Graduate Course

Paper - VII :

English Literature 5

SM : 7.04 A (Part-I)

W.B. YEATS
POETRY

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Dear Student,

This Study Material on the poetry of W.B. Yeats has been designed to help you understand various complexities of his poems which are prescribed in your course. In all, 5 representative poems of Yeats have been prescribed as a part of Paper VII for B.A. (Hons.) English IIIrd year. These are:

‘No Second Troy’
‘The Second Coming’
‘Sailing to Byzantium’
‘Leda and the Swan’
‘Among School Children’

Keeping in view the thematic contents and various stylistic features of these poems, this Study Material has been divided into 2 parts. Part 1 contains an introduction to the life and works of W.B. Yeats and also the text along with critical analysis of two poems, namely, ‘The Second Coming’ and ‘Leda and the Swan.’ These two poems share some common features, that is the use of myth, supernatural elements and Yeat’s cyclical theory of history. The two poems are often regarded as companion pieces, one examines the genesis of the civilization that preceded the Christian era, and the other envisages the future that is to come. Part 1 of this Study Material also contains a commentary on one of the Background Topics prescribed in your course, namely ‘The Uses of Myth.’

While studying Yeats’s poetry you must bear in mind the fact that he was writing at a very critical period of human civilization. It may be noted that Yeats was born in 1865 and Darwin’s book concerning the origin and evolution of species was published in 1859, that is, just six years before Yeats’s birth. This publication shook man’s belief in the established world order and also had a deep impact on literary writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In addition, there were other social and political factors which contributed to a redefinition of man’s existence and his relations with his surroundings. These socio-political issues have been discussed by me in the Study Material on T.S. Eliot’s poetry. You may note that W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot were contemporaries and were influenced to a great extent by similar scientific, religious, social and political events. Whereas Eliot stayed away from political activism, Yeats was involved in Irish nationalist movement, echoes of which are often pronounced in his poems.

The above aspects along with an understanding of Yeats’s life and personal beliefs will help you better appreciate his poetry.

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W.B. YEATS: LIFE AND WORKS

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was born at Dublin in Ireland on June 13, 1865. His career epitomizes the history of English poetry of his times. In the course of his career, W.B. Yeats was largely responsible for founding a literary movement and bringing an Irish national theatre into existence. The poet’s father John Butler Yeats was expected to follow the career of his forefathers and become a clergyman of the Church of Ireland. However, John Butler Yeats went against the deeply orthodox views of his own father, became a sceptic, obtained training as a barrister and finally became an artist. His son, the poet William Butler Yeats held an “eccentric faith somewhere between his grandfather’s orthodox belief and his father’s unorthodox disbelief.”

The poet W.B. Yeats spent a part of his childhood in Sligo with his mother and her family. John Butler Yeats was not a practical man where financial matters were concerned, thus young Yeats grew up in what has been termed as an atmosphere of “genteel poverty.” In 1874 the Yeats family moved to London. Between 1877 and 1881, W.B. Yeats attended Godolphin School in Hammersmith.

Against the background of famine in Ireland and the election of Charles Parnell as the leader of the Irish party, the Yeats family moved to Dublin in 1881. After attending High School in Dublin, Yeats entered the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. W.B. Yeats chose to become a poet, and was encouraged by his father in his choice of vocation.

The poet met John O’Leary, the old Fenian leader in Ireland, who was to be a formative influence in his life. O’Leary stimulated the poet’s interest in nationalism and old Irish legends. Yeats used to describe himself as a person who was naturally religious, but his Christian belief had been thwarted by the prevalent mood of scientific rationalism of his times. As a reaction to this, Yeats invented his own mythological system, which he drew from Irish legends and folklore. Yeats recreated Ireland’s largely forgotten intellectual heritage by investing old Irish legends with fresh expression in English. In his quest for an ideal world of myth and imagination, he also drew upon Indian legends, and built up a a deep interest in magic and theosophy. With George Russell Yeats got deeply involved in the study of occult. He studied European magic, mysticism and Eastern religion, and on June 16, 1885, attended a meeting of Dublin’s Hermetic Society for the first time.

*The Wanderings of Oisin* appeared in 1889, and in the same year Yeats fell in love with a beautiful revolutionary Maud Gonne. This unrequited and lifelong love was to form the subject of many of his intense and striking love poems. In ‘A General Introduction for My Work’, Yeats wrote: ‘A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a plantasmagoria.’ Yeats’s poetry reflects the influences on his personal life, whether it be his love for Maud Gonne whom he compares with Helen of Troy, or his increasingly active interest in nationalist politics and in mysticism.

In 1899, *The Wind Among the Reeds* was published, which showed the influence of Blake and the poet’s various mystical preoccupations. Yeats believed that “imagination is always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and the patterns in that great Mind, and that great Memory.” Yeats’s view of this great Memory resembles Jung’s concept of a universal or racial memory which renders meanings to symbols. The influence of Symbolists, of Boehme, Swedenborg, Mallarme, and Verlaine can also be discerned in Yeats’s poetry. In 1899 Yeats became the co-founder of Irish Literary Theatre.

One can see the emergence of an altered style in his next volume of poems, titled *In the Seven Woods*, which appeared in 1903. When Maud Gonne married John MacBride in 1903, the poet was very deeply hurt. In a series of well known poems, Yeats speaks of her haunting beauty and his lost love. In ‘No Second Troy’ and ‘A Woman Homer Sung,’ which form a part of the collection *The Green Helmet and other poems* (1910), the poet compares Maud Gonne with Helen of Troy.
The next volume of poems Responsibilities (1914) shows a different mood of poetry as he used satire and invective, and defended true art against the philistines. Yeats met Ezra Pound and learnt from him the necessity of eliminating superfluous or merely decorative words in writing.

From now on Yeats began to believe in and praise the aristocratic way of life. The poet’s ideal Ireland comprised of a “hard-riding Protestant aristocracy of fine artistic tastes and a devout Catholic peasantry, full of instinctive wisdom and preserving a living folklore,” as Bernard Bergonzi points out. In his poetry Yeats mythologizes his friends and adversaries of his native land. The Easter Rising of 1916 in which several revolutionary leaders were executed made a deep impact on the poet.

In 1917, W.B. Yeats married Georgie Hyde Lees. Soon after their marriage, Mrs. Yeats attempted ‘automatic writing,’ and started writing odd sentences on subjects about which she did not know anything. Yeats was stimulated by this, and spent a lot of time daily to decipher the automatic script. This helped him in giving what he called ‘a new framework and new patterns,’ which aided him in his work. Yeats incorporated some of these ideas and built up a ‘system’ and developed a complex magical view of history and personality, which he published privately under the title A Vision in 1926, and later, through Macmillan in 1937. As Yeats has explained, this work is ‘a system of symbolism,’ which deals with various types of human personality, ‘gyres’ of historical change and elements of the supernatural. Yeats classified human personality into 28 types or, as he puts it, into 28 phases of the moon. Each phase is pictured as a spoke of a Great Wheel. The classification depended on the degree of subjectivity or objectivity. As Richard Ellmann sums it up: “At phase 15, where the moon is full, subjectivity is at its height; as the moon wanes subjectivity decreases and objectivity increases, until at phase 1, where the moon is dark, objectivity is greatest. Any individual can be typed or classified as belonging to one of the twenty-eight phases and Yeats soon began to put his friends and enemies into their appropriate phases as Dante had done in The Divine Comedy.”

The major poems which drew upon A Vision appeared in The Wild Swans at Coole (1919), ‘The Phases of the Moon’ and ‘The Second Coming’ in Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921). A Vision was intended to be, as the poet puts it, “a last act of defence against the chaos of the world.” Symbols of the cyclical movement of history permeate A Vision as well as some of Yeats’s first poems, two of which are prescribed in your syllabus - ‘The Second Coming’ and ‘Leda and the Swan.’ It has been noted, however, that although A Vision was a valuable system of symbols for the poet, Yeats was capable of holding the system in abeyance if his experience showed a contrary view. In 1923 Yeats received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In The Tower (1928) and The Winding Stair (1933), Yeats’s poetic genius finds full expression. The two Byzantium poems are known for their attempt to transcend the world of old age, decay and impermanence by glorifying the timeless world of art, which is symbolised by Byzantium.

In his last poems, Yeats experiments with ballad forms as well as “new kinds of magical and symbolic expression, new combinations of realism and ritual gesture.” With Shri Purohit Swami Yeats worked on a translation of the Upanishads. Yeats hated old age and also believed that life should be conducted with dignity no matter what happens. He wrote his own epitaph and elegy ‘Under Ben Bulben’:

‘Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!’

Yeats’ last public appearance was in the Abbey Theatre in 1938. He died in France on 28 January 1939.

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THE USES OF MYTH

A critical dictionary of literary terms defines myth as an "anonymous tale, ostensibly historical, the origins of which are unknown." A mythology, which is a collection of such tales may contain the story of the origin of the world, the creation of mankind, the feats of gods or heroes, or the tragedies which befell ancient families."

In earlier times myths provided an explanation for many supernatural occurrences and natural phenomena, but with the advance of scientific temper, their significance was relegated to the background. Writers have often found myths fascinating because of their remoteness and complexity. Towards the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century there was a heightened literary interest in the use of myths as this technique provided the writers with a vantage point from where they could objectively view their experiences. In the context of twentieth century literature, the motivation behind using the mythical mode, to quote T.S. Eliot's words, has been of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," thereby "controlling, ... ordering, ... giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Such manipulation on the part of writers is two fold. The use of ancient myths serves as a testing ground to explore various dimensions of reality. Secondly, the use of distant or historical settings provides the writer with an advantage of mythifying history. Thus use of myths reflects the twentieth-century writers' belief that ancient "myths can help us to grasp and order the chaos of twentieth-century experience." While James Joyce used Homer as a "way of ordering the chaos of modern existence," D.H. Lawrence looked for the "pure primitive consciousness of American Indians or Ancient Etruscans."

Myths were sometimes used by modern writers to explore both the terrible and the sublime aspects of reality, and at other times to look for the possibility of a return to primal perfection by man even after the world has "deteriorated beyond salvage." The mythical mode was often used as a medium to portray a wholistic view of the world. T.S. Eliot recommended the modern classicist approach to myth, whereby myth is used as "an intellectual strategy, a device for gaining perspective on himself and on his myth-forsaken time."

As the West lacked an adequate mythological tradition, twentieth-century poets and novelists searched for myths in ancient and exotic civilization and cultures. The "dechristianization" of man's view of the world gave rise to what C.G. Jung calls the phenomena of "the importation of the strange gods" to the West - a trend that is reflected in modern literature.

Like many of his contemporaries, Yeats was also dissatisfied with the traditional Christian world view. As shall be evident from an analysis of his poems, Yeats' use of the mythical mode is directed towards a search for a more integrated world view.

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The text of the poem:

**THE SECOND COMING**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
the falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand,
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

Notes

5:1-3. Turning and . . . loosed; surely some revelation is at hand; the Second Coming is at hand; surely the Second Coming is at hand; The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out; When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi; Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert; A shape with lion body and the head of a man; A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun; is moving its slow thighs, while all about it; Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds; The darkness drops again; but now I know; That twenty centuries of stony sleep; Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle; And what rough beast, its hour come round at last; Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?
'THE SECOND COMING': A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

This famous poem forms part of the volume of poems titled ‘Michael Robartes and the Dancer,’ which was published in 1921. Before you read the poem, reflect upon the title. What does the phrase “the Second Coming” bring to your mind? It suggests the Second Coming of Christ, based on the prediction of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Chapter 24. Now read the poem. Do the contents of Yeats’s poem match the note of hope and joy as suggested by the title? No, rather you find that although Yeats takes the title from Christianity, he presents a very negative view of the future by representing the much-awaited arrival of god as a being, who is “destructive rather than benign, a monster rather than a lamb.”

Re-read the poem with the help of the following Study Notes:

Notes

lines 1-2: ‘Turning and ... falconer’:

The first two lines of this poem compress Yeats’s concept of the gyre. Yeats viewed history diagrammatically and conceived of each era of history as being “overthrown by some catastrophic change.” He symbolized this idea in the form of gyres. Turning in a gyre suggests a conical and spiral movement. At one level the falcon stands for man who is going increasingly out of reach of the falconer Christ. In other words, the Christian civilization is moving away from Christ. In a broader context, the falcon’s separation represents man’s alienation from every ideal that has “enabled him to control his life, whether this comes from religion or philosophy or poetry,” as Richard Ellmann puts it.

lines 3-6: “Things fall apart ... is drowned”:

Lines 3 and 4 depict the most vivid picture of destruction and devastation that characterised twentieth century Europe. Disintegration - or things falling apart - is the natural manifestation of a world without a cohesive centre. Yeats refers to both international and national crises - the first world war, the Irish civil war and the Russian revolution when he says, ‘Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.’

lines 5-6 may refer to the Massacre of the Innocents by Herod. In more general terms the phrase ‘the blood-dimmed tide’ is indicative of the “destructive forces that are unleashed at the end of an era, and has special reference to war,” as Ellmann points out. The ‘ceremony of innocence’ is a reference to baptismal rites. Also, ‘ceremony’ means to Yeats, all those qualities that make life valuable in the context of a decaying social order. In one of his letters Yeats wrote: ‘Every nerve trembles with horror at what is happening in Europe - “the ceremony of innocence is drowned.”’

lines 7-8: ‘The best lack ... passionate intensity’:

The poet laments the fact that in this world, as in Ireland of his times, power is wielded by fanatical men, who are full of “passionate intensity.” On the other hand, “the best men,” lack all conviction, because they have become cynical. In the context of Yeats’s theory of the Great Year and the Phases of the Moon, these lines refer to the view that “at the time we have reached, the best minds being subjective, ... have lost all faith though desiring it, and the worst minds, being so nearly objective, have no need of faith and may be full of ‘passionate intensity’ without the control of any faith or wisdom” (See R.P. Blackmur, ‘The Later Poetry of W.B. Yeats’).

lines 9-13: ‘Surely some revelation ... Troubles my sight’:

lines 9-10 raise expectation in mind of the reader that some revelation or the promised Second Coming is around the corner to give to mankind all the hope and salvation it needs. Upto
Line 12, the reader has hope, but a reversal of all positive expectations takes place in line 13 with the expression ‘troubles my sight.’ The poet’s image comes from the *Spiritus Mundi*, which according to Yeats, is ‘a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit.’ In other words, the image is not a personal one, but has an independent meaning and operative force of its own.

lines 13-17: ‘Somewhere in sands ... desert birds’:

The ‘Second Coming’ in this poem is not what the devout Christian expects. Yeats draws upon the notion of cyclical god of the Theosophists. However, no beneficent god heralds the beginning of the new cycle in the poem, ‘the Second Coming’. According to Yeats’s cyclical view of history, a period in history spanned approximately two thousand years, the birth of a new age is expected to be the reverse of all that has gone before. But Yeats is more true to his sense of experience rather than his theory. So, although in *A Vision* Yeats expressed his belief that the next era would be subjective and preferable to his own contemporary age, the god of the next era, as Yeats envisions in this poem, is a horrifying monster, a ‘shape with lion body and the head of a man.’

Critics have suggested several sources for this horrifying beast: the beast may have been derived from Yeats’s experiments with symbolism, or from illustrations of Blake, or from Ezekiel. It could also have been derived from the beast of the Apocalypse in Revelation chapter 17. More important than the source, however, is the impact it has on the reader.

lines 18-22: ‘The darkness ... to be born?’:

‘Twenty centuries of stony sleep’ refer to the two thousand years of Christian civilization during which this shape with ‘lion body and head of a man’ has been in stony sleep. Now this beast appears to be moving in a nightmarish way towards “birth and awakening.” The ‘rocking cradle’ of Christianity is superseded by an opposite brutal force of the ‘rough beast.’ Yeats was not a firm adherent of Christianity, but he considers the future that he envisions in the poem to have an even worse impact than his present age. The notion that the ‘rough beast’ will be born in Bethlehem, a place that is traditionally associated with tenderness and love of Christ, makes the horrifying vision of brutality even more poignant.

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The text of the poem:

**LEDA AND THE SWAN**

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her hapless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
A shudder in the loins engenders there

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

(1923)

**Critical Commentary**

‘Leda and the Swan’ appears in the collection of poems known as ‘The Tower,’ which was published in 1928. First, read the poem and jot down your impressions about it. Does the title of the poem remind you of an ancient Greek myth?

Written in sonnet form, the poem traces in a superbly condensed manner the rise and fall of a civilization, which was initiated by the union of the divine and the human. The rape of the mortal Leda by the Greek god Zeus in the form of a swan, resulted in the birth of Helen. In a powerful blend of myth, symbol and ritual in poetry, Yeats explores the beginnings of the historical cycle that preceded the Christian era. The poem is rich with symbolic, historical as well as philosophical connotations. In ‘Leda and the Swan,’ the poet presents a diagrammatic representation of the first annunciation, or the birth of “Homeric Greece, which is where his imaginative understanding of history” is said to have begun.

The most commonly known source behind Yeats’s pictorial and sensuous rendering of the theme of the poem is Michaelangelo. Critics have pointed out other sources such as Spenser, Shelley, Pater, Blake and the Theosophists as well.

Now re-read the poem with the help of these Study Notes:

lines 1-4: ‘A sudden blow ... upon his breast’:

The first four lines of the poem depict the powerful impact of the Greek god Zeus upon Leda. Zeus who is said to have assumed the form of a large swan, caught hold of Leda with his beak in order to ravish her. The expressions ‘sudden blow,’ on the ‘staggering girl’ and her ‘helpless’ condition show how Leda is completely overpowered by Zeus. The description suggests, as B. Rajan aptly puts it, “a controlled and crushing violence, indifferent to everything but its apocalyptic function.”

lines 5-8: ‘How can those ... where it lies?’:
Although Leda is terrified, she is beginning to yield to pressure, as the expression ‘her loosening thighs’ indicates. The ‘feathered glory’ refers to the form of the glorious swan which was assumed by Zeus. Through his rhetorical questioning Yeats seems to invite the reader to reflect upon the whole question of the individual’s choice, or lack of it, in his participation in an inexorable, divinely ordained event.

lines 9-11: ‘A shudder ... Agamemnon dead’:

The climactic event of ‘a shudder in the loins’ leads to the conception of Helen, who was to create history. Yeats compresses the history of Greek civilization into a few lines. The union of the mortal Leda with the immortal mythological god Zeus, resulted in the birth of Helen. Helen’s eventual elopement with Paris the son of Priam who was the King of Troy, led to the famous Trojan war of Greek history. The fall of Troy and the death of King Agamemnon, the commander of Greek army are summed up in these lines. In other words, the ‘divine influx’, initiated by Zeus began a new historical cycle, which led to ultimately disastrous consequences through the birth of the beautiful Helen.

It may be noted that Agamemnon was the brother of Menelaus and his wife Clytemnestra was a daughter of Leda and her husband Tyndareus. In the absence of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra had an affair with Aegisthus. When Agamemnon returned from Troy, he was murdered by his wife and her lover.

lines 11-14: ‘Being so caught ... let her drop?’:

Leda is completely overpowered (‘so caught up’ and ‘mastered’) by the swan, who is now referred to as ‘the brute blood of the air.’ The expression ‘brute blood’ highlights the sense of physical violence in the poem. According to a critic Yvor Winters, “Yeats was fascinated by the demonic possession as a form of mystical experience and with the possibility of obtaining supernatural knowledge through such possession.” The poem ends with the rhetorical question whether Leda had acquired any kind of knowledge during her encounter with supernatural power. By the end of the poem, Zeus’s passion is over and so he becomes indifferent and lets her drop.

The poem concludes with a question of contemporary relevance with which Yeats was preoccupied, that is, whether power and knowledge can ever be united in life. As one critic sums up, the question is “whether Leda, having been impregnated by the god with his power to create the future, had any awareness of how the future was now working through her.”

Thus Yeats uses myth to reinterpret the past in terms of his contemporary civilization, and, simultaneously, views the present in terms of the past. Yeats’s theory of a cyclical view of history is implicit in ‘Leda and the Swan.’ Richard Ellmann points out that Yeats expected some new revelation to “inaugurate a subjective pagan era opposite to the objective one of Christianity, an annunciation to some new Leda by a swan rather than to some new Mary by a dove.”

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Graduate Course

Paper VII : English Literature - 5

William Butler Yeats
(1865-1939)
SM : 7.04 A (Part-II)

Contents

1. Objectives
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3. Poems: Study Notes (with the text):
   ‘No Second Troy’
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   ‘Among School Children’.
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5. Bibliography

1. Objectives: The study material has been written:
i) To enable you to read Yeat’s poems in your course with pleasure and understanding;
ii) To enable you to read other poems of Yeats also with enjoyment.

2. How to use this study material: It is important to remember that the central point of interest is the poem. And no summary or discussion can be a substitute for the experience of it.

Step One: The best way for you to use this material would be to read the poem first, even if you don’t understand much, twice without looking at the notes and make a note of the things that strike you. If could be a word or a phrase, or a sentence, or the rhythm or some image or metaphor that has been used. The poem may also remind you of something else in your past experience. Note down whatever comes to your mind as you read the poem.

Step Two: After you have done this read the poem again with the help of the study notes provided. You may also like to read some background material on the writer. But don’t forget to come back to the poem.

Step Three: Rewrite your response to the poem. Do you understand it much better now?

NOTE: For your convenience the texts of the poems has been printed in the study material.

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1. NO SECOND TROY

This poem forms part of the volume of poems entitled The Green Helmet and Other Poems Published in 1910. Before we take up the poem, do the following:

Step One: Even before you read the poem, spend a few minutes over the little and speculate what you imagine the theme of the poem to be. What do the words ‘No Second Troy’ suggest? Troy would bring to mind the ancient Trojan city that was destroyed in the heroic war between the Greeks and Trojans in ancient times; also Helen who was the cause of it all. Is Yeats then talking about a contemporary situation similar to that in Troy of ancient times? Or is he talking about the lack of heroism in modern times? Or, again, is his focus on a woman as beautiful as the Helen of old?

Don’t forget to spend a few minutes on the title and make a guess about the subject of the poem. It is quite possible that your speculations turn out to be incorrect. But this should not bother you. The important thing is to think about the possible subject of the poem even before you start reading it.

Step Two: Now read the poem a number of times and try to figure out what the poet is talking about. Again, put down whatever comes to your mind on paper. It may be a striking word, a phrase or a sentence. It may be the rhythm or image or metaphor in it or it may be something the poem reminds you of in your past experience or your earlier reading.

Why Should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late 2
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great, 4
Had they but courage equal to desire?
What could have made her peaceful with a mind 6
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind 8
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern? 10
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another troy for her to burn? 12

Step Three: Now compare your speculation about the subject of the poem with your actual experience of reading it.

Step Four: Read the poem again with the help of the study notes provided below.
Study Notes: No Second Troy: The words of the title don’t occur anywhere in the poem. Troy is mentioned only in the last line.

1-5 Why Should ... desire?: Note how the poem begins. It begins with a rhetorical question. Are there other such questions in the poem?

The first two lines tell us that the poet is disappointed in love. The woman referred to in line -1 is Maud Gonne who rejected Yeats and married John MacBride instead.

2. Of late: but not now for Maud Gonne withdrew from political activity after hers marriage failed in 1905.

3. Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways: Maud Gonne was politically very active and was an agitator and a revolutionary. Who are the ‘ignorant’ men? Is Yeats criticising Maud Gonne or condemning the men she tried to incite? What is the force of the word ‘ignorant’ here?

4. Hurl the little streets upon the great: The Word hurl means to throw with force or shout out violently. For example: 1. The mob hurled bricks through the window. 2. The boss hurled abuses at the chaprasi. The question is: how can anyone throw ‘little streets’ on the ‘great ones’? The person who can hurl ‘little streets’ must be a giant.

Little streets: Here Yeats identifies the little people whom Maud Gonne tried to incite to violence with the streets where they lived. What is his attitude to these people? Is he praising them or condemning them?

Upon the great: Who are the great? Since the phrase ‘the great’ is set up opposition to the ‘little streets’, the suggestion is that ‘the great’ are those who live in great big houses. If that is so, Yeats is critical of both the common people and the aristocrats who live in big mansions. What is the effect of this on the stature of Maud Gonne? Was she a revolutionary or a mere political agitator.

1-5 Why should ... equal to desire?: Yeats has two complaints against Maud Gonne- she filled him with misery by turning down his proposal and she tried to incite people to violence and revolution. But in the last two lines the poet is critical of the people who had no courage to fight for their demands.

6-10 What could ... most stern?:

1. What is the focus in these lines? What justification does the poet offer regarding the nature of Maud Gonne?
2. Do you see any similarity between the first five lines and the next five lines?
Compare these lines with the following description of Maud Gonne:

i) For she had fiery blood
    When I was young.
    And trod so sweetly proud
    As ‘were upon a cloud’
    -(‘A Woman Homer Sung’)

ii) ‘Were not all her life but storm,
    Would not painters paint a form
    Of such noble lines,’ I said,
    ‘Such a delicate high head,
    All that sternness amid charm,
    All that sweetness amid strength?’
    - (‘Peace’)

iii) Although crowds gathered once if she
    but showed her face,
    And even old men’s eyes grew dim, this
    hand alone,
    -(‘Fallen Majesty’)

6. **What could have made her peaceful?**: Yeats is trying to defend Maud Gonne for her restlessness. He singles out two leading features: The nobility of her character and her beauty.

7. **That nobleness made simple as a fire**: She had greatness of character which made her restless and gave a burning desire to do great deeds. Does the word ‘burn suggest anything else?

8-10 **With beauty like a tightened bow, ... most stern?**: She looked extremely beautiful and grand. Because of her distinguished and stern appearance, she stood apart from her contemporaries.

9. **That is not natural in an age like this**: The features of character and beauty that Maud Gonne possessed were heroic and therefore unnatural in an unheroic age like ours. For these reasons Maud Gonne could not but be what she was --- a revolutionary. *In the present age all her potential energy remained unrealized.*

11. **Why, what... what she is?**: This line recalls both the ‘why’ of the first question (line 1) and the ‘what’ of the second question (line 60) and thus provides an answer to both the rhetorical question put earlier through a third rhetorical question. This line brings out the inevitability of her conduct. She could not have behaved in any other way.
12. **Was there... to burn?:** This question is answered by the title. Maud gonne could not have caused the destruction of another Troy. Here the poet for the first time implies a comparison between Maud Gonnie and Helen of Troy. Maud Gonne lives in an unheroic age. So she could not have behaved differently. The poem, you will remember, began by talking of Maud Gonnie’s offences against Yeats and society. But as the poem proceeds to the end, Yeats the victim does not ask for sympathy for himself but extends this sympathy to his tormenter whom he sees as a noble being in an ignoble, unheroic age. Do you think the comparison between Maud Gonnie and Helen is forced or natural and inevitable? The comparison is withheld till the last line. What do you think is the effect of this on the total impact of the poem?

**Discussion:**

1. The theme of this poem is the contrast between the stress of Maud Gonnie’s splendor and the cowardice of the modern ago-no easy relation between them is possible.

2. Yeats valued passion highly and believed strictly in the value of emotion rather than reason, intuition rather than logic. In his *Autobiographies* he recalled “... I often wonder if the delight in passionate men in my plays and in my poetry is more than his (grandfather William Pollexfen’s) memory (P.C. 10).

3. This is not the only poem in which Maud Gonnie is compared to the mythical Helen. Other poems which use the Helen image are: ‘A Woman Homer Sung’ ‘Reconciliation,’ ‘Peace’, all in *The Green Helmet and other Poems.* There are several other poems also where Yeats uses the Helen figure.’

4. Yeat’s use of myth: ‘No Second Troy’ is one instance of the use of a mythical figure from Greek mythology. Yeats use of Irish myths started early and continued during the 1900’s. ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’ is an early example of this. Later Yeats discarded the embroidered coat of Celtic mythology because it was subsequently worn by ‘fools’ who claimed that they had made it. He announced that there was “more enterprise in walking naked” (‘A Coat’). Yeats also created “a new mythology out of the memory of the patriots of the eighteenth century Ireland who still lived in the popular imagination”. A good example of this is ‘September 1913’.

5. In Yeat’s play *The Player Queen* one of the characters says: ‘Man is nothing till he is united to an image’. The imagination, Yeats holds, must create an image or a mask (a favourite word with Yeats) which then enables a man to develop his personality fully. In his *Autobiographies* Yeats says: “My mind began drifting towards the doctrine of the “mask” which has convinced me that every passionate man... is, as it were, linked with another age, historical or imaginary, where alone he finds images that rouse his energy. Napoleon was never of his own time, as the naturalistic writers and painters bid men be, but had some Roman emperor’s image in his head...” (p.188).
In this poem Yeats identified Maud Gonne with the mythical Helen. It is this image that provides the "mask" that enables Yeats to present Maud as a splendid figure.

6. **Language:**
   
   (i) This poem, as indeed any other poem, must be seen against Yeat's sustained effort to make his style hard and clear and more objective, and to shake off the vagueness of his earlier manner. The poet came to realise that the new age (the twentieth century) called for a new style and went about systematically to update it.

   (ii) This poem shows a considerable advance in language upon the poems included in the earlier volumes. The language here is terse, unadorned and near the language of common speech.

   (iii) Line 4 is an example of how Yeat's poetry is becoming concrete as against the vagueness of the earlier speech.

7. L.C. Knights, finds evidence of romantic idealisation in this poem is lines 6-10. "To romanticise any element in a given situation is to admit in inability to deal with it completely and with a full awareness of all that is involved; and Yeats, even in his middle and later periods, continued to use romantic glamor as an escape from difficult or painful problems. The poem "No Second Troy" opens in the tones of straightaway speech: (Lines 1-5 above).

   But from the sixth line the poem draws largely on Romantic idealisation: (Lines 6-10 above). And in the end a woman with whom only difficult relations were possible is transformed into the Helen who exists only for the imagination: (Lines 11-12 above).

8. It has been pointed out that Yeats was particularly prone to lapse into sentiment while dealing with the subject of Maud Gonne. Do you think this is true of "No Second Troy"? Read some poems dealing with her and find out if this criticism is true.

**Quotations:**

1. Why does the poem begin with a rhetorical question?
2. Find two instances of terseness and compression in the poem.
3. What images are used by the poet in this poem?
4. Why does Yeats delay identifying Maud Gonne with Helen? And how does he do it directly or indirectly?
5. What is Yeat's attitude Maud Gonne?
6. Where do Yeat's political sympathies lie ... with the common people or with the great?
7. Compare and contrast this poem with 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' with respect to theme, use of myth and language.

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2. SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

Yeat's early poetry offered dreams and music. But his later was robust and vigorous. As Yeats himself claimed, his poetry grew younger as he himself grew older. "Yeat’s efflorescence in old age is perhaps unique in recent English poetry". said Louis MacNeice in his book The Poetry of W.B. Yeats (London: OUP, 1941) P. 136 ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ published in the volume called “The Tower” (1928) is among the peak of Yeat’s achievement.

Background Information:

1. There is another Byzantium poem, simply called ‘Byzantium’ but it is included not in The Tower published in 1928 but in the Winding Stair and Other Poems, published in 1933.

2. What is Byzantium? Byzantium in the poet is a mythical city, a symbolic holy place which stands for the life of the soul. But it is founded on the real Byzantium, the holy city of Eastern Christendom, which was the centre of a flourishing civilization. It was in historical Byzantium, says Yeats in his A Vision where “may be never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one... The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of a whole people.”

3. “From his earliest work on, Yeats dreamed of a world exempt for the usual sadness of life. Byzantium became the most lavishly imagined and the most famous of these anti-worlds.

4. About the subject matter of this poem, Yeats said in a paragraph written for a broadcast of his poem in 1931:

Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to mak his soul, and some of my thoughts upon that subject I have put into a poem called ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ When Irishmen were illuminating the book of Kells... Byzantium was the centre of European civilisation and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolise the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city.

Step one: With the background information given earlier read the poem and find out if the poet’s journey to the city of Byzantium in search of a spiritual life is successful. There may be much that you may not understand but don’t led that bother you at this stage. Put down what you think the poet is trying to say in the poem.
SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

I

That is no country for old men. The Young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
-Those dying generations- at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel- crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect

II

An aged man is but paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soup clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every taller in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing- masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing.
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing or to come.
Step Two: Read the poem again with the help of study notes.

**STUDY NOTES:**

Stanza I:
1. **That is no country for old men....** The word *that* indicates that the poet has already left the country, i.e. Ireland. **That is no country for old men/The young:** This line presents an opposition between the old and the young. Are there any other oppositions presented in the poem? What are they?

1-6 **The young ... born, and dies:** This is the natural world of birth and mating and death that the poet repudiates in his old age. Note that this world is composed of all living beings.

3. **Those dying generations:** The phrase brings together the process of death and birth.

4. **The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas:** The poet suggests swarming fertility and abundant life.

7. **Caught in that sensual music...** The sensual music i.e., the life of senses is a kind of prison from which the poet has come out. The use of the word that again suggests that all the sensual music has been left behind.

8. **Monuments of unageing intellect:** The soul’s timeless creations. The meaning is: Engrossed is sensual music the young neglect the timeless creations of the soul. These timeless creations are the objects of art.

Discussion:

1. In this stanza the poet bids farewell to a life of the senses.
2. What kind of a farewell is it? Willing or reluctant? Does the poet have any reservations about it?
3. ‘Fish, flesh or fowl’ is a triad. (A triad is a group of three closely related things or people). Is there any other triad in the first stanza?
4. The first stanza expresses the poet’s reasons for turning away from the life of the senses in general terms. But behind these general reasons is the consciousness that the poet himself has been a captive of ‘the sensual music.’
5. The song of the birds in line 3 is a literal song. But ‘the sensual music’ of line 7 is used in a metaphorical sense and stands for the delight or eeestasy of the life of the senses or simply, the life of the senses.
6. Louis MacNeice comments: The first verse is a find example of Yeat’s maturest manner... He is expressing a wish, confirmed in the title poem of The Tower-

   Now Shall I make my soul,
   Compelling it to study
   In a learned school

- but denied in other poems of this period of renounce “that sensual music” for Byzantium which represents a world of Platonic Forms free of the flux of Becoming.

7. What does the poet substitute the life of the sense with? Is he successful? Read the remaining three stanzas and find out.

Stanza-II

9-10 An aged man is but... upon a stick: In this caricature the poet is perhaps glancing at himself in self-mockery.

10. A tattered coat upon a stick: age renders the old man fleshless, a caricature of a man.

10. unless: Note the clever positioning of the word at the end of the line. By using the word unless at the end of the line the poet stresses the condition that follows in the next two lines

11-12 Soul clap... mortal dress: The poet is acutely conscious of the onset of decay in old age. To the ‘sensual music’ of the first stanza he opposes the music of the soul. These lines convey their meaning through sound also. The meaning is” An old man is of no consequences unless he too can proclaim his soul’s joy and unless his song becomes louder as his flesh grows weaker. Clearly, the poet has used song as a metaphor. The song of the soul is a metaphor for the eternal life of the spirit just as the sensual music is a metaphor for the joy of sexual life.

13-14 Nor is there... own magnificence: The country that the poet has left behind him contains no ‘singing school’. All that the young do is to study ‘monuments of its own magnificence, i.e., of their own kind of poetry or live poetry.’

16. To the holy city of Byzantium: In search of a life of the spirit.

Discussion:

1. One critic has asked: “In what sense of singing is it that the singing of the soul will compensate... for the failure of the flesh? The answer to that seems to be that the poet is looking not so much for compensation for the failure of the flesh in old age but
for balance. He believes that the soul’s song or eestasy will balance the sensual music of youth.

2. Lines 15-16 say that the poet has sailed the seat and come to the holy city of Byzantium. But does his arrival there mean that he has cut himself off from a life of the senses completely? Read the remaining stanzas and find out.

Stanza III

17. **O sages standing in God’s holy fire:** The poet here abruptly appeals to the sages to come to his rescue because sages are embodiments of wisdom. The sages are apparently depicted as standing in “a Byzantine mosaic from which the poet asks us to fancy the figures stepping out to serve as his singing masters”.

19. **Perne in a gyre:** Spin in a spiral. The poet asks the sages to whirl down in the cone from their heavenly to his earthly part of the universe. See notes on *Perne* and *gyre* in the glossary.

20. **the singing- masters of my soul.** The poet asks the sages to teach his soul to sing how to live the life of the soul.

21. **Consume my heart away:** In spite of the poet’s journey to the holy city of Byzantium the Poet’s heart is still attached to the pleasure of the senses. So he asks the sages to consume his heart away and thus purge him of the taint of the body. This lien and the next recall stanza I, particularly lines “The young/In one another’s arms”.

22. **fastened:** *recalls caught* of the first stanza.

**dying animal:** *recalls dying generations* of the first stanza.

21-22 **Consume my ... dying animal:** This is how the poet represents the world of love.

23. **It knows not what it is:** It is not able to identify itself properly.

Discussion:

1. If the sages represented in the Byzantine mosaic step up to teach him the song of the soul, they will in effect gather the poet into the artifice of which they themselves are apart, into the mosaic.

2. There is an echo of monument in artifice, which carries the suggestion of permanence into the phrase *artifice of eternity.*
3. The phrase ‘artifice of eternity’ recalls Keats’ Ode on a Grecian Urn’ where among other figures and scenes, the lover and his beloved carved on the urn will for ever be the pursuer and the pursued and thus have immortality conferred upon them:

Bold Lover, never, can’t thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal... yet,
do not grieve/ She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,/ For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

4. The phrase perne in a gyre in line 19 takes us into Yeat’s philosophy or system as presented in his book A Vision but the system is not obtrusive and the poet makes its essential meaning clear without reference to the system.

Stanza IV:

25 Once out of nature: His soul having been purged of all dross in the purgatorial fire.

25-26 I shall never take/My bodily form from any natural thing: Here the poet repudiates the natural process of mating and reproduction. Note the emphatic never and any.

27-28 But such a form ... gold enamelling : ‘ I have read somewhere that in the Emperor’s palace of Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang.’ He will take the artificial form of a golden bird created by some Byzantine artist for the entertainment of the Emperor of Byzantium and his court. The phrase ‘ham mered gold’ suggests effort and ‘gold enamelling’ suggests precision and hardness.

32. Of what is past, or passing, or to come: What will the golden bird sing of? It will sing of the world of nature. This line recalls the ‘sensual music’ of the first stanza. Just as the real bird in the trees at the beginning of the poem sang of mortality (‘Whatever is begotten, born and dies’) the golden bird inhabited by the poet’s soul will sing of what is past, or passing, or to come. In other words, the poet once again will get involved in the real world. The poet had categorically stated his intention to repudiate the world of the senses but that is exactly what the poet in his new incarnation as a golden bird will do. Louis MacNeice says: “In sailing to Byzantium the poet expressed a wish to go on singing but as a golden bird, that is, to be himself a work of art producing works of art, and so immortal.”

Discussion:

1. The poem suggests that it is not possible to separate the world of art and nature.

2. In this poem the poet allows the soul to have its say. But after going through a tortuous process of thought and feeling the wheel almost comes full circle and the poet realises
that a complete disjunction between the body and the soul is not possible. It is thus a poem of acceptance.

3. There is a balancing of opposites in the poem. The basic oppositions are: Youth to Age, Life to Death, Time to Eternity, and nature to Art.

4. The poem is most highly suggestive. It has a singular complexity. The logic goes one way, the feeling another. The insistence and determination of the opening of this verse is flatly contradicted by what follows. For it ends where the first stanza began.

5. The whole poetic effort, the purgation which will gather ‘him out of nature’ into ‘the artifice of eternity’ is made solely so that he may celebrate better the world of love and creation and fecundity that he has behind. The power of the poem comes from this ambiguous attitude, the poet’s ironic tenderness and pity for mortality considered against eternity and for the vanity of his own striving for impersonality set against the immediate and beauty and warmth of the created world.

6. **Language:** Yeat’s language in this poem has the firmness of authority. It begins in the manner of conversation. It opens as though a previous discussion has taken place... “That (Ireland) is no country for old men.” The impression of the use of spoken language is sustained by the use of that in that sensual music and all in all summer long and all again in all neglect. Again, the second stanza in the first four lines uses the simplest of words. Even so, the language tends to the formal, even dignified.

   Nor is there singing school but studying
   Monuments of its own magnificence.

7. This poem is not a definite statement by the poet on the problem of Youth versus Age of Flesh Spirit or Nature versus Art. There are several other poems of his that deal with similar problems: ‘The Tower’ (poem), ‘Youth and Age’ and ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul,’ where he treats the issues differently. There is also another poem on Byzantium simply called ‘Byzantium.’ So, do find time to read all of some of these poems to realise the complexity to Yeat’s attitude.
3. AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

This poem is also included in the collection called The Tower published in 1928.

**Step One:** Guess from the title what kind of poem you expect Among School Children to be. There are some questions that arise. How did Yeats happen to be among school children? What do the school children remind him of? Does the great love of his life, Maud Gonnie, have anything to do with it? Spend a couple of minutes thinking about the possible subject of the poem and put down your guess on paper.

**Step Two:** Now read the poem and try and find out what it is about. The following questions will help you in your search.

1. Do you see any similarity between this poem and ‘Sailing to Byzantium’? Look for similarity of phrases or lines or meaning.
2. In what capacity is the poet visiting the school?
3. Who is referred to by the phrase “a Ledaean body”?
4. Who is the ‘she’ of stanza III?
5. Does stanza VI offer any clue to the meaning? Why does the poet refer to the philosophers?
6. Who are the Presence in stanza VII? What does the last line of the stanza mean?
7. What is the poet saying in stanza VIII?
8. Is the poem about school children? Or does he use the occasion of his presence in the school for saying something else?
9. Is it a meditative poem or is it a narrative poem? Your understanding of the poem will necessarily be incomplete. There will be portions that you will find obscure. But try and form your impressions about the poem and put these impressions into sentences.

I

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 histories,
To cut and scw, be neat in everthing
In the best modern way—the children’s eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

II

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changes 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.
And thinking of that fit of grief of rage
I look upon one child of 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.

Her present image floats into the mind—
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
And I though never of Ledacan kind
Had pretty plumage once—enough of that,
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

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?

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.

Both nuns and mothers worship images,
But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother's reveries,
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
And yet they too break hearts—O Presences
That passion, piety or affection knows.
And that all heavenly glory symbolise—
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII
Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor beareyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
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 dances?

Step Three: Now read the poem with the help of study notes.

Don't forget to attend to
i) the tone of the poem; and
ii) its language, and any special features of it.

STUDY NOTES
Stanza 1
1. I walk through the long schoolroom: As a Senator Yeats visited S. Otteran's School, Waterford, in February 1926 for inspection. At that time he had crossed 60.
2. A kind old nun: It was obviously a convent school. The kind old nun is identified as the Reverend Mother Philomena, Principal of the School.
6. In the best modern way: The school was run on Montessori methods founded by Maria Montessori (1870-1952), Italian teacher. The Montessori method aims at developing the child's individuality.
7. A sixty-year-old smiling public man: How does the poet view himself as a public figure? Do you see a note of irony in this description? Compare this with line 31-32 in stanza IV.

Discussion:
1. This stanza gives the setting, the occasion of the poet's meditations. Yeats is a Senator and is on an inspection visit to a school.
2. V. de Sola Pinto in his Crisis in English Poetry says: "In Among School Children he starts with a vivid picture of himself as an elderly senator of the Irish Free State inspecting a convent school. Again there is ironic humour both in the glimpse of the education of the children and in the self-portrait" (p.123)
3. Note the tense which the poet has used to describe the visit in the stanza. The tense is historical present—the same tense which a commentator mostly uses to give a running commentary on the play going on before his eyes. Does the poet change the tense later on? If so, why? The question to ask is: Is the tense used in the poem appropriate?

Stanza II

8. **I dream of a Ledaean body:** There seems to be a sharp break between this stanza and the preceding one. Actually the scene in the school makes him think of the great love of his life, Maud Gonne as an old woman.

*Ledaean body:* Maud Gonne. This description recalls the Greek myth of Jupiter making love to Leda in the guise of a swan. Out of this union two eggs were produced from one of which came Helen and Pollux and from the other Clytemnestra and Castor. Yeats has several poems in which he compares Maud Gonne to Helen.

9-12 **I’dream ... to tragedy:** The sight of the schoolgirls reminds Yeats of Maud Gonne her old age when ‘bent above a sinking fire’ she told him of an incident from her own childhood leading to a day’s unhappiness.

13-16 **Told, and ... of the one shell:** As he listened to her, it had seemed to Yeats for a moment as though their opposite natures were reconciled, blended into a sphere, or into the yolk and white of one egg.

15 **Plato’s parable:** The parable of the egg suggests a primordial unity.

**Discussion:**

1. Yeats’s visit to the schoolgirls reminds him of Maud Gonne who was the great love of his life and who had now grown old.

2. What do the references to the ‘Ledaean body’ and ‘Plato’s parable’ indicate? Yeats is obviously a poet for the educated reader.

3. You have some poems of T.S. Eliot’s in your course. How does Yeats compare with T.S. Eliot in this respect?

4. What does the phrase ‘sinking fire’ suggest?

Stanza III

17-19 **And thinking ... at that age:** The recollection of Maud Gonne’s story of her childhood
leads him to realise that Maud must once have looked like one of the children before him.

19. **She: Maud Gonne**

at that age: as a child.

23. **And thereupon:** On thinking of Maud Gonne as a child.

24. **She:** As in line 19.

*She...living child:* Maud Gonne must have looked like one the children before him.

**Discussion**

1. Note that Yeats oscillates between old age and childhood. The poetry implies a sense of loss that occurs as one grows up.

2. How is this stanza linked to the preceding one?

**Stanza VI**

25. **Her present image:** Maud Gonne as an old woman.

26. **Quattrocento:** the fifteenth century used in reference to the Italian art of that time.

25-28 **Her present image... for its meat?** The poet implies a sharp contrast between Maud Gonne as a child and as he loved her, and as an old woman hollow of cheek, no better than a scarecrow. A further implication is the sense of loss involved in growing up from childhood to old age.

30. **Had pretty plumage once—enough of that:** Note that Yeats here avoids self-pity and pulls his own legs. He has the ability to laugh at himself. The dash indicates Yeats’s resolve to avoid the merely sentimental.

**Discussion**

1. Note that the poem in its first four stanzas focuses on the discrepancy between childhood and age and the loss involved in the process. The discrepancy suggests a sense of loss, though this is merely a suggestion and has not been stated openly in the poem so far.

2. These four stanzas present the naturalistic framework for the poet’s meditations on the question of unfulfilled expectations in the remaining stanzas.
3. Which other poem does line 32 remind you of, the word ‘scarecrow’ particularly? What about line 10 of ‘Sailing of Byzantium’?

Stanza V

33 shape upon her lap: the image of a child in the lap of its young mother.

34 Honey of generation had betrayed: (The soul) that had been betrayed into the flesh or trapped into the body by the generative honey.

35 That: used for the betrayed soul or ‘shape’ upon her lap.

35-36 sleep . . . decide: The soul that had been betrayed into the flesh shows two reactions:
  i) sleep and forgetting of past glory suggested by drug and
  ii) a struggle out of generation and towards remembered blessedness.

37-38 did she but . . . its head: if she could. See or imagine what her son would become or look like at 60 or more.

39-40 A compensation. . . setting forth?: The meaning is: No young mother wouldn’t consider the pain and anxieties of motherhood worthwhile could she see what he would become or look like at 60.

39 pang of birth: pain that a mother experiences while giving birth to her child. Pang is a sudden sharp feeling of pain.

40 Or the uncertainty. . . forth?: the anxieties that the mother feels about how her son would do or fare in life.

Discussion

1. Note the form and the punctuation of the stanza. It begins with a question word What and ends with a question mark. What kind of a question is it? There is only one answer to it, hence it is a rhetorical question.

2. Thomas Parkinson in W.B. Yeats: The Later Poetry (1971) says: “The implied matter of the first four stanzas is the soul’s loss in its entry into the flesh, and the various oscillations from youth to age, child to nun, child to aging man, learning to innocence, play to wisdom, the present to the conjectured past childhood image of the lover—all these prepared the way for the questions to be overtly examined in stanza 5…”(pp.96-97).
Stanza VI

41-42 **Plato**... **things**: According to Plato, visible nature was only foam, white, air-filled matter on the top of a liquid, especially on the sea, something empty or not lasting.

42 **paradigm**: archetype or Platonic idea or essence.

**Ghostly paradigm of things**: used for archetype or Platonic idea or essence. The reference is to Plato’s philosophy of Ideas.

43 **Soldier Aristotle**: Aristotle who is more solid. The word solider suggests a contract to Plato who believed in Ideas or Esseences of which visible nature was merely an imitation.

**Taws**: birch

43-44 **Solider... king of kings**: Aristotle was the tutor to Alexander and used the birch or stick upon the buttocks of the king of kings. The meaning is that human intellect (Aristotle) dominates mere temporal power (Alexander). The lines also show Yeats’s own contempt for merely civil authority.

45 **Pythagoras**: (c. 582-500 B.C.) Greek philosopher. He was a mystic and mathematician, and founded a brotherhood, who saw in numbers the key to the understanding of the universe. The central idea of his philosophy was that Number was the first principle of the universe: On numbers depended the harmonies which established it and which sustain it in ordered motion.

45-47 **World-famous... Muses heard**: Pythagoras measured the intervals between musical motes on a stretched string.

47 **Muses**: 9 Greek Goddesses who represented an art or science.

48 **Old clothes upon old stricks to scare a bird**: All these philosophers, Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras, whatever their achievements, could not prevent the onset of old age and became scarecrows. This line has the effect of reducing the forceful achievements of the human intellect to mere pretentions. Does this line ring a bell in your mind?

**Discussion**

1. Note the punctuation of the stanza. The achievements of Plato and Aristotle and Pythagoras are given separate sections—the first two marked off by a semicolon, followed by a colon. This makes the last line a summary of and commentary on what has gone before.

2. What does the last line remind you of? Compare it with line 10 of “Sailing to Byzantium”
[Text from the document]

Stanza VII

49. **Both nuns and mothers:** Here Yeats gathers the thread of his observations and meditations. He has referred to a nun in Stanza I and to a mother in Stanza V.

**Mothers:** The mother creates in her heart an image of her son.

**Both nuns... images:** The mother creates in her heart an image of her son which she cherishes over the years whereas a nun worships an actual stone or a bronze image of God.

50. **But those:** But those image.

53. **And yet they too break hearts:** Not in the sense in which a mother’s or a lover’s heart is broken. They also break hearts by highlighting the inability of human endeavour to reach perfection.

**Presences:** The images that nuns worship, the images of children that mothers cherish and that love engenders in the heart of the beloved. In other words, these images or presences are created by the passion of lovers, the piety of nuns and the affection of mothers. These presences are symbols of heavenly glory as they are outside the world of time.

56. **self-born mockers:** These presence are self-bon because they are not created in the sense perceptions of human beings, they do not arise out of what we perceive. Yet they too break hearts and mock human enterprise, by showing up the limitations of mortal life.

**Discussion**

1. Note that the stanza does not close with a full stop. The poet’s apostrophe or address continues in the next stanza.

2. You will also notice how the first half of the poem has prepared the readers for the meditations in the second half.

3. In an earlier draft the poem was supposed to end with stanza VII? If Yeats had done that, stanza 7 would have provided “a sorrowful and fitting ending” to the poem. But it would have been a lesser poem. As it is, the poem moves from complaint to a more positive, rhapsodic ending.
Stanza VIII

57 Labour: Human effort. The poet gives two instances of this ‘labour’—the flowering of the chestnut tree and dancing.

Labour is . . . where: Labour truly blossoms or flowers into perfection or a state of perfect blessedness only where . . .

58 The body . . . soul: Labour reaches the fullness of its being where the body is not made to suffer to make the soul happy. That is, where there is no disjunction between the body and the soul.

59 Nor beauty . . . despair: Where beauty (such as it is in human life) comes from the despair of creating an image of perfect beauty.

60 blear-eyed: Eyes that are red and tired.

Blear-eye wisdom: Wisdom that comes from exhaustive study.

57-60 Labour is . . . midnight oil: These lines are an apostrophe to the Presences of the preceding stanza. They also end in even more ecstatic concluding lines.

61 chestnut tree: Yeats has used the chestnut tree to stress the unity of being in nature.

62 bole: The main stem or trunk of a tree.

63 O body swayed to music: Yeats’s use of dance can be taken to represent art.

64 How . . . the dance?: Yeats has concluded the poem with a rhetorical question. When a perfect dance is in progress, we cannot distinguish between the dancer and her dance.

Discussion

1. In human life, body and soul are hardly ever united. Such beauty as there is comes from the despair of creating an image of perfect beauty and the attainment of wisdom is exhausting. When labour truly blossoms i.e., achieves perfection there is no such disjunction between the physical and the spiritual, between the idea and its realisation.

2. The ecstatic vision of the last few lines of the poem is the outcome of the poet’s meditation over human limitation in the rest of the poem.
3. Yeast has used the two favourite images of a tree and dance in several other poems also. These images stand for the unity of being. The image of the tree in this poem recalls tree images in some of Yeats's earlier poetry. Here, however, it is a more natural, less stylised tree. The tree is majestic, full of blossom and is all of its parts—spreading roots, leaf, trunk and flower—which are inseparable and which therefore symbolise unity of being in the world of nature. The other images, that of dance, also recurs several times in Yeats, through with slightly differing connotations. Here it signifies 'the coming together of the individual striving and the abstract perfection itself for which it strives.'

4. V. de sola pinto writers:
   The last stanza answers all the questionings by showing a beauty, which is preceptual growth and movement the wholeness of life, which defies analysis.

   This is poetry in which the outer and inner lives are brought together in a unity, which includes religion, wit, lyrical beauty and philosophic meditation. It is not a synthesis in which we feel a sense of terrible effort and strain as we do in much of the best work of Hopkins, but it seems to arise easily and naturally from the poet's mind 'as the leaves grow on the tree'.

   General Discussion

1. As Thomas Parkinson tells us in his W.B. Yeats: The Later Poetry (1971), the poem has its germ in a judgement already firmly established in Yeats's mind. 
   *Topic for poem*—school children and the thought that life will waste them, Perhaps that no possible life can fulfill their own dreams or even their teacher's hope. Being in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens.

   ... But in the final poem 'the old thought' forms only one among many notions that are folded together in a complex design of meaning.

2. The poem was a long time evolving. At one stage in his writing of the poem Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespeare that the poem was a curse upon age:

   Here is a fragment of my last curse upon old age.
   It means that even the greatest men are owls, scarecrows by the time their fame has come. Aristotle, remember was Alexander's tutor, hence the taws (from of birth).
   (here the inserts an earlier form of stanza VI)

   Pythagoras made some measurement of the intervals between notes on a stretched string. It is a poem of seven or eight similar verses.

3. But again in the final poem the opposition of Youth and Old Age forms only a part of the totality of life and death over which Yeats meditates in the poem.
IV GLOSSARY

Byzantium: Byzantium is the name of an ancient city which was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Empire was called the Byzantine Empire after its capital city and lasted for over 1000 years from A.D. 395 onwards. Byzantine art is a fusion of the Roman, Greek and Persian cultures and its supreme achievement were mosaics and frescoes. You would be well advised to consult Encyclopaedia Britannica or some other encyclopedia of art under the entry on Byzantine art.

Celt: a name applied in modern times to peoples speaking languages similar to those of the ancient Galli or Gauls including the Bretons in France, the Cornish, Welsh, Irish manx and Gaelic of the British Isles. The word Celtic in derived Celt.

Dublin: capital city of the Republic of Ireland. The Irish population is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic.

Leda: wife of Tyndareus, King of Sparta and mother of Castor and Pollux, Helen and Clytemnestra. She was beloved by Zeus (the supreme god of the Greeks) who visited her in the form of a swan. Yeats wrote a poem on the subject, 'Leda and the Swan.'

Mosaic: a piece of ornamental work produced by the fitting together of small pieces of coloured stone, glass, etc. on a base to which they are fixed so as to form a pattern or picture. The sages referred to in line 17 in 'Sailing to Byzantium' are remembered as the beautiful mosaics on the wall of S. Appolinaire Nuovo in Italy.

O'Leary, John (1830-1907): A Fenian leader, exiled in Paris for fifteen years, greatly influenced Yeats as a young man. He introduced him to the movement of young Ireland.

Perne (in a gyre): to pern is to move with a circle, spinning motion. Yeats noted that which he was a child in Sligo he could see a column of smoke from the 'the pern mill' and was told 'pern' was another name for the spool on which thread was wound. To 'gyre' is to gyrate. Yeats, in A vision, saw history as a series of opposing historical change.

Romantic Ireland: Heronic Ireland. The phrase would become clear if we used it in the context of Indian history. The phrase 'Romantic India' would be appropriate if it were applied to the time when people like Maharana Pratap or Rani Jhansi, Shaheed Bhagat Singh and other martyrs lived.

Tone-Wolfe (1763-98): was involved in the 1798 Rising. Took his own life while under sentence of death.
Vision, A: Published in 1925, revised edition, 1937. Contains Yeats's philosophical system which is at once complex and private. This new universal mythology Yeats derived through the medium of his wife. It concern the 28 phases of the moon, relating them to types of human personality and the history of civilisation, seen as huge complementary cycles. This new mythology enters several poems of Yeats's
V. BIBLIOGRAPHY