



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.3. 2020 (July-Sept)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

“BYZANTIUM” BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Article information

Received:20/06/2020

Accepted: 09/08/2020

Published online: 16/08/2020

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.3.73](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.3.73)

ABSTRACT

Myths, loss and ageing always had been the most celebrated subjects of the poetries of W.B Yeats. Each chosen words of his poetry had lot of symbolic significance in wider perspective. To pose a best example, “Byzantium” a symbolic creation, alone could prove this. Byzantium as an emblematic poem brings up enormous thoughts on life and after life. This perspective has been made strong through the combination of soul- artist unison. Yeats seeks to inculcate a tradition of spirituality here through a quintessential art work. The parallelism preferred by him on soul’s journey to a new world with that of an artist’s advance to the world of contentment after accomplishing the art successfully is justifiable. This paper brings up the magic of W.B Yeats “Byzantium” that takes each of us to a new realm of thought.

Key words: Art, Byzantium, Myths, Parallelism, Symbolic, Spirituality,

“I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul and some of my thoughts about that subject I have put into a poem called “Sailing to Byzantium”.

W.B. Yeats wrote so. Here the motive for writing a poem like “Sailing to Byzantium” is explicable. “Sailing to Byzantium” is a journey poem that explicitly manifests the encounters of the persona to reach a new world of newly discovered realm which is distinct from the existing one. Needless to say the persona literally can be WB Yeats himself. The above hinted quote of Yeats significantly furnishes us with the confirmation to this. Those are the words of a sixty year old common man in normal world who anxiously waits for the new life. The poem presents the predicaments of an old man bearing in mind his bygone days and of the numbered days he encounters in the material world. This is not his sole poem that exhibit ageing and its agony as the subject matter. “The Wild Swans at Coole” a lyric poem of 1917 as well is talking about the persona’s advancing age.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore
All’s changed since, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trode with a lighter tread. (13-18)

This suggests how Yeats is preoccupied with ageing and its affairs. When "Sailing to Byzantium" is a poem that unveils the persona's mental dispute with existing world and his impulse to gain the new world of divine, the poem "Byzantium", which is a follow up poem to "Sailing to Byzantium" is written to work out the skepticism offered by the previous one. It talks about a further realm of world alone in detail description as if the persona of "Sailing to Byzantium" has eventually reached there. That being so the two companion poems are the two states of mind of the poet himself as far as ageing, death and afterlife is concerned.

The poem "Byzantium" is much more divine and spiritual as far as "Sailing to Byzantium" is concerned. The five stanzas of the poem invoke two possibilities of life in normal and spiritual world with extended symbols. The stanzas are written as if the persona is making some observations and judgments on the things that are going on in material life and after life of spirituality. The poem enlists the kind of step by step withdrawal process from normal world to the realm of Byzantium. Briefly the spiritual transformation of a body through the process of purgation is exemplified with symbols and imageries. When the poem begins, the persona is framing the accounts of the other world of Byzantium even so those who reach there are still evocative of the past life which is reflected in them for a while. They have to undergo themselves in to a detailed process of actions for the purification. These reminiscences of their past material life is portrayed through the lines,

The unpurged images of day recede:
The emperor's drunken soldieries are abed:
Night resonance recedes, night walker's song
After great cathedral gong; (1-4)

The phrase 'unpurged', 'recede', 'drunken soldiery', 'night walkers' remind us of the soul's past life of carnal pleasures which is still reflected on him/her regardless of the fact that he/she is in Byzantium. The first line alone gives us the theme of material versus spiritual transformation of a soul. The gothic representations of the surroundings provide us with the concept of afterlife which is displayed through darkness. Anything could be visible only with moon light. The word 'dome' symbolizes meeting place for natural verses spiritual world.

In the perspective of the persona, who is human specie the 'dome' reflected in the moon light is scorning the complexities of normal life. This brings up the aspect of material verse spiritual, old verse new, normal verse paranormal, physical verse divine, mysticism and transcendentalism in wider sphere.

A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All these complexities, the fury and mire of human veins. (5-8)

"The fury and mire of human veins" (Yeats, line 8) shows the perishable life man leads and the concept of man as mere flesh and blood is emphasized here. Man with his fragility and complexities are contrasted with the spiritual dome that disdains the dilemma of normal world.

The persona encounters weird images or man/ shadow, even he/she couldn't confirm about the dubious image he has in front. "Before me floats an image, man or shade, / shade more than man, more image than a / shade;" (9-11). This confirms the new world and its possibilities. The particular image/man/shadow is not a human thing; the persona couldn't attribute human qualities to it as humans are preoccupied with material and carnal possibilities. There is no anger, no attitude, no pride, no skepticism, no evil, thus the image /man/ shadow is unexplainable by a mortal. This representations gives us evidence of the transformation of souls in to purgated one when it reaches new world where human qualities are nullified so that he/she can take new divine life. Hades is a Greek mythological god of underworld and dead. Here he controls the "bobbin bound in mummy- cloth" (12). The mummy figure is significant as it is all about dead and as the poet had already in mind how a dead should be made different from normal human look and for this reason he uses a mummy figure to the image of the thing in immortal world. The figure bound in mummy-cloth consequently represents the dead in new world.

Yeats always loved to enclose spiral significance to represent time transition and historical significance. "Gyre" (1) symbol in "Second Coming" has lot to do with "unwinding the winding path" (Byzantium, 13). According to Yeats, "gyre" means "the precise movement" of the human mind. This brings the concept of cycle of history from the beginning; this shows the end of a history and a need for new historical cycle in this topsy-turvy world. Likewise, the wounded mummy has to be unwounded to get deep into the settings of new world. Shedding the mummy- cloth down in spirals one after the other get along with the gyre symbols perfectly. The unwinding of mummy cloth also signifies shedding the past life and its memories one by one to be in a new world. The death aspect is made significant through the phrase "no moisture" (14), "no breadth" (14), "breathless mouth" (15). Confused what the persona should call the particular soul in front of him; he came up with a new notion of super human which is neither human nor purified soul, but something in between them. "I hail the human: /I call it death in life and life in death" (16-17).

Most celebrated symbol of the poem the golden bird strengthens the point of timelessness and eternity. It is a miracle in every angle. The gold color is opted deliberately as gold symbolizes durability and purity (non- rustic). "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork, / Planted on the starlit golden bough," (18-20).

The concept of eternity and timelessness are always praised by our ancients, moderns and contemporaries through their writings in broader contexts. There are lot more writers like Shakespeare and Donne who praise the timelessness of artistic creation. In "Sonnet 18", Shakespeare himself emphasis the point of eternity through art:

Nor shall death bring thou wand 'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time than grow'st.
So long as man can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee. (12-16).

A same expression of eternity of art is significantly stressed by Donne through his poem "canonization".
And if unfit for tombs and hearse
Our legend is, it will be fit for verse:
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms; (37-40).

The symbols used from the start suggest the art's inclination to eternity. The descriptions of soul's journey to new world and the undergoing process of purification are par with the process of artistic creation by the creator. The ultimate result of the soul's journey is similar to that of an artist's satisfaction of completing a creation and being in divine. Yeats stressed on the ageing and death aspect of life by making art and artistic creation a parallel action to it. Just like the mortal who being surrounded with worldly issues and pleasures get rid of their complexities in new world, an artistic creator with dilemmas of thought and words, in course of time will get a simplified versions of life of divine transformation through his/her art. The soul finally gets purified to get itself fully into the new world and an artist get himself in to the world of divine satisfaction by the end. The golden bird image is juxtaposed with the introduction of a symbol of Hade's cock. The cock here symbolizes rebirth or reincarnation which stressed the life after death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the starlit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of hade's crow (18-21).

The last two stanzas bring up the final process of purification going on. The expression of flames and fire display set of imageries. Fire always been a symbol for purification through destruction had done justice in the poem as well as it enlightens the concept of creation, maintenance and destruction process of purgation. The souls have reaches the final destinations to turn themselves to purified ones eternally. Nevertheless this purification ceremony has lot to do with art. The poet here makes an amalgam of art and soul where final remedy is gathered.

Flames that no fagot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flames,
Where blood-begotten sprits come
And all complexities of fury leave (27-30).

It's clear that the flames meant for, is not doing the general job it usually does. It is not fed by fagots, no steel was there to light it up, no physical entity could disturb it and it could not burn anything. The descriptions make clear where the poet has finally reached. The only purification done eternally could be attained through art and its creation and it is where the poem finally is, there are descriptions of inlaid marble stories where the sprits (the poets) are waiting one after other to get purified. "Dying in to a dance/ an agony of trance" (31), these lines intensifies the point of eternal purification.

Dolphin like mortals with its mire and blood is busy completing the process of purification. Dolphin here is divine, thus it is allotted with the task of taking spirits to the divine land on its back through deadly sea. There are helpers like emperors smithies who break the flood for the easy journey of the soul. "Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood, / Spirit after spirit! /the smithies break the flood, / the golden smithies of the emperor!" (36-37).

This journey had already made the long lost human experiences and complexities a worthless element. "Those images that yet/ fresh images beget" (40-41) talks about those writers who are on the line and on those who are still with the thought of complex life ready to be in to the renewed life. "That dolphin-torn"(42) expression intensifies the imaginative aspect of art by describing the inlaid marble image of a dolphin which is half above the sea represented as if it had torn the surfaces apart. The religious and divine relevance of the lines are sustained though out the end with the expression of "gong-tormented sea" (42).

Thus in a way, the poem "Byzantium" itself can be regarded as a medium between normal world and the new divine world to get connected. It put forward the idea of renewal of life and art in parallel combination. The query of transience and permanence of human life and art respectively becomes the subject matter here.

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