

Byzantium by William Butler Yeats

About William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats was born as the eldest son of John Butler Yeats on June 13, 1865. He soon recognized his true calling in poetry and established himself as a man of letters. For the rest of his life, he worked tirelessly as a poet, playwright, and literary critic. Revitalizing Irish culture, search for spiritual identity, and his unrequited love for Maud Gonne are the dominant themes of his poetry. As an outcome of his untiring effort, he founded the Irish Literary Theatre, later known as the Abbey Theatre in 1904 with the help of his friend Lady Augusta Gregory. Yeats proved to be a vigorous writer, writing even at the time of his death on January 28, 1939.

Introduction to poem

'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'.

Summary of Byzantium

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.

Theme and Settings of Byzantium

The major themes of 'Byzantium' can be "Human imperfection vs. perfectness of art" and "Terrestrial life vs. Spiritual or afterlife". The contrasting image of day and night, symbolically present the contrasting life before and after death. On the whole, the poet metaphorically presents human life as nothing and momentous, while the man-made arts remains forever.

The setting of the poem is "a night in the 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.

Form and Structure of Byzantium

Byzantium is a formal, rhyming poem. The poet used the stanza form that he'd already used in his other poems 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' and 'A Prayer For My Daughter.' 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).

Analysis of Byzantium

Stanza One

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.

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 center of Byzantine) is heard, even the sounds of the night and the songs of the nightwalkers (prostitutes) fades. 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 addressed in most of his poems. Further, the

second part of the stanza comments on the insignificant life of the human. The moonlit or starlit dome of the cathedral, suggest that human life is filled with “complexities” caused mainly by the “mire of human veins”.

Stanza Two

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.

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, Hade’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. For 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 and subjectivity to the poem.

Stanza Three

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.

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 Four

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.

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 can not quench them. The blood-begotten spirits (according to medieval belief spirits are begotten of blood) come to be removed of 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 Five

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.

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 with the gong sound.

Symbolism in W. B. Yeats' "Byzantium"

One of the most captivating things about W.B. Yeats' poetry in general and "Byzantium" in particular is its rich symbolism. Symbols are essentially words which are not merely connotative but also suggestive, evocative and emotive. Symbols conjure before the mind's eye a host of images attached to them.

Things that are difficult to explain or are inexpressible can be conveyed through symbols. "Byzantium" is indeed a laudable attempt at bringing together aesthetics, spiritualism, symbolism, and mysticism together on one common platform. The effect is both revealing and enthralling. The epic exploration of the other world brings into perspective, the question of life in death and death in life.

The poet symbolically leaves the world of limitations to usher into a world of permanence and artistic eternity. Tired of life's agonizing existence, the poet seeks recluse and relief in death and beyond.

W.B. Yeats' "Byzantium" is a highly symbolic poem. It contains variety of symbols. While some symbols in this poem are easy to understand as they come from W.B. Yeats' stock arsenal, other

are complex and obscure. The resonant, sonorous and glittering quality of these symbols makes "Byzantium" a visual and acoustic treat.

Yeats writes in his essay "The symbolism of Poetry", "All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions" (46). Not all symbols that Yeats uses are 'emotional symbols'. He points out, "there are intellectual symbols, symbols that evoke ideas alone, ideas mingled with emotions" (49).

The deft use of these symbols in "Byzantium" enhances the reality of the present and mystery and richness of the past.

W.B. Yeats interweaves several different threads in "Byzantium", thereby granting the symbols richness and intricacy. Byzantium was the capital of the eastern Wing of the Holy Roman Empire. It was known for its works of art; especially mosaic work and gold enameling. In W. B. Yeats' poem Byzantium ceases to have its traditional meaning. It typifies a world of artistic magnificence and permanence.

It is a world of immortality beyond limits of time and space. It also denotes a place of unity; spiritual or otherwise. Richard Ellman writes, "Byzantium is a holy city, because it is the capital of Eastern Christendom, but it is also Yeats's holy city of the imagination as Golgonooza was Blake's" (257).

The resplendent transcendental world Yeats visualizes in "Sailing to Byzantium" now gets replaced by the images of a dreary, dark and ghostly place; full of phantoms, 'mire and blood'.

"Byzantium" has three key-symbols in the poem; the Byzantine dome, the golden bird perched on the golden bough and the flames of mosaic on the Emperor's pavement. All three put together stand for the culmination of achievement in art. Being classic works of art they also symbolize immortality and eternity.

They are as timeless and beautiful as John Keats Grecian urn. T.R. Henn remarks, "Byzantium...has a multiple symbolic value. It stands for the unity of all aspects of life, for perhaps the last time in history. It has inherited the perfection of craftsmanship, and more than craftsmanship, perhaps, the 'mystical mathematics' of perfection of form in all artistic creation".

The presence of the moon in the poem signifies a lot. First of all, the moon is a symbol of rhythm and cycle of time. It also represents the different phases in man's life. It denotes the center ground between the earth and heaven, the light of the sun and night. It typifies the center point between the conscious and the unconscious. This mood is unmistakably present in "Byzantium". John Unterecker writes about Yeats' use of symbols:

Yeats draws his from nature, that same natural world glorified by the romantics. Because Yeats thinks of himself as the "Last of the Romantics," a man born out of his time, he assigns his symbols other values than the romantics did. Made "strange" by those values, his "masked"

romantic images jolt us into a recognition of their symbolical function (Unterecker 40).

The dome that soars high towards the sky symbolizes the kindred meeting point of heaven and earth. Obviously, it stands in direct contrast with 'the fury and mire of human veins'. The very fact that the golden bird and the golden bough are made of gold, says it all. Gold is a precious metal, it never rusts.

The rays of the Sun are also golden and symbolize knowledge and permanence. Byzantium is symbolic of a place that may resolve the eternal struggle between the limitations of the physical world and the aspirations of the immortal spirit.

The golden bird is a timeless artifact like the poem "Byzantium" itself. The repeated use of the term 'complexities' by the poet, signifies that there is no easy solution to the enigma of life and death, mortality and immortality and the question of salvation or redemption.

'Mire' in the poem refers to the cycle of birth and death and man's inherent relationship with dust and clay. It also reminds one of the famous Biblical lines, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

The 'mummy cloth' clearly signifies that what it holds inside is beyond the question of life and death. Hence, the poet seems to liken death in "Byzantium" and sees end to human problems with the end of physical bond with the earth. The word 'superhuman' is significant as it has been used by the poet for a ghostly figure. It means, the likelihood of gaining super- stature is possible only after death and not in one's lifetime.

The description of events in poems like "Byzantium" is cosmological. When asked about the basis of such depiction, Yeats says that they are, "purely symbolical have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice" (A Vision 25). He explains his theory further at another place in "A Vision", "The whole system is founded upon the belief that the ultimate reality, symbolized by the sphere, falls in human consciousness... into a series of antinomies" (187). Such antinomies or contradictions do confront the readers while trying to understand the complex structure of obscure symbols used by Yeats in "Byzantium".

The flames of the Emperor's pavement are fuelled by deep spiritual realization. Thus, these flames are flames of divine purgatorial fire. The spirits brought to Byzantium by Dolphins through the sea of time are covered with 'mire and blood'; here blood signifies impurity or spurious state. 'Faggot' in the poem signifies martyrdom.

This means, the impure spirits must pass through an intensely trying spiritual fire, they must consign themselves to this fire to emerge like a phoenix. This agonizing dance of fire, flames and faggots would eventually turn these spirits into something pure or 'superhuman'.

Yeats deliberately stirs up a poetic passion while describing his symbols to achieve a desired poetical effect. B. Chatterjee's comment about the use of symbols in Byzantium is significant,

"The image after image is evoked-bird..... and these lead the reader's mind through a crescendo of horror, through the torture and terror of hell. But is it Hell or Purgatory? Yeats' attitude is ambivalent" (145).

In Byzantium there are several symbols:

The Dome

Represents perfection, a vault of heaven, divine cosmic order.

Based on the Church of Hagia Sophia in Byzantium.

The Golden Bird

The unattainable made real, timeless art, artistic freedom from base mortality.

Possibly from a story of a mechanical golden bird that would 'sing' from a tree in the gardens of a Byzantine emperor.

Flames

Metaphysical fire, illumination and purging, internal energy and passion, ecstasy.

Yeats wrote in his esoteric essay *A Vision*...we may escape from the constraint of our nature and from that of external things, entering upon a state where all fuel has become flame..

Dolphins

Resurrection, as Guides to Enlightenment, Selfless Guardians of the Unconscious.

Many legends and stories are told of dolphins forming relationships with humans, helping them, carrying them, forming profound friendships. Dolphins are also associated with gods and goddesses, notably Aphrodite and Apollo from ancient Greece.

The Sea

Soul, Memory, Love, The Unconscious, Universal Unformed Mind.