

Among the School Children Summary

Writer: William Butler Yeats | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Summary

Stanza 1 - The Poet in the Schoolroom and Self-Reflection: In the opening stanza, Yeats presents himself as an aged statesman visiting a school at the age of sixty. A kind nun explains to him how the children are learning — they read, sing, sew, and are trained to be neat and disciplined. The children, full of curiosity, gaze at this “sixty-year-old smiling public man.” This scene triggers deep self-reflection in the poet’s mind — he wonders how time has transformed a once-passionate young lover into an old public figure, and how the energy of youth fades into maturity.

Stanza 2 - Memory of Maud Gonne and the Echo of Youth: In the second stanza, the poet’s mind drifts back to his past as he recalls his beloved Maud Gonne, who, though now aged and bent with time, was once the embodiment of beauty and vitality. By calling her a “Ledaean body,” Yeats compares her beauty to that of Helen of Troy, daughter of Leda in Greek mythology. He remembers the emotional and spiritual bond they once shared, when their souls seemed to merge like “the yolk and white of the one shell.”

Stanza 3 - The Child’s Face as a Reflection of Lost Youth: Here, Yeats observes a child in the classroom and imagines Maud Gonne as she might have looked at that age, with the same color of hair, the same bright cheeks, the same innocence. His heart becomes restless, overwhelmed by emotion, as he sees in the child’s face a reflection of lost beauty, unfulfilled love, and the cruel passage of time. In that innocent face, past and present blend together, reviving both tenderness and pain.

Stanza 4 - Awareness of Present Age and Reality: In this stanza, the poet accepts the reality of aging. He reflects on his wrinkled face and weary body and concludes, “Better to smile on all that smile,” meaning it is better to face old age with calm acceptance rather than regret. He compares himself to “a comfortable kind of old scarecrow,” symbolizing an aging man who has lost physical vigor but found inner peace and wisdom through acceptance of life’s inevitable changes.

Stanza 5 - Motherhood and the Cycle of Life: In this stanza, the poet reflects on the complexity of motherhood. A young mother, holding her baby on her lap, never imagines that

one day the child will grow old. She gives birth out of love and the natural desire for life, unaware of the uncertainty that lies ahead. Through this image, Yeats expresses a painful truth of existence — every birth is the beginning of a journey toward death.

Stanza 6 - Knowledge, Philosophy, and the Limits of Understanding: In the sixth stanza, Yeats mentions three great philosophers — Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras. He shows how humanity, through philosophy and knowledge, seeks to discover the ultimate truth, yet all human wisdom remains limited. As he says, “Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird,” meaning that all systems of thought and logic are ultimately lifeless, like scarecrows—mere symbols of truth rather than truth itself.

Stanza 7 - Religion, Love, and Human Idols: Here, Yeats compares the devotion of a nun and that of a mother. The nun worships the divine image of God in stone, while the mother worships the living image of love—her child. Both forms of worship are sacred, but their idols are different. Yeats points out that such images—spiritual or human—can also break the heart, because they are symbols, not reality. This contrast represents the eternal conflict between divine longing and human love.

Stanza 8 - The Unity of Life and Art: The final stanza is the philosophical climax of the poem. Yeats declares that true beauty in life is found where labour, beauty, and spirit merge into one harmonious whole. He gives the example of the chestnut tree, where the leaf, blossom, and trunk together form the complete tree. In the same way, no part of life stands alone. The lines, “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/How can we know the dancer from the dance?”. This symbolizes the perfect union of art and life, body and soul, love and creation. For Yeats, this unity represents the eternal harmony of existence.