

## Spiritual Crisis in Modernism: A Study of W. B. Yeats's Poetic Vision

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### Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the depiction of spiritual crisis in W. B. Yeats's poetry. William Butler Yeats is one of the prominent modernist poets of the English literary canon. Yeats is renowned for his intricate language, vivid imagery, and symbolic richness. He largely used a great deal of symbols to depict the modern man's moral, political, and spiritual crisis of his time. In this study, the author selects two great poems of W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming' and 'Sailing to Byzantium.' The study critically examines these poems from a modernist perspective. Yeats clearly depicts the moral degradation, spiritual sterility, fragmentation, alienation, and disillusionment of early twentieth-century post-war modern Europe. Methodologically, the study is based on a descriptive-analytical approach. In the light of the poems' analysis, the findings of the study show that Yeats's poetic expression mirrors the modernist spiritual vacuum. This study offers fresh insight into the spiritual crisis of modernism through Yeats's poetic lens.

**Keywords:** modernist poetry, spiritual crisis, symbolism, The Second Coming, Sailing to Byzantium,

### Introduction

William Butler Yeats is a prominent modernist poet, whose poetry reflects political, moral and spiritual plight of the modern man. The 20th century literature is characterized by historical and social changes that greatly affected its writers. These changes were the World War I and the scientific discoveries, particular the intellectual theories. This negative influence leads to the modern man's disillusionment and alienation. Not only has the modern man been greatly affected by these transformations, but modernist literature has also absorbed their impact. Thus, the modernist writers became obsessive of the decline of modern man's values.

Modernist literature is largely influenced by these scientific discoveries that have completely shaken the modernist writers' religious beliefs in Christianity. The Biblical origin stories were disproved by Charles Darwin's book the *Origin of Species* (1859). In addition, Sigmund Freud's psychological theories have profound effects on the 20th century literature. In the early twentieth century, Freud's ideas changed how we perceive human behaviour. He created and developed many theories, including the

three levels of consciousness, the theory of personality as well as the Oedipus Complex. He also tried to explain the human needs, fears, and anxieties of the modern man. Accordingly, these ideas or worries have created a kind of uncertainty, disillusionment, alienation and loss of religious values in a world that became morally fragmented.

Yeats is often grouped with fellow modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. Those writers have underscored how spiritual barrenness was a widespread modernist concern. As modernist poets, they have portrayed the themes of decay, disillusionment, alienation and the moral decline of the modern's man. Yeats's *The Second Coming* and *Sailing to Byzantium* as well as Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* have realistically depicted the collapse of modernist civilization.

On a similar vein, W. H. Auden depicted spiritual loss of the modern man in his poetry. This depiction can be clearly seen through the themes of disillusionment, alienation, uncertainty, and decline of religious beliefs. He portrayed modern life as devoid of true and deep meaning, highlighting how individuals constantly struggle to find a purpose in a world that is dominated by science, war and materialism. A clear example of Auden's depiction is his poem "September 1, 1939", where he captures the anxiety of a world on the brink of war and the lack of morality and spirituality. This poem is considered one of the most popular poems that Auden has ever written, which was a response of the outbreak of World War II. In addition, Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," expresses a profound exploration of spiritual loss, suffering and struggle in a shattered world that is filled with disillusionment, tragedy and agony.

The collapse of spirituality and tradition makes the modern world sterile, lustful, and money oriented. It is clear that materialistic attitude and spirituality that vividly depicts the prevalent maladies of the modern civilization as reflected in Yeats and Eliot's poetry. Both poets trace the crises of the modern man deepened by robotic and routinized life. Their poetry clearly reflects the attitude and culture of the 20th century. It began to question everything about the hardships of modern life and individual's plight that is caught by materialism, hopelessness and loss of faith.

### **William Butler Yeats as a Modernist Poet (1865-1939)**

William Butler Yeats is considered by many poets, critics, and scholars as one of the greatest English language poets in the 20th century and most certainly, Ireland's greatest poetic treasure. Though he was born in Dublin, Ireland, he was raised and studied in London, where he met intellectual figures who contributed to shape his artistic talent as a modernist writer. In his early education, Yeats read the works of great writers such as William Shakespeare, John Donne, William Blake, George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde. His family had greatly impacted him and created his unique personality.

His father, John Butler Yeats, was a lawyer turned to a precariously successful well-known painter, as well as an intellectual, a skeptic, an agnostic, and a wit. His mother, Susan Pollexfen was a quiet, religious woman of deep, intuitive feelings. She learnt him to write and paint his own feelings freely. Besides, his life in London was a great station in his life which exposed him to cultural and literary influence, a matter which later shaped his intellectual and artistic growth.

Yeats was not a literary figure in Ireland, but also a political nationalist. He became a Senator in the Irish Free State for two terms. In December 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He wrote special poetry which reflects his nation's history and aspiration. His poetry was praised by the Nobel Prize Committee as an "inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation".

Yeats's poetic evolution was shaped by the political climate of his era. Initially, his poetry reflected an idealized, aesthetically rich world inspired by Romanticism, expressing a deep longing for a utopian realm and a desire to escape the harsh realities of life. This shift in his poetic style resulted in him being awarded the Nobel Prize in literature (Kelly, 2003, p. 231). His works were enriched with the use of myths and symbols which were regarded as complex. His volume of poetry includes, *The Wild Swans at Coole*, *The Tower*, *Michael Robartes and the Dancers* and other great ones.

When Yeats died in January 1939, he quickly emerged as a lingering presence within Modernism. The first to acknowledge his spectral influence was W. H. Auden, who composed his renowned elegy, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*, a month later, in February 1939:

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities  
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections. . .  
The words of a dead man  
Are modified in the guts of the living. . . . (Howes, 2006, p. 1)

For Auden, Yeats is a distasteful Orpheus, whose corpse dismembers into the scattered leaves of his volumes of poetry, undergoing a queasy process of digestion in the guts of his readers (Howes, 2006, p. 59). Yeats's poetry is very difficult to understand easily because it is shaped by different periods and circumstances. In this regard, Ramji Lall (2004) states, "W. B. Yeats stands out as a dominant figure of his times. The circumstances of his life and his unique temperament led him through all the movements and influences of his age, from decadent nineties, to almost catastrophic forties" (p. 7). Yeats's literary career covers three historical periods, each it has its own features. In this context, Howes (2006) says:

Few modern writers have had careers as long, varied, and complex as W. B. Yeats. Born in 1865, he produced works that arguably belong to each of three major literary historical periods or traditions: the Romantic, the Victorian, and the Modernist. (p. 1).

This quotation clearly emphasizes the significant evolution of Yeats's literary career. His transition from one period to another contributes to artistic depth. These stages have greatly influenced his literary career. This influence is clearly seen in his poetry which reflects the Irish folklore, myths, mysticism, and modern's man dilemma. It is his later period which polished his artistic and aesthetic skill. He adopts modernist features such as objectivity, individuality, simplicity and symbolism. These features are crucial to Modernist poetry where the poets emphasize the personal imagination, culture, emotions, memories and every day's problems.

As a modernist figure, Yeats has influenced his contemporaries and successors such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W. H. Auden. His love for his country and Irish nationalism deepen his sadness for the postwar negative state, chaotic world and modern man's crisis. He emphasizes the moral, spiritual and decline of humanity and civilization. His poetry embodies the spirit of the modern man and age. He goes further to explore profound themes of immortality, chaos, and loss of faith. After the war, people became shattered, disappointed, alienated, anxious, and loneliness. Yeats reflects different landscapes he has experienced in his poetry as symbolic representations of spiritual, moral and psychological states of modern humanity.

Yeats's literary career is the most famous one in the history of modernist poetry. He begins as a Romantic visionary where his first works show the influence of Romantic poets. According to some scholars, the Romantic Period began with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This was one of the first collections of poems that strayed from the more formal poetic diction of the Neoclassical Period.

By examining the main features of Romanticism, one considers Yeats as a late-Romantic poet, because of the methodological and thematic similarities his poetry displays with the conventions of Romanticism. This tendency, however, was the beginning of Yeats's writing career. In his later poetry, he depicts modernist themes and practices modernist techniques. That is why he is widely regarded as a modernist writer, alongside T. S. Yeats.

Under the pressure of political, social and cultural crisis, he becomes a heroic realist and nationalist. Being an old man, he changes his writing style. Yeats's poetry draws deeply from ancient Irish legends and folklore, blending them with mystical and spiritual themes. This kind of poetry is quite different from his contemporaries. Unlike modernists who explored free verse, Yeats remained committed to traditional poetic forms such as structure, meter, rhyme scheme, rhythm and figures of speech. He even employed modernist techniques in his later poems, a matter which makes him the unique poet who could combine between the old and the modern.

Indeed, the influence of modernism on Yeats's poetry is quite clear. The gradual shift from the traditional language of his early poetry to a modern style has an evidence in his later poems. This shift makes him directly explore complex themes. This style can be clearly seen in his works such as *In the Seven Woods*, *Responsibilities*, *The Green Helmet*, *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), and *Last Poems and Plays* (1940). These works have established him as a leading figure among the 20th century English-language modernist poets.

### **The Concept of Spiritual Crisis**

Spirituality as a religious concept, is highly related to religious faith. In this case, it is connected to the Christian values and traditional biblical wisdom. The history of Christian spirituality is of great significance. A great part of what makes Christian spirituality distinctive is its underlying beliefs—in other words, how it understands the reality of God, the values of Christianity, the human nature, and how these components interconnect. This obligation implies a complete belief in God, His prophets and divine

books, specially, the principles of Christianity in this context. Thus, religious spirituality can be seen as a doctrine.

Broadly speaking, the term "spirituality" is totally connected to religion which holds an important place for most of the believers. Religion, generally referred as an organized belief system within a relationship with the Creator who has the power and controls the whole universe, and shapes the individual's fate and actions. In this regard, it generally entails a sense of connection to something greater than oneself and often involves a quest for meaning in life. As a universal human experience, spirituality deeply resonates with our emotions, souls, and minds.

Spirituality encompasses the exploration of universal themes such as love, compassion, altruism, life after death, wisdom, and truth. It is also associated with a deep awareness of divine reverence, inspiring religious individuals and saints to strive for higher levels of piety and wisdom. In this regard, it means the lack of spiritual values and true love that the modern man does not have. It further reflects our inability to take part in the spiritual tasks that God has assigned to us as believers.

In the field of literature, spirituality explores the deep relationship between human existence and the spiritual realm. In this case, it reflects the existential crises, loss of faith, and the decline of personal, social, cultural and religious identity. In the field of poetry, the theme of spiritual sterility is realistically depicted by prominent poets who profoundly have been drastically influenced by this state. For instance, Yeats contends that the decline of spirituality and tradition has rendered the modern world sterile, lustful, naïve, and materialistic. His poems explore the maladies of modern civilization, depicting the struggles of the individual who adopts capitalism as a new belief system, ultimately abandoning Christian values. This shift leads to spiritual emptiness, sexual corruption, and psychological alienation to those people who placed wealth and material possessions above all other concerns.

Indeed, not only Yeats who depicts the moral disintegration of the modern man, but also Eliot's in his poems. *The Waste Land* (1922) and *The Hollow Men* (1925) explore disillusionment, moral and spiritual condition of the modern humanity. This desperate state of individuals is spiritually describes as empty, hollow and disconnected from divine presence (Hinchliffe, 1987, p. 10). By using fragmented language and rich symbols, Eliot highlights the moral and religious decay, frustration, alienation, and despair of the modern man. The collapse of traditional values have been widely depicted in both poems.

### **Intellectual Background**

During his literary career, Yeats experienced several hard times that shaped his personality, ideology, philosophy, and melancholy. These hardships have profoundly affected his emotions and writing. One of the most painful experiences that Yeats went through was the story of his failing love which shook his life entirely. Thus, Yeats's emotional experience is largely marked by personal struggle and achieving dreams.

Yeats fell in love with Maud Gonne the moment he met her. She was well known for being the muse and long-time love interest of W. B. Yeats. She was twenty-two year old when she arrived at the Yeats's family home to visit his father. In his memoirs titled "Autobiographies," in the section titled "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth" (1914), Yeats wrote, "I had never thought to see in a living woman so great



beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, poetry, to some legendary past." Apparently, his deep love for Maud Gonne had left him heart broken. This strong emotional love remains as a source of heartache and long suffering.

In spite of marrying Georgie Hyde-Lees, their relationship did not fill the emotional gap in his heart. These painful experiences, emotional distance, true love and romance have largely created many challenges in his life. Not only failed marriages, but also temporary romantic relationships that had deeply created tension and struggle between his idealistic views of love and the realities of his personal life, a matter which was significantly marked by sadness, alienation and disappointment.

Yeats wrote poems that were filled with bitterness and distress during the period between 1922-1927. He was greatly influenced by his father's death in 1922. In addition, he was badly touched by the severe Irish Civil War, which erupted in June, 1922 and had impacted him profoundly. This harsh war remains as a significant source of distress, not only for him but also for the all Irish people. Moreover, alongside his concerns for his country, Yeats harbored deep resentment toward aging. In a society like Ireland's- or indeed, anywhere in Europe or America at the time-Christian values were nearly inescapable. Although Yeats was raised in a Protestant household, his father's atheism likely instilled a sense of doubt in him. The concept of pilgrimage-an inevitable journey every individual must undertake through life and beyond-became a fundamental element of his symbolism and philosophy, serving as a unifying theme in both poems.

### **Yeats's Personal Vision**

Yeats emerged to prominence as one of the most significant poets of the era, whose vision seeks deeper meaning beyond conventional belief. Deeply shaped by mysticism, mythology and personal insights, as revealed in his esoteric work *A Vision*, Yeats created a poetic landscape that confronted disorder by turning toward eternity, spirituality, symbolism, and transcendence.

The poems are analyzed through explaining symbolism, thematic content, and poetic structure. In the light of the poems' analysis, symbolism emerges as a fundamental device in Yeats's poetry. He uses it to enrich the poems and serve his thematic structure. In each poem, he employs certain symbols to serve his thematic structure. For example, he refers to second coming of Christ Jesus as in the Bible revelation and idealizes Byzantium as a symbol for spiritual life by a metaphorical journey to that city. Yeats draws from symbolism the ability to create universal, mythic symbols that, in his view, serve to redeem the decline of the modern world.

Unlike his contemporaries, Yeats clearly responded with a sense of detachment and ironic despair. He countered the spiritual sterility of his time with a vibrant imaginative approach that resisted the modern crisis. The author argues that Yeats's poetic vision offers a unique response to the spiritual crisis of modernism through myth, symbolism, and metaphysical systems.

Yeats's poetic vision is deeply rooted when he blends various themes in his works. They include myth, mysticism, history, and personal experience, through which he sought to explore the spiritual and emotional depths of human life. Yeats suggests that poetry should be connected the physical world with the spiritual one. That is why he often turned to Irish folklore, mythology, and occult philosophy. He often expresses his vision by using symbols in his works. Being an old man, his vision is totally

changed. Whereas his early poems are marked by romantic and idealistic tones, his later poems are filled with political tension, aging, disillusionment and quest for spirituality.

Broadly speaking, Yeats presents contrasting visions of the spiritual crisis of modernism in his two great poems "The Second Coming" and "Sailing to Byzantium." For instance, he depicts a state of spiritual collapse of the world in The Second Coming. This pessimistic view of the brittle world causes chaos and violence, symbolized by the apocalyptic vision of a monstrous 'second coming'. This vision clearly shows his belief in the cyclical nature of history and the decline of the spiritual values.

On the contrary, he gives an optimistic vision of spiritual transcendence in Sailing to Byzantium. The speaker in the poem tends to escape from the decay of physical world to the spiritual world where he finds eternal beauty representing by art, philosophy, purity and morality of the sacred city. In these poems, Yeats reveals his dual poetic vision of the modern world: one is marked by despair and destruction, and the other by hope and spiritual rebirth through art and mysticism.

### **Discussion and Textual Analysis**

This section implies close reading of the poems chosen for discussion. Textual analysis is a broad term which uses for describing, interpreting and understanding texts. All kinds of information can be gleaned from a text-from its literal meaning of the text, symbolism, figures of speech and the themes it reveals.

As previously stated, the aim of this paper is to explore the spiritual crisis depicted in W. B. Yeats's celebrated poems The Second Coming and Sailing to Byzantium. These poems are chosen as case studies of the spiritual crisis of modernism. The methodology of this present study is a descriptive-analytical approach. The poems' theme mainly focus on spiritual crisis which embodies in the physical, mental, and spiritual level of the modernism. The spiritual crisis in these two poems is critically highlighted.

#### **"The Second Coming"(1921)**

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,*

*Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
 The darkness drops again; but now I know  
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?* (The Collected Poems of W. B.

Yeats, 1989)

*The Second Coming* was written in 1919 and published in 1921 in his collection poems. It is regarded as one of Yeats's most famous poems, which symbolizes the turmoil of the early 20th century. The poem consists of two unrhymed stanzas that reflect a world descending into chaos and the emergence of a new, ominous order. The first stanza describes the chaotic state of the world, while the second introduces the ominous vision of a rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem.

In his poetry, Yeats has remarkably portrayed the theme of spiritual and moral decline so as to convey a deep sense of the modern man's traditional values and beliefs. This spiritual barrenness in modern life causes a kind of disconnection between the modern man and religion. The historical context of the "The Second Coming" refers to major change after World War I. It created the sense of chaos, disillusionment and decline of old values.

Like other writers, Yeats was an eye witness of the social unrest and disintegration of modern civilization. As a sensitive figure, he perceived a chaotic world that has increasingly become destabilized. This disturbing world has lost its balance and become totally beyond human control. Thus, the poem largely reflects his response to an impending crisis that permeates into the political, cultural and moral ground. The basic idea of this poem is related to the "system" which Yeats explained in *A Vision*. He had a theory regarding the rise and fall of civilizations. It begins with a movement of inspiration or revelation, such as the birth of Christ. This is clearly depicted in "The Second Coming."

Following World War I, individuals were left shattered, grappling with feelings of frustration, boredom, anxiety, and loneliness. Yeats used various landscapes to symbolize the spiritual and psychological states of modern individuals. *The Second Coming* is a prime example of Yeats' modernism, where he depicts the chaotic and disordered state of the world post-war, with the poet expressing a desire to escape from this bleak reality.

The poem begins with the image of a falcon flying out of control. The spiritual sterility in modern life leads to a wide distance from religion. He says, "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ the falcon cannot hear the falconer." Yeats clearly refers to the loss of control. The falcon, which is a bird of prey, no longer listens to its master. Yeats used this image "falconry" to suggest the situation of the modern world, which is like the distant, circling falcon. The falcon is symbolic of human technology going beyond human control. The falcon is a representative of all people who moved away from God and came back to their pagan roots.



The falcon also symbolizes the spiritual emptiness of the modern man, and the loss of spiritual values in this age, where man became interested only in material things. A man forgot values and plunged into the world of materialism. The system becomes chaotic everywhere. What dominates and controls modern life is disorder and spiritual sterility. There are no values, so the earth is dominated with evil. Yeats shows his concern that technology has advanced to the point where mankind can do a great deal of harm with relative ease. The world had never seen destruction of the World War I, and most people were shocked at the extensive loss of human life during the war.

The futile war has drastically destroyed the world. This destruction represents the spiritual decay of modern era. Consequently, life has turned empty and devoid of meaning. The world is filled with violence and hatred where the modern man became morally and spiritually corrupt.

The question which arises here is 'what is the use of life without spiritual values or purpose in life'?! It is a world where spiritual emptiness is spreading everywhere. People no longer care for religious duties. Religion and spiritual affairs are fading away. The present condition evokes doubt, disappointment and uncertainty. Modern humanity has deserted God's commands and drifted away from him.

God has sent messengers, each with a distinct religion so as to guide humanity. For example, Jesus Christ was sent to the Christian people and his sacred scripture was the Bible. His mission was to deliver this message to his followers. Religion serves as the foundation of society, and when people deviate from the righteous path, harmony is disrupted. The further we move away, the more lost we become. This is the condition in which modern humanity has distanced itself from God, forgetting the purpose of its creation. People have overlooked the blessings that God has bestowed upon them, abandoning their spiritual values. Therefore, they have defied the Creator and fallen into wrongdoing, committing various sins and crimes. Consequently, his purpose in life has become more materialistic than spiritual.

The word "gyre" is a rare term for circular motion. It suggests a sense of circling, inexorable movement. The opening lines of the poem depict a picture of disintegration that has overtaken the Christian civilization. The diminishing force of Christianity is conveyed to us through the idea that Christianity is like a falcon that has lost touch with the falconer, so it becomes directionless. The lines "*things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*" appear to mirror both the circling falcon and Yeats's concept of historical cycles. They also suggest there is no stabilizing force. The poem's speaker seems, at the very least, uncertain about the chaotic events unfolding before him.

*"The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."* These lines portray the prevailing death and great devastation of humanity. This pessimistic view predicts an era of huge battles, where chaos spreads, morality declines, and destructive forces dominate. The poet declares that all this chaos, confusion, and disintegration must surely be a sign that a revelation, a second coming of Christ, is at hand. The poet considers Christ as the savior and redeemer of the world. It refers to the Second Coming of Jesus to liberate the earth from corruption, as life is empty of religion and a lack of spirituality.

The lines *"A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, is moving its slow thighs, while all about it Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds. The darkness drops again; but now I know that twenty centuries of stony sleep,"* clearly depict the world's barrenness. In a loud cry, the speaker exclaims the second coming as his voice summons a sphinx creature, a powerful, half-animal sphinx. Its body is that of a "lion", only the head of a man is left. It could also be Christ, who will be strict with people, and that is what they deserve. They do not deserve his mercy and his kind heart.

The poem concludes with an open question, leaving its meaning to different interpretations: *"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"* This open question probably evokes a sense of uncertainty and inevitability. It predicts an ominous change because of the arrival of a big force that can reshape the world completely. These lines also suggest that the history moves in regular cycles. The poem's title carries a symbolic significance, which suggests an ominous disaster in the future. Apparently, Yeats escapes the harsh reality towards a secular place. He seems to pass the tragic past, the bleak present, and contemplates future. It is clear that the poem is a deep lament for the spiritual sterility of the modern age.

Yeats's second poem "Sailing to Byzantium", has a similar theme, but with a different view. Yeats seeks to escape into the past rather than living the bleak present and dreadful future. Instead, he prefers not to confront these harsh realities as he seeks refuge in an idealized world. According to Yeats's vision, the new world is 'Byzantium', a visionary city that exists only in his imagination. This sacred city symbolizes an artistic and spiritual haven. This is Yeats's view and criticism of Western civilization, which is likely to decline and vanish.

### "Sailing to Byzantium" (1928)

- I *That is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,  
-Those dying generations-at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect.*
- II *An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.*

- III *O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.*
- IV *Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.* (The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, 1989)

Yeats composed *Sailing to Byzantium* in 1926 and it was published in 1928. It is regarded as one of Yeats's finest works which was included in his collection *The Tower*. This poem consists of four stanzas, each written in ottava rima, an eight-line stanza with a rhyme scheme of ABABABCC. In this context, Helen Vendler says the poem finds its most complete and beautiful form in the ottava rima. It consists of eight-line stanzas written in iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme of two asymmetric parts: a sestet and a couplet (quoted in Marjorie Howes and John Kelly's *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, p. 82). In her essay titled, "The Later Poetry," Howes contributes in writing critical views in Yeats's poetry.

The poem closely explores the contrast between old age and youth, sensuality and spirituality. According to the poet, youth is a time of enjoyment of worldly pleasures, while the old age is a time for enjoying inner peace and spiritual serenity. The poem's main concern is Yeats's oldest theme-aging, passing time, man's mortality. In the poem, the poet describes someone who approaches his old agedness. He says, "That is no country for old men." The old man realizes that youth and sensual life are no longer an option for him. Therefore, he seeks a spiritual journey to the ideal world of Byzantium. As the title suggests, Byzantium is the ancient city of Byzantine, the capital city of Eastern Roman Empire during the rule of Romans (330-1453 CE). It is known in the past as *Constantinople* and in the present time is called Istanbul, Turkey. This city was the shining centre of art, wisdom, philosophy and knowledge.

The poem was composed in a critical period in the later days of Yeats's life. He wrote *Sailing to Byzantium* in 1926 when he was sixty-one, twelve years before his death in 1933. This period is noticeably marked by a sudden shift from romantic nationalism to a more profound and mystical exploration of the nature of existence. It reflects the difficulty of keeping one's soul alive in a fragile, failing human body. The speaker describes as an old man, who leaves behind the country of the young for a visionary quest to Byzantium, the ancient city that was a major seat of early Christianity. The poem explicitly expresses the agony which come with old agedness.

"Byzantium" is founded on paradox; the real world of mortal human beings and the ideal world of art and spiritual perfection. The poem's hidden meaning is clearly based on the Platonic one. It delves into the theme of aging, mortality, the desire for spiritual tranquility.

For Plato, the ideal city was one which mirrored the cosmos, on the one hand, and the individual on the other one. As he described in *The Republic*, the ideal city, or polis, was one based on justice and human virtue. Like Plato, Yeats longs for a place where he will find acceptance and peace of mind. This longing grants him self-satisfaction and a sense of eternity. For Yeats, Byzantium is the place where he finds pleasure and happiness. This great ancient city of Byzantium is a symbol of eternal culture and spiritual fulfillment. The old man usually longs for 'heaven' as death approaches him. In heaven, the man rests peacefully and comfortably as there is no worry, grief, fatigue, fear, and sadness.

The best comment on the poem is found in a paragraph Yeats wrote for a broadcast of his poems (B.B.C. Belfast, 8 Sept. 1931) which was not included in the final version of the script:

Now 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 upon that subject I have put into a poem called 'Sailing to Byzantium'. When Irishmen were illuminating the Book of Kells [in the eighth century] and making the jeweled croziers in the National Museum, Byzantium was the centre of European civilisation and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolise the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city. (pp. 253-54)

This excerpt is cited in A. Norman Jeffares's essay on "Sailing to Byzantium," where he notes that the paragraph was not included in the final broadcast script. A. Norman Jeffares (1984) writes insightful essays on Yeats's poetry. In his essay titled "The Tower: 'Sailing to Byzantium,'" Jeffares explores the geographical, historical, literary, and religious sources and allusions present in "Sailing to Byzantium" (pp. 211-16).

Yeats's uses new techniques in his later poems. He uses refined and formal language, adopting a melancholic tone to convey the contrast between the fleeting nature of life and the eternal world of art. Byzantium had a rich cultural and artistic heritage as it was the centre of European civilization. It was the source of spirituality, philosophy, art, wisdom and intellectuality. Thus, Yeats uses the word "Byzantium," as a metaphor for a realm of timeless wisdom and artistic immortality. It is the holy city where art and spiritual life are ultimately fused. The main theme of the poem suggests longing for a distant place, where he can find his proper position. Yeats writes, "I think if I could give a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium" (Coles Notes, 2001, p. 59).

Accordingly, the poem can be metaphorically interpreted as a journey from the material, mortal world to the spiritual realm of eternity; from a world of chaos and decay to one of art and perfection. Byzantium, in this sense, exists only as a holy city in the poet's imagination, akin to Plato's ideal Utopia. The poet desires to sail to Byzantium, a sacred realm where he will be honored. In doing so, he seeks escape from the harsh reality of the world to one of creativity and vitality. In this context, Byzantium

is seen as a significantly symbol of giving joy, wisdom, knowledge and happiness to the poet.

In the opening line of the poem, Yeats states: *“That is no country for old men”*. His mention for old men indicates his obsession with old agedness. The speaker lost his youth and feels that he is a stranger in his country because he is not cared by the young. As he is an old man, he is not happy with his present life. The idea of sailing is still flashing in his mind. He contemplates the holy city 'Byzantium.' Yeats clearly escapes from the material life into the spiritual one. For Yeats, this life is regarded as the last stage in his lifetime. That is why he wants to enjoy it as he can as possible, because it is vital, eternal and spiritual.

The stanza continues by painting a picture of teaming life, the sensuous world of youth, vitality, reproduction, decay and death. Yeats describes the young people, men, women, girls and boys are all interested in their sensual joy, but he cannot do such things because he is an old man. The poet calls this kind of people as *“dying generation”* because they do not appreciate the value of art and literature. Even the birds on trees, and animals in farms and fish on the sea are indulged in the process of birth. Yeats writes, *“The young/ in one another’s arms, birds in the trees.. The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,/ fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long/ whatever is begotten, born and dies”*.

Yeats strongly asserts why he has rejected the land of eternal youth in the second stanza. He justifies his choice when intends to sail *“To the holy city of Byzantium.”* He has grown old and approaching his death and feels being out of place in the land he has left. The old man, according to Yeats, is *“a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick.”*

One can find the poet claims that the old man in the old city is despised and not respected. That is why he is longing to travel into a new city where he can find love, comfort and respect. Yeats discusses an old man as something of little consequence: *“An aged man is but a paltry thing”*. He uses an analogy with a scarecrow, to represent the lifelessness of someone old. It is as if the marrow has been sucked from the bones. This life for Yeats is the inevitability of old age, unless *“soul clap its hands and sing”*. Yeats's focus on intellectuality, spirituality and transcendentalism grants him the right decision to escape from the constraints of the human body; secularism and sensualism. Hence, he has decided to attempt such journey, a metaphorical voyage: *“I have sailed the seas and come to the holy city of Byzantium.”*

The poet, in the third stanza, shouts at the *“sages standing in God’s holy fire”*, the agents of his transition from the land of the living, to free his soul from his mortal body and desires. Yeats here addresses the great artists in the history. He imagines them as they are standing in front of him in the holy fire. This fire does not burn or hurt them but it rather purifies their souls from all the worldly ills. He wants to be part of the holy fire to purify his soul. He addresses the wise men to come from their higher place and take him to the spiritual life; to come from the fire and take him to purify his sick soul and heart from sensual joys. He imagines them coming to teach him how to understand and appreciate art and literature.

In the final stanza, the poet envisions himself transformed into a timeless artistic creation after death, symbolizing his desire for spiritual transcendence. As a writer of art and literature, he wants to immortalize himself through history. He begins by declaring that in this world of art, he would not take the form of any natural things.



The images of the opening stanza, would be susceptible to the ravages of time, decay and death. Instead, he would take the form of a golden bird, “*such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make*”. Such an escape would enable the bird to sing and entertain the lords and ladies of Byzantium, singing “of what is past, or passing, or to come”. This final image is a contrast to the living birds (and other creatures) in the first stanza. It is similar to the “scarecrow that represents the dying generation who seeks only pleasure.

The poem clearly emphasizes the superiority of art over modernism, which represents materialism. He wants to show that permanence can be achieved through art as in Byzantium, and that human life by contrast is transient. Yeats uses symbolism throughout the poem to highlight this contrast. The title of the poem “Sailing to Byzantium” has two important symbols: (1) Sailing which depicts a metaphorical physical voyage by the sea; and (2) Byzantium which symbolizes a world of artistic magnificence. The images of birds, fish and young lovers used by the poet in the first stanza symbolize transience and mortality. Besides, the symbol of a scarecrow represents the decrepitude of old age. It is also a repulsive lifeless image symbolizing everything that Yeats wants to reject in his mortal existence. His strong desire to sail to Byzantium clearly describes his intellectual will to leave the sensual world behind him. Everything around him is spiritual emptiness and barrenness, so the right decision for him is to escape to the glorious past, which is impossible to obtain, but metaphorically can be achieved according to Yeats's view.

In short, the poet metaphorically used “Byzantium” as a holy city of art, peace, purity, spirituality, philosophy and serenity. It is a golden land, both literally and symbolically, where the elderly and wise people through this spiritual and physical journey reach the highest point of knowledge. Yeats’s *Sailing to Byzantium* also resembles Dante’s purgatory, where individuals undergo a cathartic process to cleanse themselves of earthly sins.

The results and discussions presented can be concluded in the following points:

William Butler Yeats is considered one of the modernist writers of the 20th-century English literature. He was not only a symbolist and modernist poet, but also a great dramatist and essayist. He has largely used allusive imagery and symbolic structures throughout his poetic career. He left a significant impact on the English writers, critics and readers. His great legacy continues to widely inspire writers and scholars. His poetry is rich of various modernist facets; Irish legends, myths and mysticism. As a prominent modernist, he infused his poetry with layers of political, cultural and spiritual depth.

Two of Yeats's great poems have been critically studied as a manifestation of modern man's spiritual crisis. His great interest in modern civilization decline and spiritual barrenness is quite clear in these poems “The Second Coming” and “Sailing to Byzantium”. They clearly show the decline of spirituality and the rise of materialism in the modern world. Modern people begin to lose faith in religion, and consequently become hollow and fragile in terms of spirituality, morality, and tradition. The poems also represent a search for utopian ideals and an idealized refuge so as to escape from the harsh realities of a war-torn, materialistic world. Through his poems, Yeats suggests searching for moral ideals, traditional norms and spiritual values.



In both poems, Yeats skillfully employs striking images and symbols to explore spiritual emptiness of the materialistic world. In *The Second Coming*, the breakdown of society's spiritual and moral core results in a chaotic world where destructive forces rise to power. In *Sailing to Byzantium*, Yeats skillfully depicts the speaker's alienation, disillusionment, moral and spiritual disintegration. Therefore, the poet suggests an escape from the physical world which awaits its inevitable decline and seeks a quest for spiritual immortality through art and transcendence. Yeats explores the conflict between decline and transcendence in both poems. According to Yeats's poetic vision, he envisions the modern man's crisis when he plunged into the material world, which is full of desires and pleasures.

### Recommendations

This study is of great interest to both academics and students in the field of English language study. In the colleges of languages or education, W. B. Yeats's poetry can be effectively studied in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classes. In this context, English poetry is taught as one of the basic courses of the English department. Students study poetry in different historical eras, therefore, W. B. Yeats should be studied in the modernist period as a representative of modernism. The course's instructor may focus on the following areas: (1) historical and cultural context; (2) rich language and vocabulary; (3) style and themes; (4) pronunciation and rhythm; (5) figures of speech; and (6) critical thinking. In this case, students will be exposed to various poetic devices and terminology.

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