

# W.B. Yeats

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was an Irish poet and playwright who played a leading role in the Irish Literary Renaissance. His works often explore themes of mysticism, Irish mythology, and the supernatural. Yeats, a monumental figure in 20th-century literature, was appointed to the Irish Senate in 1922 and received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923 for his dramatic works. His revolutionary contributions to poetry, including iconic volumes like 'The Wild Swans,' 'The Tower,' and 'Last Poems and Plays,' have cemented his legacy as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. His greatest works include 'A Coat,' 'A Dream of Death,' 'Byzantium,' 'Leda and the Swan,' 'A Dream of Death,' and 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer.'

## BYZANTIUM

'Byzantium' is a sequel written by W. B. Yeats to his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium'. This poem was written four years later in 1930 and published in the book '**Words for Music, Perhaps, and Other Poems**' in 1932. During the break between these two poems, the poet has undergone physical (due to Malta fever) and intellectual changes. In 'Sailing to Byzantium' the poet talks of the journey to Byzantium but in 'Byzantium' the poet talks of his experience at Byzantium. Therefore, 'Byzantium' looks like an improvised version of 'Sailing to Byzantium'. These two poems are commonly addressed as 'Byzantium poems'.

### Text

The unpurged images of day recede;  
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;  
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song  
After great cathedral gong;  
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains  
All that man is,  
All mere complexities,  
The fury and the mire of human veins.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,  
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;  
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth  
May unwind the winding path;  
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath  
Breathless mouths may summon;  
I hail the superhuman;

I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,  
More miracle than bird or handiwork,  
Planted on the starlit golden bough,  
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,  
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud  
In glory of changeless metal  
Common bird or petal  
And all complexities of mire or blood.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit  
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,  
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,  
Where blood-begotten spirits come  
And all complexities of fury leave,  
Dying into a dance,  
An agony of trance,  
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,  
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,  
The golden smithies of the Emperor!  
Marbles of the dancing floor  
Break bitter furies of complexity,  
Those images that yet  
Fresh images beget,  
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

## Summary

The poem 'Byzantium' deliberates what happens at night in the city of Byzantium, through the first-person perspective. As the night emerges, in the city of Byzantium, the day's activities recede. The drunken soldiers of the Emperor are asleep, and the song of night-walkers too

fades along with other night sounds, after the great cathedral gong. The “starlit” or “moonlit” dome, disdains everything that is human, for human life is mere complexities filled with fury and the mire of human veins. As he observes the scene around him, the speaker sees an image floating in front of him. The speaker addresses the spirit as “superhuman”, for it reflects the ultimate truth of “death-in-life and life-in-death.” The poet follows the floating image to find a golden bird perching on a golden tree like a “miracle”. It calls and scorns the birds of “mire and blood.”

At midnight, the images float through the flames across the Emperor’s pavement. The fire seems to be self-generated and self-fed for it was fed by neither wood nor steel. Even the storm has no effect on it. Here, “blood-begotten spirits” come and “dance” in a “trance” and be cleared of all earthly impurities. Finally, spirit after spirit arrives at the seashore to be carried across the sea on the backs of dolphins. The golden smithies of the Emperor ensure the perfection of the end process, while the flames ensure the speckles cleansing of the spirits on land.

## **Paraphrasing and Analysis**

### **STANZA 1:**

***The unpurged images of the day recede 1***

***The Emperor`s drunken soldiers are abed 2***

The picture of the day to day objects which are mere objects having gross nature are going to the background because something important is coming so their value is fading away. The soldiers of the Emperor who are drunk heavily are now fast asleep. They do not move and it shows the night at its full calm and peak.

***Night resonance recedes, night-walkers` song 3***

***After great cathedral gong; 4***

When the cathedral (church of St. Sophia) has struck the sound of mid night, so the music and songs of people of in the midnight also fade away and the night walkers` song also fade away. The night walkers` can be analysed in two ways; one as usual night walkers who are rushing towards home while the others are the prostitutes.

***A starlit or moonlit disdains 5***

***All that man is 6***

***All mere complexities 7***

***The fury and the mire of human veins 8***

The starlit is the reference to the cathedral that is dislikes all that human possesses, the cathedral is contemptuous towards the nature and feelings of humans. It does not contemplate human and his intricacies. The cathedral stands here for spirituality while man stands for modernist perspective.

**Analysis:** The first stanza of ‘Byzantium’ presents the night view of the place. As night emerges, the unpurged images or the human activity recedes. Also, the drunken soldiers of the emperor have gone to sleep. By the time the sound of the gong of the great Cathedral (the

church of St. Sophia, the centre of Byzantine) is heard, even the sounds of the night and the songs of the nightwalkers (prostitutes) fade. All these scenes indicate that it is the late hours of the night, he is describing. The “drunken soldiers” and “night-walkers” indicate the poet’s disappointment over the degrading cultural and social values that are addressed in most of Yeats’s poems. Further, the second part of the stanza comments on the insignificant life of the human. The moonlit or starlit dome of the cathedral, suggests that human life is filled with “complexities” caused mainly by the “mire of human veins”.

## **STANZA 2:**

***Before me floats an image, man or shade 9***

***Shade more than man, more image than a shade 10***

The poet says that it is this time of the night when it is a right time for meditation and he has entered to the spiritual city of the Byzantium a vision appears before him. He gets confused after seeing the vision because it seems like a man and a shadow. Whether it is a shadow or a man, the poet seems baffled in deciding about. This shade which means a spirit is more than a man in appearance as its outlook and the composure is more than a man.

***For Hades` bobbin bound in mummy cloth 11***

***May unwind the winding path 12***

This spirit which has come from the region of death has unwound the coffin cloth and threw away all the impurities and has become a purified spirit which has been through agony.

***A mouth that has no moisture and no breath 13***

***Breathless mouth may summon 14***

***I hail the superman 15***

***I call it death in life and life in death 16***

The poet then explains this spirit and says that this image of spirit is very lifeless because it does not breathe, it is in no current of life. But at the same time it seems an immortal being as well. So the poet calls it life in death and death in life image or spirit.

**Analysis:** In the second stanza of the ‘Byzantium’, the poet talks of the vision or the image that appeared in front of him. He wonders if it is a man or a shade. As he looks further, he realizes it to be a shade more than a man; an image more than a shade. The verb “float” makes it clear that the image isn’t moving but simply carried away by the wind, confirming it to be a ghost or spirit. For, Hades’s bobbin – the dead people wound in “mummy-cloth” – takes the winding path to reach him. Further, the next lines describe them to be with no “moisture” or “breath” and “dry-mouthed”.

Yeats has used the “mummy-cloth” as a symbol of human experiences and periods of aging and death. The cloth wound around indicates the complexities of life a soul carries around after death to be unwound before entering the afterlife. A similar idea is presented by the poet in his other poem ‘All Soul’s Night’ published in 1920. The poet addresses those dead people as “superhuman” for they are free from the earthly curbs. Further, the poet employed “chiasmus,” a rhetorical device to reveal the contrasting perspective on death. Those alive on earth may

think it to be an end of life, but from a spiritual perspective, it is the beginning of new life. The use of “me” in this stanza gives more personal subjectivity to the poem.

### **STANZA 3:**

***Miracle, bird or golden handiwork 17***

***More miracle than bird or handiwork 18***

***Planted on the starlit golden bough. 19***

Then the poet says that he says a miracle. He sees a golden bird but promptly says that is something else than a bird. It is unusual bird golden bird ‘set upon a golden bough’ which Yeats has described in his earlier poem ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ as well.

***Can crock like the cocks of the Hades Crow? 20***

***Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud 21***

***In glory metal 22***

***Common bird or petal 23***

***And all complexities of mire or blood 24***

He says that this bird can crock like the crow which has come from the region of death and scorn other birds of petals and all the changes which flesh means mortal beings are destined to pass through. So this birds is spiritual and is casting away the material impurities.

**Analysis:** In the third stanza of ‘Byzantium,’ the poet sees something that looks like a miracle. He sees a golden bird or bird sculpture placed on the starlit golden bow. The poet here refers to the art and architectural beauty Byzantine is famous for. He calls it a miracle for it was more than a bird or a handiwork. It seems to be crowing like the cocks of Hades, the city of the dead, and ghosts. In its glory of “changeless metal”, the state of immortality, it scorns those “birds of petals”, the mortal ones. The bird image serves as a paradox on the immortality gained by human handiwork. It becomes something that is immune to the impurities and aging of human experience. The art, which is manmade, becomes something that gives reason to human existence.

### **STANZA 4:**

***At Mid night on the Emperor`s pavement flit 25***

***Flames that no faggots feeds; nor steel has lit it 26***

The poet says around midnight fire appears on the Emperor`s pavement and it seems that this fire has not been lit by burning wood or the friction of any steel against these move about stones.

***Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame, 27***

He adds that no storm can interfere of disturb this fire and the flames which have been lit though self-generating.

***Where blood-begotten spirits come 28***

***And all complexities of fury leave 29***

He says that all the spirits come to this fire because they want to cast away their impurities.

***Dying into a dance, 30***

***An agony of trance, 31***

***An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve 32***

These spirits are purified from all the complexities in this fire. They come out as purified spirits. Then these spirits begin their dance of purgatory because they are about to be purified. This dance ends in a soothing joy and peace. And in the end these spirits are purified.

**Analysis:** The fourth stanza of the poem details what the poet has witnessed in the city at midnight. At midnight on the Emperor's pavement, a fire appears. It is neither fed by fuel sticks nor started by striking a piece of iron against a flintstone. They look like self-generated flames, one arising out of another. It is miraculous in nature for even storms cannot quench them. The blood-begotten spirits (according to medieval belief spirits are begotten of blood) come to be removed from all their impurities and earthly passions. "Blood-begotten" spirits can also be interpreted as the spirits of those who died during the world war and the civil war in Ireland. The spirits undergo a "dance" of "trance" in this mystical agonizing fire, yet can burn even the sleeve. It allegorically refers to the fire of Judgment mentioned in the bible to those impure souls.

**STANZA 5:**

***Astraddle on the dolphin`s mire and blood 33***

***Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood 34***

These spirits one by one sit in the dolphins with their mire and blood and reach the beach of Byzantium.

***The golden smithies of the emperor! 35***

***Marbles of the dancing floor 36***

***Break bitter furies of complexity, 37***

***Those image that yet, 38***

***Fresh images beget, 39***

***That dolphin-torn that gong-tormented sea. 40***

These spirits are imposed order upon by the blacksmiths of the Emperor. The marbles of the floor where they dance break little furies of complexity and those images beget fresh images. The poet describes the shore of ocean of life in the last line. It is a conflict between flesh and spirit.

**Analysis:** The fifth and the final stanza of the poem 'Byzantium', deliberate on the final process of the spirits. Spirit after Spirit comes to ride on the dolphins, symbolically referring to the Roman beliefs of the dead carried to the Isles of the Blessed. The golden blacksmiths of the



emperor are given the responsibility of keeping things in order. At the same time, the marbles of the dancing floor break even the little furies of complexity for those images that beget fresh images in fire. Still, the process of the spirits being carried on despite the sea being torn by the dolphins and the silence of the night disturbed by the gong sound.

## Themes

### Theme: Art and Immortality

- **Paradox of Art and Mortality:** The poem explores the paradoxical relationship between art and mortality. While art is portrayed as a source of eternal beauty and perfection, it arises from the messy and transient nature of everyday life. The beautiful and lasting artworks of Byzantium seem to disdain their mortal creators, yet without these mortal creators, the art wouldn't exist.
- **Creation and Symbiosis:** The speaker emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between mortal beings and immortal art. The "golden smithies" creating eternal art are the same individuals who engage in the messy, mundane aspects of life. The poem suggests that the deathless beauty of art relies on the existence of the mortal world, creating a reciprocal connection between the two.
- **Symbolism of Shade:** The image of the dried-up "shade" symbolizes the preserved visions and ideals of the dead. This shade contains both "death-in-life and life-in-death," emphasizing the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the immortal art and the deceased creators. The artwork preserves the essence of those who are no longer alive.
- **Spiritual Transcendence:** The poem suggests that art has the power to transcend the limitations of mortal existence. The "superhuman" shade represents a fusion of life and death, indicating a spiritual transcendence beyond the earthly constraints. Art becomes a vehicle for immortality, breaking the continuous flood of death and giving rise to fresh images of heavenly beauty.

### Theme: The Relationship between the Body and the Soul

- **Contrast between Body and Soul:** The poem explores the stark contrast between the physical body and the immortal soul. The magnificent art of Byzantium symbolizes the perfection and eternity of the soul, while the chaotic and messy human activities around it represent the limitations and imperfections of the physical body.
- **Intertwined Existence:** The speaker acknowledges the intertwined existence of the soul and the body. Despite the apparent disparity between the divine art and the rowdy human life, the poem suggests that the immortal soul, represented by everlasting art, depends on the mortal body. The creation of art necessitates the engagement with the messy realities of human life.
- **Purification and Afterlife:** Symbolic elements, such as dancers "dying" in a purifying "flame" and a mummy's wrappings unravelling to create a "winding path," imply a process of purification. This suggests that individuals must shed the "mire and blood" of mortal life to move into a world of spiritual perfection and beauty after death. The pain and fear associated with death are seen as a transformative journey leading to an eternal realm of spirit.

### Theme: The Impact of Fate and the Divine on History:

- **Devotion to Mysticism:** Yeats's rejection of Christianity did not signify a rejection of spirituality. His deep interest in mysticism, mythology, Theosophy, spiritualism, and the occult led to the development of a unique spiritual and philosophical system. This system emphasized the role of fate and historical determinism, where events were believed to be preordained.
- **Interlocking Gyres:** Yeats conceptualized the development and reincarnation of the soul using the image of interlocking gyres, representing spiral cones. This spiritual system suggested a complex interplay between the human and the divine, with fate being a guiding force in the course of history.
- **Complex System of Spirituality:** His spiritual and philosophical system, influenced by various esoteric traditions, created a lens through which he viewed the world. Yeats believed that moments of interaction between the human and divine revealed the plan of fate. The divine, in its various forms, played a crucial role in shaping historical events.
- **Historical Determinism:** Yeats's poems often convey a tone of historically determined inevitability, particularly in situations involving human and divine interaction. The belief in fate and its influence on history is a recurring theme in his works.

## Form and Literary Elements

Byzantium is a formal, rhyming poem or **lyric poem written in 5 stanzas**. Each stanza of the poem has **eight lines** with the rhyme scheme of 'AABBCDDC'. The first four lines are made up of two rhyming couplets (AABB), while the rhyme structure of the next four lines looks like sandwiched couplets with the rhyme scheme (CDDC). Metrically, each is quite complicated; the **lines are loosely iambic**, with the first, second, third, fifth, and eighth lines in pentameter, the fourth line in tetrameter, and the sixth and seventh line in trimeter, so that the pattern of line-stresses in each stanza is 55545335.

The setting of the poem is "**a night in the ancient city of Byzantium**". The great Cathedral in the poem refers to the church of St. Sophia, which is built in the central part of Byzantium or the Eastern part of Rome. The speaker is **an unidentified individual** who is implied to bear a similarity to the poet himself.

**Alliteration** appears in the phrases: "resonance recedes" "dome disdains" "Hades' bobbin bound". **Assonance** appears in: "Nor storm" "An agony of trance". A creature (the shade) is compared through **simile** to "the cocks of Hades." The poem alludes to the history of Byzantium, also later known as Constantinople or Istanbul. It contains several **allusions** to Greek myth, and in particular to Hades, the Greek god of the underworld.

## Symbolism in "Byzantium":

Various important symbols are employed by Yeats in the poem. The never-tarnishing **golden bird** which is made of "changeless" gold, represents spiritual and artistic perfection, embodying an idealized form that transcends the imperfections of mortal existence.

**Byzantium** serves as a symbol of the ideal, spiritual world of art, reflecting the glorious architecture and mosaic art of the ancient city. **The Shade** or ghost, represents artistic immortality and the enduring nature of great works of art. This 'superhuman' figure implies a state beyond the ordinary human existence, suggesting the elevated and transcendent nature of artistic immortality.