the infant will fall asleep and forget everything that has happened, or "shriek" and "struggle to escape" the effects of the drug, so that later it can "recollect[]" its own birth.

With these lines, the speaker has now introduced the three roles that woman play in the poem: nuns, beautiful erotic partners, and mothers. Having spent time thinking about his erotic love for a beautiful woman, the speaker now turns to a depiction of motherhood. As with his depiction of feminine beauty, the speaker presents motherhood from his own, male perspective. This perspective will become clearer in the next four lines.

This stanza exhibits one of the poem's most extreme examples of hypotaxis. The whole stanza is one sentence that constantly interrupts itself with grammatical asides that provide additional information. The speaker weaves a tangled and complex scene that will stretch from motherhood, through birth, all the way to old age. The stanza's highly wrought syntax captures the

strange entanglement that is a parent–child relationship.

LINES 37-40

Would think her ...
... his setting forth?

In the second half of stanza 5, the speaker continues where he left off in lines 36. Having introduced the infant's struggle with the "Honey of generation," the speaker now tries to imagine the mother's perspective.

Line 37 actually picks up from the first half of line 33. They can be combined as such: "What youthful mother [...] would think her son, did she but see that shape / With sixty or more winters on its head." That is, the intervening three-and-a-half lines are essentially parenthetical information that set the scene, but aren't grammatically necessary.

The speaker imagines what a mother would think if, right after giving birth, she could see her son as a 60-year-old man. Would she think the pains of childbirth ("the pang of his birth") and the anxiety of raising a child and sending them out into the world ("the uncertainty of his setting forth") were worth it? Again, this highlights some of the strangeness of a parent–child relationship, how babies will someday be elderly.

These final four lines once again use the device hypotaxis, including lots of information that is grammatically supplemental to the main thrust of the sentence. In fact, the entire stanza could be simplified to the following: "What youthful mother [...] Would think her son [...] A compensation for his birth." This simple sentence captures the speaker's main point, but none of the richness of his argument.

In this way, the very grammar of the sentence seems to say something about life. As a single sentence, the stanza mirrors a single life from beginning to end. While that life *could* be summed up in a simple statement, the grammar here suggests that the meaning and substance of life comes from the powerful moments along the way.

BETWEEN LINES 40-41, LINES 41-44

VI ...
... king of kings;

The speaker again jumps to a new subject: this time, it's ancient Greek philosophers. The speaker begins with two foundational thinkers, Plato and Aristotle.

Plato's philosophy was very important to Yeats. As Yeats understood him, Plato argued that the everyday world is a kind of illusion. All the "things" in nature—people, plants, animals, earth, sky, etc.—are shadows of a deeper reality, called *the ideal*. In a sense, this deeper, ideal "nature" provides the blueprints or "paradigm" for all the things of the everyday world. What's real are these perfect forms and abstract truths—all the imperfect things of the everyday world are merely copies or glimpses of their true, ideal forms.

Yeats sums up his interpretation of Plato's philosophy with the metaphor of "spume," or sea foam. According to this metaphor, the regular world that humans perceive is like the foam of a wave. The deeper, true reality is what lies beneath that wave. Yet this true reality is also "ghostly" because it can't be perceived directly. It haunts humans who can only perceive their imperfect, everyday world.

Plato's student Aristotle took a markedly different approach, according to Yeats. He believed, on Yeats's account, that what you see is what you get: matter, not "ghostly" forms, is real. In this sense, Aristotle was "Solider" than Plato. He was also famously the tutor of the conqueror Alexander the Great. Yeats imagines Aristotle punishing Alexander in the same way that Irish schoolteachers punished their students: spanking him with taws, a kind of short leather whip.

Yeats turns this difference into a joke. While Plato thought everyday reality "plays / Upon" a deeper truth, he says that Aristotle "played the taws" upon Alexander's bottom. While Plato contemplated profound abstractions, Aristotle, more interested in earthly matters, got to work spanking Alexander.

LINES 45-48

World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras ...
... scare a bird.

Next, Yeats alludes to the teachings of Pythagoras, an ancient Greek mathematician and mystic. In line 45, Yeats references a certain myth in particular about Pythagoras: that he was "golden-thighed." Yes, the myth is literally that Pythagoras had a thigh made of gold.

According to tradition, Pythagoras was also the first to propose the theory of *the music of the spheres*. According to this theory, the stars and planets make beautiful music as they pass through their orbits in space. Yeats then imagines Pythagoras imitating this music, copying "What a star sang" on his own musical instrument, such as "a fiddle-stick or strings."

Yeats also suggests that the "Muses," goddesses of poetry and artistic inspiration, would overhear the music of the spheres if they were "careless." Note that *muse* is the root of the word "music." Pythagoras's theory, then, would seem to unify art and astronomy. Like Plato and Aristotle, Pythagoras presents a compelling, unified vision of life and existence.

However, there's also a problem with these three different theories, which is that they're just that: different. They can't all be true. None of these thinkers has the final word on the nature of reality, their theories are just human inventions. And like any human invention, the theories are flawed. In fact, the speaker equates their grand theories with something as simple as "Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird": a scarecrow. Just as scarecrows are built to scare away birds from crops, these theories are made to scare away feelings of meaninglessness. Humans invent theories to try to feel better about existence,

but ultimately people get old and theories are no better than rags and sticks.

BETWEEN LINES 48-49, LINES 49-52

VII ...
... a bronze repose.

In stanza 7, Yeats compares nuns and mothers. Specifically, the speaker compares how mothers worship their children (and pictures of their children), while nuns worship images of God and saints.

"Both nuns and mothers worship images," begins the speaker. But mothers are devoted to living beings—their children—while nuns are devoted to something abstract: God. As a result, they worship very different kinds of images.

Nuns worship religious images by candlelight, the speaker says. And compared to living children, religious images "keep a marble or a bronze repose." Religious statues *almost* seem to bring figures like Jesus or a saint to life, but not quite. Instead, they have a certain "repose" or aloofness. Statues, after all, aren't alive.

Here, the speaker presents two distinct visions of women. He has already unpacked some of his thoughts about motherhood in stanza 5, where he pondered the relationship between a mother and her child from infancy to old age. As the mother nursed her child, the speaker emphasized the physicality of this relationship: the pain of giving birth, the holding of the infant, the toll of age on the child's body. Motherhood, in this depiction, is about "generation"—the physical creation of new life.

In contrast, the speaker's depiction of nuns centers of "a marble or a bronze repose." Nuns are chaste, meaning they never engage in procreation. They aren't married to a human but to God; they're married to an idea rather to a flesh-and-blood person.

As such, nuns and mothers represent two poles of experience for the speaker. Mothers represent embodied life, what it's like to go through life's big biological processes and changes. On the other hand, nuns represent intellectual and spiritual life. They renounce fleshly existence for contemplation of God's eternal unchanging nature.

LINES 53-56

And yet they ...
... of man's enterprise;

Having argued that nuns "worship [...] a marble or bronze repose," the speaker now thinks further about religious art. Here's, he specifically imagining statues of religious figures, like saints. Catholics often pray to such images of saints. But, of course, the saints are statues and do not respond.

Even so, for religious people such as nuns, the speaker imagines that these statues seem alive in some way. More specifically, the speaker sees them as "Presences." The statues make something sacred and otherworldly, which humans normally wouldn't otherwise perceive, seem *present*; statues of saints seem to be filled with spirits of those saints. People perceive those spirits through their emotions, through "passion, piety, or affection." That is, through strong emotion, through strong religious faith, and through love.

For the religious, these "Presences" symbolize "all heavenly glory." That is, they represent heaven as a perfect, eternal, ideal realm. Religious art has a powerful effect on the devout and provokes a strong emotional response. In fact, religious statues "break hearts"—they make people weep. Part of the reason for this weeping is that such art can be incredibly beautiful. It may also represent Jesus's crucifixion, a subject traditionally meant to evoke tears in the Christian tradition. Or, such art may also make the faithful regret past sins and want to repent.

However, there is one more reason that such art may "break hearts," which the speaker brings up at the end of the stanza. Religious statues, and the holy beings they represent, are "self-born mockers of man's enterprise." The phrase "self-born" means that the "Presences" were not born from another person, but that they created themselves. Divine spirits are totally self-sufficient, in other words. This, of course, contrasts with humans, who are born from human parents and helplessly rely on those parents for a number of years.

Furthermore, these divine presences are immortal and unchanging. Humans, on the other hand, live and die. Humans engage in "enterprise[s]," or ambitious activities, that often fail or don't last as long as people would hope. Everything about human life is subject to change. It is in this regard that the "Presences" seem to "mock[]," or make fun of, human life. Humans think of immortal spirits and see how measly human activity is in comparison to eternal divinity. It is in this sense especially that the speaker says religious art breaks hearts.

BETWEEN LINES 56-57, LINES 57-60

VIII ...
... of midnight oil.

In the final stanza, the speaker tries to sum up all his ideas so far and provide a resolution for them. Although the poem has seemed to hop around from subject to subject, looking back over the poem it's possible to see how everything is connected.

The speaker has been preoccupied with aging, with the changes that life brings. He's thought about how change contrasts with human ideals of eternal truth, whether in the theories of philosophers or the "Presences" captured by religious art. In this last stanza, the speaker tries to address his own idea of beauty in the context of life's many phases.

Although the speaker admires art that represents perfect, unchanging beauty, he has also acknowledged the limits of such an art. Here, he wants to talk about how change and bodily life

can also be beautiful. As a result, he replaces the "marble or a bronze repose" of religious art with "dancing" and "blossoming." These two processes contrast with the unchanging stoniness of religious statues. As *processes*, dance and blossoming are metaphors for life as change.

Here, the speaker wants to find a positive vision of the relationship between body, soul, and the struggle to find beauty:

> Labour is blossoming or dancing where
> The body is not bruised to pleasure soul

"Labour" means work. The speaker in particular seems to be thinking of the kind of work necessary to create beauty and find satisfaction in life (note also the echo with childbirth). He emphasizes that such work shouldn't be harmful to the person engaged in it. People searching for beauty that will please their souls shouldn't have to hurt their bodies in order to so.

Similarly, "beauty" shouldn't be "born out of its own despair"—people shouldn't need to be miserable in order create beautiful works of art. And people shouldn't need to burn "midnight oil" (i.e., spend sleepless nights studying) in order to achieve wisdom. All this to say, the speaker is searching for a life-affirming form of beauty.

LINES 61-64

> *O chestnut tree, ...*
> *... from the dance?*

In the final four lines of the poem, the speaker eloquently summarizes his thoughts about the relationship between life, change, and beauty. Using parallelism, the speaker asks two similar rhetorical questions about the nature of life and change.

In two couplets (lines 61-61 and 63-64) the presents two versions of this question. In the first couplet, the speaker thinks about life through the metaphor of a chestnut tree, implicitly comparing the parts of the tree to the parts of a life:

> O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

A "bole" is the trunk of a tree. Here the speaker is asking if a chestnut tree can be reduced to any of its parts. Is the essence of the chestnut tree its flowers, its leaves, or its trunk? Of course it's all these things: it is a whole that's irreducible to its parts. And so is life, the speaker implies. A person can't be reduced to who they were as a child, or who they will be in old age.

In the second couplet, the speaker asks, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" This famous question is a version of the first one with a slightly new spin. Now, the speaker asks if there's some essence of a dance that can be separated from the motions of the person dancing it. Put in terms of a person's life: Is the some essence of a person separate from all the events of their life? Here, the speaker implies that there isn't. Life is a process, like blossoming or flowering. Its beauty is in how things change, not in how things stay the same.

Line 63 captures how a view of life as a process means that every moment is beautiful in some way: "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance." These descriptions could apply to someone at any age. Anyone can feel moved by music, anyone's eyes can light up upon seeing a beautiful thing or a beloved person. In these eloquent final lines, the speaker puts a positive spin on his worries up to this point. Whatever the difficulties of aging or the search for truth, at least life is beautiful.

SYMBOLS

THE DANCER AND THE DANCE

The poem's famous final line asks a rhetorical question: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" The speaker is saying that a dance—a series of movements—and the person making those movements are one. Both the dance and dancer are symbolic here: the dance here represents life, which is a series of moments/actions/events from youth to old age. The dancer is the person living that life—going through the "steps" that life entails. A person can't be separated from their own life.

This relates to another symbol in the poem—that of the chestnut tree mentioned in line 61. The speaker asks the tree, "Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" The implied answer is that the tree is all of these things at once; the tree isn't something separate from its parts, but rather *is all of those parts*. In the same way, the actions that make up a life aren't separate from that life. Life *is all of those actions*, all the steps that the "dancer" goes through.

This connects to the poem's broader idea of life it also as a continual process—a series of ongoing moments that come together to fashion a whole. One can't pluck one moment from this process and call it a life; everything from youth to old form the "dance" of life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 64:** "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

In the second half of his career, Yeats moved towards a style of poetry that sounded a bit more like spoken language. As a

result, although he still uses alliteration in this poem, Yeats blends it into his speaker's seemingly causal monologue.

The early /k/ and /s/ alliteration provides a good example of how the speaker uses alliteration casually, rather lyrically—that is, as a means of holding the poem's images together rather than creating high-flown poetic beauty:

> I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
> A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
> The children learn to cipher and to sing,
> To study reading-books and history,

The first alliterative pair of "questioning" and "kind," with those sharp /k/ sounds, subtly evokes the speaker's brief interruption as he questions this nun. The /s/ alliteration in "cipher," "sing," and "study," meanwhile, simply lends a sense of unity to this list of the children's school subjects.

Most of the poem's alliteration function much like the above. One noticeable exception is the final stanza, which is by far the poem's most lyrical. Here, /b/ alliteration flows throughout the stanza, as in these lines:

> O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,

The shift to a more lyrical tone is clearly signaled by the speaker's repetition of "O," an old-fashioned form of the word "Oh," meant to capture a sudden burst of strong emotion. This burst of emotion is conveyed through the strong /b/ sound, which highlights poetic words like "blossom," "body," and "brightening." By repeating this strong sound with poetic words throughout the stanza, the speaker creates a lyrical summary of the poem's many concerns.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “cipher,” “sing”
- **Line 4:** “study”
- **Line 5:** “sew”
- **Line 6:** “modern”
- **Line 7:** “momentary”
- **Line 8:** “sixty,” “smiling”
- **Line 9:** “body,” “bent”
- **Line 10:** “tale”
- **Line 11:** “Told,” “trivial”
- **Line 12:** “tragedy”
- **Line 13:** “Told”
- **Line 14:** “sphere,” “sympathy”
- **Line 15:** “Plato's,” “parable”
- **Line 16:** “white,” “one”
- **Line 17:** “thinking,” “that”
- **Line 19:** “stood,” “so”
- **Line 20:** “swan”
- **Line 21:** “Something,” “heritage”
- **Line 22:** “had,” “hair”
- **Line 26:** “finger,” “fashion”
- **Line 28:** “mess,” “meat”
- **Line 30:** “pretty,” “plumage”
- **Line 31:** “smile,” “smile”
- **Line 34:** “Honey,” “had”
- **Line 35:** “sleep,” “struggle”
- **Line 36:** “drug,” “decide”
- **Line 37:** “son,” “she,” “see,” “shape”
- **Line 38:** “sixty”
- **Line 41:** “Plato,” “plays”
- **Line 42:** “paradigm”
- **Line 43:** “played”
- **Line 44:** “king,” “kings”
- **Line 46:** “Fingered,” “fiddle,” “stick,” “strings”
- **Line 47:** “star,” “sang”
- **Line 48:** “Old,” “old,” “sticks,” “scare”
- **Line 49:** “Both”
- **Line 50:** “But”
- **Line 51:** “mother's”
- **Line 52:** “marble,” “bronze”
- **Line 53:** “break,” “Presences”
- **Line 54:** “passion,” “piety”
- **Line 56:** “mockers,” “man's”
- **Line 57:** “blossoming”
- **Line 58:** “body,” “bruised”
- **Line 59:** “beauty,” “born”
- **Line 60:** “blear”
- **Line 61:** “blossomer”
- **Line 62:** “blossom,” “bole”
- **Line 63:** “O,” “body,” “O,” “brightening”
- **Line 64:** “dancer,” “dance”

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration, assonance is a subtle presence throughout this poem. It helps provide a sense of structure and unity, and to call readers' attention to certain images and ideas. A good example of this comes early, in lines 2-3:

> A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
> The children learn to cipher and to sing,

These lines sound as if they could almost be prose. That's not a bad thing—in fact, it's the effect the speaker's after. He *wants* the poem to feel casual and quiet, to give the impression of observing these things as they happen. As with alliteration, the speaker uses assonance to convey this mixture of structure and casualness, adding subtle music that never overpowers the poem.

Assonance also helps readers get a sense of the poem's environment and the speaker's state of mind. For example, the shared long /ay/ sound of line 12 adds a sing-song feel that suggests the "childishness" of the tragedy being described:

> That changed some childish day to tragedy—

The short /ih/ sounds of "Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings" feels similarly lighthearted as the speaker describes Pythagoras's pale imitation of the songs that stars sing (an allusion to the music of the spheres—more on that in the Allusion entry of this guide).

The first part of the sixth stanza features quite a bit of alliteration, assonance, and consonance as well. Note all the /aw/ and /ay/ sounds throughout:

> Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
> Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
> Solider Aristotle played the taws
> Upon the bottom of a king of kings;

Readers can hear the speaker building his argument. The /aw/ of lines 43-44 ("Solider [...] kings;") is again light-hearted, in keeping with the image of the philosopher Aristotle essentially spanking Alexander the Great.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "through," "schoolroom"
- **Line 2:** "kind," "white," "replies"
- **Line 3:** "cipher," "sing"
- **Line 4:** "history"
- **Line 5:** "be," "neat," "everything"
- **Line 9:** "dream," "Ledaean," "body"
- **Line 12:** "changed," "day"
- **Line 20:** "daughters," "swan"
- **Line 22:** "had," "that," "hair"
- **Line 23:** "thereupon"
- **Line 31:** "show"
- **Line 32:** "old," "scarecrow"
- **Line 33:** "shape"
- **Line 34:** "generation," "betrayed"
- **Line 35:** "sleep," "shriek," "escape"
- **Line 37:** "she," "see"
- **Line 38:** "sixty"
- **Line 39:** "compensation," "pang"
- **Line 41:** "Plato," "nature," "plays"
- **Line 43:** "Solider," "Aristotle," "taws"
- **Line 44:** "Upon," "bottom"
- **Line 46:** "Fingered," "fiddle," "stick," "strings"
- **Line 48:** "Old," "clothes," "old"
- **Line 49:** "nuns," "mothers"
- **Line 51:** "reveries"
- **Line 52:** "keep"
- **Line 53:** "they," "break"
- **Line 54:** "That," "passion"
- **Line 58:** "body," "not"
- **Line 60:** "eyed," "midnight"
- **Line 61:** "tree"
- **Line 62:** "leaf," "blossom"
- **Line 63:** "body," "glance"
- **Line 64:** "can," "dancer," "dance"

CONSONANCE

Consonance works much like assonance and alliteration in "Among School Children." It tends to hang in the background, adding quietly to the music of the poem.

Take the poem's opening lines:

> I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
> A kind old nun in a white hood replies;

The repeated /l/, /k/, and /n/ sounds aren't meant to hit the reader in the face, but rather to weave a feeling of general cohesiveness—of this scene being a peaceful, harmonious one.

Another example of this is in the sixth stanza:

> Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
> Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
> Solider Aristotle played the taws
> Upon the bottom of a king of kings;

Here, the repeated /p/, /l/, and /s/ sounds helps the speaker weave together his summary of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. These lines feel connected, like an argument. The percussive nature of the /p/ sound has an almost humorous feel to it, adding to the speaker's jokey tone, especially in his discussion of Aristotle. The assonance throughout this passage of the /aw/ sound adds to this lightheartedness.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "long," "schoolroom," "questioning"
- **Line 2:** "kind," "old," "nun," "in," "replies"
- **Line 3:** "children," "learn," "cipher," "sing"
- **Line 4:** "study," "reading," "books," "history"
- **Line 7:** "momentary," "wonder," "stare," "upon"
- **Line 8:** "smiling," "man"
- **Line 9:** "body," "bent"
- **Line 10:** "Above," "tale"
- **Line 11:** "Told," "harsh," "reproof," "trivial"
- **Line 12:** "changed," "childish," "day," "tragedy"
- **Line 13:** "Told," "two," "natures," "blent"
- **Line 14:** "Into," "sphere," "youthful," "sympathy"

- **Line 15:** “else,” “alter,” “Plato's,” “parable”
- **Line 16:** “white,” “shell”
- **Line 17:** “thinking,” “that,” “fit,” “grief,” “rage”
- **Line 18:** “upon,” “one,” “t'other,” “there”
- **Line 19:** “wonder,” “stood,” “so”
- **Line 20:** “daughters,” “swan,” “can”
- **Line 21:** “every,” “paddler's,” “heritage”
- **Line 22:** “colour,” “cheek,” “hair”
- **Line 23:** “thereupon,” “heart,” “driven”
- **Line 24:** “living,” “child”
- **Line 25:** “Her,” “present,” “image,” “mind”
- **Line 26:** “finger,” “fashion”
- **Line 27:** “cheek,” “drank”
- **Line 28:** “took,” “mess,” “shadows,” “meat”
- **Line 29:** “never,” “Ledaean,” “kind”
- **Line 30:** “pretty,” “plumage,” “once,” “enough”
- **Line 31:** “smile,” “all,” “smile”
- **Line 32:** “comfortable,” “kind,” “scarecrow”
- **Line 33:** “shape,” “upon,” “lap”
- **Line 34:** “Honey,” “generation,” “betrayed”
- **Line 35:** “must,” “sleep,” “shriek,” “struggle,” “escape”
- **Line 36:** “recollection,” “drug,” “decide”
- **Line 37:** “son,” “she,” “see,” “shape”
- **Line 38:** “With,” “more,” “winters”
- **Line 39:** “compensation,” “pang”
- **Line 40:** “uncertainty,” “setting”
- **Line 41:** “Plato,” “spume,” “plays”
- **Line 42:** “Upon,” “paradigm”
- **Line 43:** “Solider,” “Aristotle,” “played”
- **Line 44:** “Upon”
- **Line 45:** “World,” “golden,” “thighed,” “Pythagoras”
- **Line 46:** “Fingered,” “upon,” “fiddle,” “stick,” “strings”
- **Line 47:** “star,” “sang,” “careless,” “Muses,” “heard”
- **Line 48:** “Old,” “clothes,” “old,” “sticks,” “scare,” “bird”
- **Line 49:** “mothers,” “worship,” “images”
- **Line 50:** “candles,” “light,” “not,” “those”
- **Line 51:** “That,” “animate,” “mother's,” “reveries”
- **Line 52:** “marble,” “bronze,” “repose”
- **Line 53:** “break,” “hearts,” “Presences”
- **Line 54:** “passion,” “piety”
- **Line 55:** “all,” “heavenly,” “glory,” “symbolise”
- **Line 56:** “born,” “mockers,” “man's,” “enterprise”
- **Line 57:** “Labour,” “blossoming,” “dancing”
- **Line 58:** “body,” “bruised,” “pleasure,” “soul”
- **Line 59:** “beauty,” “born,” “despair”
- **Line 60:** “blear,” “wisdom,” “midnight”
- **Line 61:** “tree,” “great,” “rooted,” “blossomer”
- **Line 62:** “leaf,” “blossom,” “bole”
- **Line 63:** “body,” “brightening,” “glance”
- **Line 64:** “can,” “know,” “dancer,” “dance”

ALLUSION

"Among School Children" is chock-full of allusions, most of them to various elements of ancient Greek culture. The first allusion the speaker makes is to the story of Leda and the swan from ancient Greek mythology:

- According to this story, Leda was a beautiful Spartan queen that the god Zeus was attracted to. To consummate his desire for Leda, Zeus took the form of a swan and raped her. As a result of this act, Leda had several children, one of whom was the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, whose abduction would later cause the Trojan War, as depicted in Homer's *The Iliad.*
- Yeats was fascinated with this story. In fact, the same volume that has "Among School Children" also includes Yeats's famous poem "Leda and the Swan." He also wrote about Helen of Troy numerous times.
- For Yeats, Leda's story represents how mortals can suddenly be swept by forces beyond their control, how the tragedies of history can stem from a single moment. Leda's story connects to Yeats's concern over how to evaluate a person's life, how to separate the essence of a person from the events they are involved in.
- Leda also represents ideal feminine beauty for Yeats. That is the sense Yeats means to give by the phrase "Ledaean" body. This woman is a beautiful as the most beautiful woman in the world. For Yeats, Helen of Troy symbolized the kinds of troubles that could stem from men's intense desires for woman, a trouble that many of Yeats's speakers contend with.

The speaker also alludes to several ancient Greek thinkers: Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras.

- In Yeats's interpretation, the philosopher Plato argued that the visible world is but a shadow of a deeper realm of unchanging, absolute truth.
- In contrast, his student Aristotle focused on physical objects and creatures, arguing that everything has some purpose it is meant to accomplish in the physical world. Aristotle was also the tutor for Alexander the Great, a military conqueror of the ancient world, a "king of kings."

Plato's writings also have a description of love that is the basis for what is now commonly called *platonic love*.

- In Plato's *The Symposium*, one of the characters tells a story about how human beings were originally two people joined in one sphere-like body. Later, they became separated, but still longed for that state of perfect union.
- Sometimes in contemporary speech, platonic love is taken to mean love without sexual desire. However, that's not necessarily that case when Yeats

describes how "our two natures blent / Into a sphere of youthful sympathy." He's just saying that he feels that he and the woman have a perfect emotional connection, in addition to his implied erotic attraction.

The speaker also alludes to the Greek mystic and mathematician Pythagoras, familiar to high school students through the Pythagorean Theorem.

- One of Pythagoras's many teachings was that the stars, planets, and the moon move in perfect mathematical harmony that produces beautiful music called the music of the spheres.
- Alluding to the "Muses," the Greek goddesses of artistic inspiration, the speaker suggests that the Muses would sometimes overhear this music, and the Pythagoras would try to reproduce it on musical instruments.

There's one more philosopher that the speaker could also be said to allude to: Porphyry.

- Yeats said he borrowed the phrase "Honey of generation" from a text by Porphyry called "The Cave of the Nymphs." Adding his own spin to this phrase, Yeats imagined the honey as a drug present in mothers' milk that caused children to forget their existence as souls in heaven before they were born.
- This reference ties in to the speaker's meditation on the conflict between eternal beauty and the ephemeral nature of embodied, human life.

Finally, let's briefly gloss the word "Quattrocento."

- This refers to Italian Renaissance art from the 1400s, a period during which Europeans began to master realistic depictions of human form. The speaker suggests that in her old age, his beautiful friend's gaunt face looks like a painting or sculpture by one of the esteemed artists from this period.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Ledaean body"
- **Lines 13-15:** "it seemed that our two natures blent / Into a sphere from youthful sympathy, / Or else, to alter Plato's parable,"
- **Line 20:** " daughters of the swan"
- **Line 26:** "Quattrocento"
- **Line 29:** "Ledaean kind"
- **Line 34:** "Honey of generation"
- **Lines 41-48:** "Plato thought nature but a spume that plays / Upon a ghostly paradigm of things; / Solider Aristotle played the taws / 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 scare a bird."

METAPHOR

The speaker uses metaphor at key moments throughout the poem. The first metaphors come in the second stanza, when the speaker tries to describe his feeling of connection with a beautiful friend:

- First, he compares this connection as being "blent / Into a sphere." In other words, he feels as if he and his friend are a single orb. (This description is also discussed in the Allusion section of this guide.)
- Next, the speaker tries a slightly different metaphor. Now he says the two of them are like "the yolk and white" of a single egg. This metaphor again suggests that the two are like one organism. It also captures the speaker's sexual desire for the woman: a fertilized egg is produced by the union of sex cells.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker compares himself to "a comfortable kind of old scarecrow." This self-deprecating remark suggests that the speaker doesn't think much of his appearance in his old age. He thinks he looks like a scarecrow: thin, with wrinkled skin, etc. At the same time, he tries to convey that he is a harmless scarecrow, that there's nothing for the children to be afraid of.

The speaker picks up the metaphor of a scarecrow again in stanza VI. After listing the various theories of different philosophers, the speaker calls them all "Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird." This description seems to apply equally to each of these philosophers' theories as well as to the philosophers themselves. Of course, all these philosophers would have also aged as they got older, and becomes "scarecrow[s]" like the speaker. Furthermore, their theories are also like scarecrows: instead of grand truths, their theories might as well be a collection of rags and sticks.

In the final stanza, the speaker employs two of the poem's most striking metaphors. He compares life to a chestnut tree and then to a dance. In the comparison to a tree, the speaker wonders if the tree's essence can be reduced to any of its parts—is the essence of the tree its leaves, its flowers, or its trunk? Metaphorically, the speaker is asking if life can be reduced to any of its particular phases, to youth, or young adulthood, or old age.

Next, the speaker compares life to a dance, asking if it's possible to separate a dance from the person dancing it. In other words, can the events of a life be separated from the person who has

lived them?

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "it seemed that our two natures blent / Into a sphere from youthful sympathy, / Or else, to alter Plato's parable, / Into the yolk and white of the one shell."
- **Lines 29-30:** "And I though never of Ledaean kind / Had pretty plumage once"
- **Lines 31-32:** "and show / There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow."
- **Lines 41-42:** "Plato thought nature but a spume that plays / Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;"
- **Line 48:** "Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird."
- **Lines 57-58:** "Labour is blossoming or dancing where / The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,"
- **Lines 61-64:** "O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? / O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

SIMILE

The poem uses two similes. The first is in stanza IV:

> Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
> And took a mess of shadows for its meat?

The speaker is talking about his beautiful friend he thinks has become gaunt in her later years. In fact, he thinks she's so gaunt that she looks as if she only drinks air and eats shadows (i.e., like she's not really eating at all). All the same, there's a sort of austere beauty to her, as if a "Quattrocento" (15th-century Italian artist) had sculpted her.

Next, the speaker compares the "images" worshiped by mothers and nuns:

> Both nuns and mothers worship images,
> But those the candles light are not as those
> That animate a mother's reveries

The images "the candles light" are images of saints, while the images "That animate a mother's reveries" are children. In other words, mothers worship living beings—children—while nuns worship images of immortal spirits. By using a simile here, the speaker explicitly contrasts these two very different models of femininity: on one hand, a mother and the physicality of her relationship with her child (birth pains, nursing, embracing, etc.), and on the other hand, a nun's spiritual, intellectual, and ethereal relationship with God.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-28:** "Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind / And took a mess of shadows for its meat?"
- **Lines 49-51:** "images, / But those the candles light are not as those / That animate a mother's reveries,"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speakers asks four rhetorical questions in "Among School Children."

First, he asks:

> Did Quattrocento finger fashion [the woman's face]
> Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
> And took a mess of shadows for its meat?

There's no answer to this question because it's purely metaphorical. The speaker knows the woman's face wasn't sculpted by an Italian Renaissance artist, and that she doesn't drink wind and eat shadows. Instead, he asks this question to convey his incredulity at how austere and gaunt her face has become.

Next, the entirety of stanza V can be read as a rhetorical question. The speaker asks, if a mother could suddenly see what her newborn child would look like as an old man, would she think all the trouble of parenthood was worth it? As a rhetorical question, the implied answer is *no*, she wouldn't think it was worth it. However, there's also some genuine doubt here. Interpreted this way, the speaker is not posing a rhetorical questioning but genuinely wondering: is life worth it?

At the end of the poem, the speaker asks two rhetorical questions in a row:

> O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

And:

> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?

In the first question, the speaker asks if the essence of a chestnut tree can be reduced to any of its parts. And in the second question, the speaker asks how the motions of a dance can be separated from the person dancing. Both these questions are metaphors for life. And both questions have implicit answers to them: a tree can't be reduced to any of its parts and a dance can't be separated from the dancer. Life is a holistic process, and each phase of it has its own beauty and satisfactions.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 26-28:** “Did Quattrocento finger fashion it / Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind / And took a mess of shadows for its meat?”
- **Lines 33-40:** “What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap / Honey of generation had betrayed, / And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape / As recollection or the drug decide, / Would think her son, did she but see that shape / With sixty or more winters on its head, / A compensation for the pang of his birth, / Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?”
- **Lines 61-64:** “O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? / O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

POLYPTOTON

The speaker uses polyptoton three times in "Among School Children." The first example is in line 31: "Better to smile on all that smile." Here, the speaker's telling himself to return the smiles of the children. The first "smile" is a verb and the second is a noun. This repetition of "smile" emphasizes the social nature of smiling. In contrast with the speaker's deeply inward thoughts, smiling represents the speaker's exterior life as a senator, his engagement with other people.

Next, in stanza VI the speaker repeats two forms of the word play:

> Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
> Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
> Solider Aristotle played the taws
> Upon the bottom of a king of kings;

The repetition humorously contrasts the markedly different philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Plato theorized that visible reality was just a "spume" or froth that "plays"—sputters and sprays—over a truer, deeper reality. This interpretation of Plato is very poetic and serious. In contrast, Aristotle focused on earthly things, and was also the tutor of Alexander the Great. The speaker imagines Aristotle punishing Alexander in the same way that an Irish schoolteacher would punish a student: by spanking him with "taws," a kind of short leather whip. In this sense, it could be humorously said that Aristotle "played the taws / Upon [Alexander's] bottom."

Finally, in the last stanza, the speaker uses the words "dancing," "dancer," and "dance" to emphasize the point he is trying to make. In this stanza, the speaker describes how people are inseparable from the events in their lives, and that every phase of a person's life is important. By using different forms of the same word, "dance," the poem conveys how people themselves can take many forms, changing throughout their lives. Additionally, it captures the inseparable connection between a "dancer" and "the dance."

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 31:** “smile,” “smile”
- **Line 41:** “plays”
- **Line 43:** “played”
- **Line 57:** “dancing”
- **Line 64:** “dancer,” “dance”

METONYMY

The speaker occasionally uses metonymy to add some variety to his phrasing.

For instance, the speaker uses the phrase "sixty or more winters on its head." Here, "winters" metonymically refers to years, and years are conceptually related to the white hair on the speaker's head. Furthermore, the color white is often associated with winter snow. The speaker uses this phrase to get the reader to imagine the white hair on the speaker's head *and* how that white hair represents the speaker's age and experience.

And at the end of the poem, the speaker uses the phase "midnight oil" as metonymy for staying up late. This use actually comes from the idiom *burning the midnight oil*, which comes from the era of using oil-burning lamps as a source of light. Burning the midnight oil means staying up late with a lamp on, probably reading or writing. In some of his later poems, Yeats talks about staying up late, studying old philosophers like Plato. For him, "midnight oil" represents the tiring and time-consuming search for wisdom.

As a related note, the phrase "Quattrocento finger" might be mistaken for metonymy, but it is more properly classified as synecdoche. Here, the "finger" of an Italian Renaissance artist stands in for the artist as a whole.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 26:** “Quattrocento finger”
- **Line 38:** “With sixty or more winters on its head”
- **Line 60:** “midnight oil”

APOSTROPHE

The speaker uses apostrophe in the final two stanzas. These instances can be easily spotted because they all begin with "O."

First, the speaker addresses the "Presences" that seem to fill religious artwork—the divine spirits of saints or even God:

> [...] O Presences
> That passion, piety or affection knows,
> And that all heavenly glory symbolise—
> O self-born mockers of man's enterprise

These "Presences" are mysterious beings or spirits that people sense through their emotions and religious faith. Although they're called "Presences," in a literal or physical sense they're not actually present, and they can't respond to the speaker. This moment marks the speaker's most intense moment of his relationship with *the ideal*—with eternal truth and perfection. Here, the speaker passionately addresses these beings that symbolize the ideal.

With his second "O," the speaker's tone shifts. Instead of praising them, he becomes pessimistic: "O self-born mockers of man's enterprise." He acknowledges that the Presences have a kind of aloofness to them; they seem to "mock," or make fun of, humanity from afar. Humans address them through apostrophe, but the Presences don't respond.

At the end of the poem, the speaker again employs "O" to address a "chestnut tree," a "body swayed to music," and a "brightening glance" (eyes filled with pleasure). Again, the "O" also signals praise. Now, however, the speaker's not addressing something far off and inaccessible. Instead, he's addressing organisms that are full of life. He asks a tree the rhetorical question: "Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?" He asks the dancing body and the "glance" the ever-quotable question: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" With these questions, the speaker emphasizes a view of life as a process.

Comparing the apostrophe in stanzas VII and VIII, then, provides a clear view of one of the poem's central conflicts: between eternal, unchanging beauty and truth on one hand, and the transient, mortal beauty of human life on the other.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 53-56:** "O Presences / That passion, piety or affection knows, / And that all heavenly glory symbolise— / O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;"
- **Lines 61-64:** "O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? / O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

HYPOTAXIS

Some of the stanzas in this poem employ hypotaxis, long sentences of intertwining grammatical units. In particular, stanza II, III, and IV are each composed of a single hypotactic sentence.

Perhaps stanza V is the most obvious example of hypotaxis, because it's not really even possible to tell what the speaker is saying until the end of the sentence. The language continually interrupts itself with what are essentially parenthetical statements. Removed of all these extraneous statements, the entire stanza would read as thus: "What youthful mother [...] Would think her son [...] A compensation for the pang of his birth, / Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?" All the extra phrases do add evocative detail, giving life and emotion to this stanza, capturing facets of both childhood and old age.

In a way, the fact that the stanza is a single sentence mirrors the stanza's depiction of a life from beginning to end. On its own, the bare bones of the sentence's grammar don't do justice to its rich asides, in the same way that a simple summary of someone's life doesn't capture all the important moments along the way. But taken in its hypotactic entirety, this stanza goes a little ways towards capturing the strange complexity of an entire life.

Meanwhile, stanzas II and III capture the texture of the speaker's train of thought. In stanza II, the speaker discusses how he feels a perfect connection with his beautiful friend, and in stanza III he thinks about how this woman must have looked as a child and compares her to the children in the classroom. In both stanzas, hypotaxis conveys something like a stream of consciousness, a glimpse into how the speaker associates different ideas in his head.

The speaker doesn't use hypotaxis throughout the poem. Rather, he uses it at key moments to create certain effects, such as conveying his thought process or conveying the tension between youth and old age.

Where Hypotaxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-16:** "I dream of a Ledaean body, bent / Above a sinking fire, a tale that she / Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event / That changed some childish day to tragedy— / Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent / Into a sphere from youthful sympathy, / Or else, to alter Plato's parable, / Into the yolk and white of the one shell."
- **Lines 17-24:** "And thinking of that fit of grief or rage / I look upon one child or t'other there / And wonder if she stood so at that age— / For even daughters of the swan can share / Something of every paddler's heritage— / And had that colour upon cheek or hair, / And thereupon my heart is driven wild: / She stands before me as a living child."
- **Lines 33-40:** "What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap / Honey of generation had betrayed, / And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape / As recollection or the drug decide, / Would think her son, did she but see that shape / With sixty or more winters on its head, / A compensation for the pang of his birth, / Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?"

PARALLELISM

The speaker uses parallelism a few times in the second half of the poem. Each of these uses is meant to show how the speaker's examples share some similarity or are related to each other in an interesting way.

For instance, the speaker describes three different

philosophers using a parallel structure. This parallelism highlights the *differences* in their philosophies. Here are the three parallel phrases:

> Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
> Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;

And:

> Solider Aristotle played the taws
> Upon the bottom of a king of kings;

And:

> World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
> Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings

Two elements help the parallelism stand out: the repetition of "upon" and the use of some form of "plays" or a word related to plays ("Fingered," to describe playing a musical instrument). Each of these philosophies is seen to be some form of play that happens "upon" something else. Furthermore, each of these philosophies is different. None of them actually captures the true nature of reality in its entirety. Rather, they are more like forms of play that can't get at some deeper meaning.

In the final stanza, the speaker uses parallelism twice. First, lines 59 and 60 are parallel (and also feature anaphora):

> Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
> Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

In both these lines, the speaker describes things that are "born" from something else. "Beauty born" from "despair," and "wisdom" born from staying up late. But, the speaker says, these things shouldn't be the case. People shouldn't need to suffer to create beautiful things and shouldn't need to stay up all night studying in order to achieve wisdom. The use of parallelism captures how these two examples fit into the speaker's broader argument that life should be seen as a process full of beauty and satisfaction at every stage.

The final instance of parallelism also fits into this argument. Here are the two parallel phrases

> *O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,*
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

And:

> *O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,*
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?

In each of these phrases, the speaker begins by addressing something through apostrophe (which again creates anaphora). In the first phrase, the speaker addresses a "chestnut tree." In the second phrase, he addresses a "body swayed to music" and the "brightening glance" of someone whose attention has been captivated by beauty. Then, he asks each of these things a question. Again, the questions connect to the speaker's thoughts about life as a process and its relation to beauty.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 41-46:** "Plato thought nature but a spume that plays / Upon a ghostly paradigm of things; / Solider Aristotle played the taws / Upon the bottom of a king of kings; / World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras / Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings"
- **Lines 59-60:** "Nor beauty born out of its own despair, / Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil."
- **Lines 61-64:** "O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? / O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

VOCABULARY

Cipher (Line 3) - Read or do arithmetic.

Reading-books (Line 4) - Presumably early-reader books for students just learning read.

Public man (Line 8) - A politician (Yeats was serving as an Irish senator when he wrote this poem).

Ledaean body (Line 9) - A woman who has a body as beautiful as Leda's—a mythological queen—or as one of her children. Her daughter Helen (a.k.a. "Helen of Troy") was called the most beautiful woman in the world.

Reproof (Line 11) - Scolding.

Natures (Line 13) - Souls, personalities, minds, etc.

Sympathy (Line 14) - A feeling of connection with someone.

Plato's parable (Line 15) - A story told in the philosopher Plato's famous text *The Symposium*, about how human beings were originally two people fused into a single sphere. These spheres represent the perfect union of two souls in love.

Plato (Line 15, Line 41) - An ancient Greek philosopher who has played a central role in Western philosophical thought.

Shell (Line 16) - An eggshell.

Fit (Line 17) - Episode, outbreak.

T'other (Line 18) - A contraction of "the other," with a bit of a colloquial feel to it.

Daughters of the Swan (Line 20) - An allusion to Greek mythology, this refers to children descended from Leda and Zeus (who took the form of a swan when he raped Leda).

Paddler's (Line 21) - Swans and other waterfowl.

Quattrocento (Line 26) - Italian Renaissance art from the 1400s.

Mess (Line 28) - A serving of food.

Plumage (Line 30) - Feathers. The speaker is metaphorically comparing his former good looks to bird feathers.

Honey of generation (Line 34) - A mythological drug that Yeats imagined being present in mother's milk, and which would cause infants to forget their former existences as souls in heaven. He took the phrase from a text by the ancient philosopher Porphyry.

Drug (Line 36) - This refers to the "Honey of generation."

Pang (Line 39) - A feeling of pain.

Setting forth (Line 40) - Growing up. Can refer to childhood as well as to the beginning adulthood, when someone leaves home.

Spume (Line 41) - The foam of ocean waves.

Paradigm (Line 42) - Prototype, blueprint, form.

Solider (Line 43) - More solid. Aristotle's philosophy was more earthly than Plato's, focusing on matter, objects, and organisms.

The taws (Line 43) - A type of short leather whip that splits into two flat strips, often used by Irish schoolmasters to punish students.

Golden-thighed Pythagoras (Line 45) - An allusion to the myth that Pythagoras, an ancient Greek mystic and mathematician, had a thigh made of gold.

Fiddle-stick or strings (Line 46) - A violin or lyre, a type of harp.

Muses (Line 47) - Greek goddesses of artistic inspiration.

Reveries (Line 51) - Strong, absorbing thoughts or emotions.

Repose (Line 52) - A state of stiffness, rest, tranquility.

Presences (Line 53) - Spirits, beings, or essences that seem to be present in religious art.

Piety (Line 54) - Deep religious faith.

Self-born (Line 56) - Born from themselves. In other words, these presences aren't descended from anyone or anything. They are totally self-sufficient.

Blear-eyed (Line 60) - Having cloudy eyes from staying up late.

Midnight oil (Line 60) - A reference to the idiom "burn the midnight oil." People used to light their homes with lamps that used oil. Burning the midnight oil means that one stays up late with the light on, probably reading or writing.

Bole (Line 62) - Tree trunk.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Among School Children" uses a type of stanza called *ottava rima*, an eight-line stanza that rhymes ABABABCC. This form was originally developed by early Italian Renaissance poets, who used it for long narrative poems.

In Yeats's hands, however, ottava rima it becomes a means of thinking through different trains of thought one at a time. Instead of telling a story that flows from one stanza to the next, Yeats makes each stanza self-contained. Many of the poem's stanzas begin with a huge leap in subject compared to what has come before.

- For instance, stanza I gives a straightforward description of the speaker's visit to a school, while stanza II begins by describing a woman's body in terms of Greek mythology.
- The leaps between stanzas are further emphasized by the fact that each stanza is numbered and almost all of them end with a period or question mark. As a result, each stanza becomes its own little world.

One reason Yeats may have chosen this form, then, is that it provides just enough room to consider each topic—erotic love, motherhood, religious art, etc.—going into some detail, but not overdoing it.

METER

"Among School Children" is written in a very loose iambic pentameter that is characteristic of Yeats. Iambic pentameter has five iambs (feet with a da-DUM rhythm) per line, but the speaker often diverges from this pattern.

The first line is a good example:

> I walk | through the | long school- | room ques- | tioning

This line is highly irregular, not only because it deviates quite a bit from the meter, but also because it is *the first line* of the poem. Traditionally, poets have viewed the first line as an important moment to establish the poem's meter, usually following that meter exactly.

Yeats disregards that tradition here. Instead, he shows off his skill at *not* following that meter, but establishing a compelling rhythm even so. He continues this way in the second line as well:

> A kind | old nun | in a | white hood | replies;

Notice how both lines involves a pyrrhic (da-da) foot followed

by a spondee (DUM-DUM). This similarity between lines creates a rhythmic consistency that gives the poem its own unique music and sense of order at the beginning.

One reason that Yeats is considered a Modernist poet, even though he continued to used traditional forms, is that his language grew to have this sort of metrical flexibility. This kind of thing wouldn't fly with Yeats's predecessors—even a radical poet like Percy Bysshe Shelley, whom Yeats greatly admired, was a stickler about meter. Yeats's achievement was that he allowed his meter to mimic everyday speech, creating an almost casual, everyday quality that plays off the traditional forms he continued to use.

As a result, the language in this poem sometimes has a thorny, knotty, sinewy, or even awkward quality to it, which mimics the texture of the speaker's thoughts. The speaker contrasts this awkwardness, to great effect, with the prim and proper world around him:

> The chil- | dren learn | to ci- | pher and | to sing,
> To stu-| dy rea- | ding-books | and his- | tory,
> To cut | and sew, | be neat | in ev- | erything

In three lines of perfect, unbroken iambic pentameter, the speaker captures a world of children being taught to "be neat in everything." The meter here becomes neat in order to reflect that, contrasting markedly with the loose, untidy meter of the speaker's inner thoughts.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in a form called *ottava rima*, the poem sticks to the following rhyme scheme:

ABABABCC

One effect of this rhyme scheme is to create distinctly self-contained stanzas (an effect that's reinforced by the numerals between each stanza). The ABABAB rhymes makes the lines feel interlocked as well, mimicking the tumbling associations of a single train of thought. Then, the CC couplet at the end of the stanza puts a stop to this train of thought, neatly summing up the speaker's thoughts and ending the stanza. As a result, each stanza feels like a process that is seen through to completion.

Although from a bird's eye view this rhyme scheme provides a tidy feel to each stanza, on the ground it is much more complicated because the poem uses lots of slant rhymes and eye rhymes— rhymes like "parable" and "shell," or "it" and "meat"; "age" and "heritage," or "mind" and "wind." These rhymes prevent the rhyme scheme from becoming too predicable and obvious. Many of the rhymes are so unnoticeable they almost disappear, so that at times the poem can *feel* like conversational blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter).

Often, the off-kilter rhymes mimic the poem's content in some ways. For instance, in stanza V ("What youthful mother [...] Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?"), almost every ABABAB rhyme is a slant rhyme ("escape" and "lap," for example). These uneasy rhymes mimic the infant's "struggle to escape," and the speaker's deep uncertainty, at this point, about whether life is really worth all the trouble. Furthermore, when the speaker does employ full rhymes, often as the CC couplet at the end of a stanza, these full rhymes ring out all the more clearly, as they do in stanza V. This moments provide definite endings to the stanzas, clearly separating one stanza from the next.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Among School Children" is usually closely associated with Yeats himself. Especially in the second half of his career, Yeats often wrote about events from his own life. In this poem, the speaker is a "sixty-year-old smiling public man"—a politician—visiting a convent school. In real life, Yeats served as an Irish senator in his 60s and really did have to inspect schools as part of his job. What's more, the woman whom the speaker describes as having "a Ledaean body" is commonly associated with Maud Gonne, a woman Yeats loved hopelessly throughout his life and who was often the subject of his poetry.

That said, it's not *necessary* to identify the speaker and the woman with Yeats and Gonne completely; the poem is purposefully left vague so that readers can fill in their own experiences and assumptions. All the same, it's good to know these biographical details.

In terms of how the poem works, there are essentially two sides to the speaker's attention: a public side and a private side. The poem begins with the public, as the speaker spends the first stanza describing the classroom in literal terms. After that, though, the speaker's attention quickly shifts to his own private ruminations, and the bulk of the poem is taken up with deeply personal thoughts—not the kinds of things a senator would share with a classroom of children! As the poem progresses, the reader is given a multifaceted snapshot of an aging politician and extremely successful writer, who is just as complex and conflicted as ever.

SETTING

"Among School Children" is set in a convent school in Ireland in the 1920s. It was common for classes to be taught by nuns or priests in Ireland. The presence of the nun also leads the speaker to further thoughts about religious art and worship later in the poem.

Although the poem begins with the speaker visiting a public school on official business, most of the poem takes place in his head. He mulls over memories of a beautiful women,

summarizes what he knows about Greek philosophy, ponders motherhood, and contemplates the meaning of life—all while he's supposed to be paying attention to a classroom full of children! In this regard, as the speaker's imagination leaps from one subject to the next, the poem's actual, mundane setting always lurks in the background as a stark contrast.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

W.B. Yeats won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923, solidifying his reputation on an international scale: a symbol of Irish culture as well as a master of poetic forms who could bridge the gap between tradition and modernity.

Yeats's career spans the late-Victorian period to the Modernist movement. His early poetry is usually classified as Symbolist, an aesthetic movement that began in France in the 19th century, whose poetry involved using vague and beautiful symbols to evoke feelings of the infinite. During this period, Yeats wrote very lyrical poems about nature, love, and Irish mythology. He greatly admired the English Romantic poets, like Keats and Shelley.

Later, as Yeats grew older, his poetry began to address more worldly affairs, such as politics, current events, and public figures. His language shifted, becoming more subdued and sounding more like *spoken* language. He still talked about love and relationships, but now turned to his newfound style. This is Yeats's Modernist phase, when "Among School Children" was written.

Modernism was a huge aesthetic movement that lasted from the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. Modernists reinvented traditional forms of art or invented their own, redefining what art could depict, and how. Yeats was friends with one of the most influential English-language modernists, Ezra Pound. Pound was a major proponent of free verse, poetry that does not follow a set meter. Pound believed that poets should employ a variety of rhythms in their poems with an ear towards everyday speech, creating an energetic and immediate effect. Although Yeats never adopted free verse, he did use very loose meters that left room for the kinds of rhythmic effects that Pound advocated.

Similarly, Yeats's subjects captured many of the concerns of Modernism. In this poem, for instance, he shows the conflicts between modern life (as exhibited by the "neat" and "modern" schoolchildren) and the spiritual desires of an older generation (as exhibited by the speaker's inner life). And while younger modernists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound took their poetry to greater experimental lengths, Yeats stood behind them as a poetic elder and major voice in English-language writing. He paved the way for developing poetry based on a strong personal vision and a willingness to continually reinvent oneself in writing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Early in his life, Yeats was a fervent Irish nationalist—someone who supported Irish independence from England's colonial rule. He believed in elevating Irish culture through retellings of Irish myths and the development of a uniquely Irish playhouse in Dublin. Although he never took part in the violent rebellions against English rule, particularly the Easter Rising of 1916, in his older age he played a prominent role in the political life of the Irish free state by serving as a national senator. One of his roles as senator was inspecting public schools, like the elementary school his speaker visits in this poem.

Another important cultural element in Yeats's life is mysticism and the occult. From the end of the 19th century through the beginning of the 20th century, many upper-class people in Europe become interested in occult practices, such as fortune telling, contacting spirits, speaking with the dead, performing alchemical transformations, etc. Yeats was a member of one such occult society called the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Throughout his life, he engaged in mystical, magical experiments as a member of this Order. In fact, outside of poetry, these magical studies were the driving force of his life. Much of Yeats's concern about otherworldly beauty, "Presences," etc., in this poem can be connected to his deep interest in mysticism.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of Yeats's "Among School Children." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDEsZ_EIEQ4&t)
- The Yeats Society — Helpful resources from the Yeats Society in Sligo, Ireland. (https://www.yeatssociety.com/)
- Yeats's Passionate Intensity — A review of a large exhibition of Yeats's archive, with details of th tumultuous relationship with Maud Gonne. (https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/20/arts/design/20dwye.html)
- A Biography of Yeats — A good overview of Yeats's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)
- Yeats in the Senate — The Irish Independent provides a brief overview of Yeats's time as an Irish senator. (https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/wb-150/wb-yeats-he-cast-a-cold-eye-on-church-and-state-in-seanad-career-31188427.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- When You Are Old

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