

Topics for discussion:

1. Why is Adam's curse not Eve's curse? How does Adam's curse, as described, affect women? Do you think that the poet means what he says when he asserts (indirectly) that scrubbing pavements (woman's work) or breaking stones (for roads) is not so toilsome as writing poetry? By extension, the woman who "labors to be beautiful" is working harder than the kitchen-floor scrubber. Do you think this idea is valid? What do you make of the fact that the poet insults those who think otherwise as "the noisy set/ Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen/ The martyrs call the world." If you disagree about the labor that goes into beauty are you part of the set? What principle of selection governs Yeats's choice in listing those who are called "the world"? Who are the martyrs who call them so and what are they martyred by? Why was love reckoned among the labors? In the poem's view, is it still to be reckoned among them? Elucidate the metaphor about the moon and the shell and discuss its aptness to this poem.

2. Compare Yeats's swans (in *The Wild Swans at Coole*) with Keats's nightingale. Do you think that these are the same nine-and-fifty swans that Yeats counted nineteen years ago? What is the effect of calling the water in which they swim "cold, companionable streams"? How do they contrast with the man for whom "All's changed"? The contrast between bird and man is complete by the end of the fourth stanza; what does the fifth add to the poem?

3. Yeats was a famous Irish poet when the ill-fated Dublin uprising took place in 1916; many involved were known to him, some intimately, but he did not approve of their action. It would have been ugly to condemn them in their martyrdom for the cause of Irish liberty but Yeats could not exonerate them, either. He might have kept silent, but he chose to write this poem. How well does it answer his dilemma? At the outset, those in the uprising have "vivid" faces—faces filled with life but by the third stanza they have been "enchanted to a stone". The contrast between "vivid" faces and "grey" houses now becomes a contrast between an enduring stone and things that change from minute to minute. Discuss both contrasts and what it means for the poem to turn from one to the other.

4. In alluding to the perennial or the most troubling problems of mankind, poets like Shakespeare and Donne, even when approaching secular subjects, nonetheless depended for their allusions upon a common stock of references to Judeo-Christian belief. References of this kind are muted in later poets, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, or largely absent, as is the case with Keats. Yeats, coming later, took some of these references up again but incorporated them in a self-created system of spiritual understanding which took Judeo-Christian symbolisms to be one-half of a set of contraries, each expressive of the spiritual limits between which human life must run its course.

Yeats believed that Christianity had weakened its hold on the life and imagination of mankind and that this was because it gave a distorted view of things, representing only one side of humanity's two-fold spiritual and imaginative capacities. Prompted by this belief, he developed the notion that the collective spiritual life of humanity moved through a series of phases, in which each age drew spiritual nourishment from both sides, but in differing measures. One side would be virtually all-encompassing, then the other would gradually encroach upon it; the two would enter a phase of relative balance (Yeats located the last balanced phase at the time of the Emperor Justinian who ruled the Empire from Byzantium in the sixth century AD), then move through phases in which the second side is increasingly dominant, until a phase is reached where it becomes virtually all-encompassing, in a reversal of the imaginative and spiritual values of the first phase. The whole process would continue from this new point, moving through phases back to balance and one to recover the initial position.

It does not matter how seriously Yeats took this notion. The point is that he believed it impossible to write important poetry without an extensive system of metaphors and allusions

behind it, and the system that he created—using elements from various sources—was a way of getting Judeo-Christianity into his poetry without subscribing to it. The reader of the poetry did not have to grasp all the sources of the allusions and symbols to understand it—any more than Shakespeare’s readers had to know the theological writings that gave authority to the doctrine of “prefiguring” that underlies sonnet CVI.

5. *The Second Coming*, written in 1919 at the conclusion of the First World War, raises the expectation by its title that the one who comes will be Jesus, the Redeemer. Startlingly, the poem fuses the idea of Jesus’s coming with the Beast of the Apocalypse, not with the Redeemer. The Beast, in Yeats’s view, is a twisted version of the antitype to the Judeo-Christian side of things, twisted because the Book of Revelations was written in opposition to the antitype at the time when that side was virtually all-encompassing; its vision could perceive its alternative only as monstrous. Do you think that knowing why Yeats presents the Redeemer as the Beast makes an important difference to understanding the poem? What is “the ceremony of innocence”? Does it relate to the ceremonious quality of love-as-labor in *Adam’s Curse*? What does the “twenty-centuries of stony sleep” refer to? Why is the gaze of the sun “blank and pitiless”? (We might consider comparing it with the sun of Herrick’s *To the Virgins* or with Marvell’s sun, which is ours and which we can make run. The poem has a dramatic movement: the ruminations of the poem are deeply troubling, there is a moment of prophetic inspiration, and the “I” of the poem is left with knowledge. How would you characterize this movement? Is the knowledge beneficial?

6. *Sailing to Byzantium* takes us to the time of Julian and the last “balance-point” in this cycle of history. The city is supposed to exemplify successfully a way of life in which art and nature, the matter of human life and its conceptions of the world around it, are in easy relationship. In Yeats’s Byzantium, human beings understand that by the activity of their intellect they create the world in which they live. Once again, is it necessary to know Yeats’s view of spiritual history to understand the poem? What is “the artifice of eternity”? How does the golden bird of the last stanza compare with Keats’s nightingale, Marvell’s bird with silver wings (in *The Garden*) or Keats’s urn? Is it a “monument of unaging intellect”—the sort of thing neglected in the first stanza? How does such a monument differ from an “unaging monument of intellect”?

7. Trace the course of reflection in its details through the stanzas of *Among School Children*. Does the “kind old nun” benefit the children (the scene is an elementary school for girls, which Yeats is visiting) by teaching them “in the best modern way”? What do you make of the description of the school’s curriculum? What is the force of the image of the “scarecrow” which figures prominently in two stanzas. What are the birds that these scarecrows are meant to scare away? The poem concerns old men, nuns and mothers? How do the nuns and mothers complement each other in the poem? At the end certain images are addressed as “Presences”. What is the purpose in addressing them in this way? What does the poet mean by his last two questions? How do you interpret the last line of the poem?