


Textual Analysis of the Poem *Sailing to Byzantium*

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Abstract

This article attempts to accomplish a textual analysis of the poem *Sailing to Byzantium* composed by William Butler Yeats. The textual analysis incorporates the analysis of divergent aspects existed in a text. The crucial aspects are: the title of the poem, substance of the poem, form of the poem, tone of the speaker, sound devices, literary devices, diction, syntax, mode of expression, themes and so on. The article writer has tried to describe these aspects to analyze them in brief. This article, which involves the interpretation of the poem from the perspective of its texture, is significant to teachers and students who are engrossed in studying English poetry.

Keywords: Sailing to Byzantium, Textual analysis, William Butler Yeats

Introduction

William Butler Yeats (13 June 1865 - 28 Jan 1939) was born at Sandymount in Dublin, Ireland. He was interested in the occult. In 1889, His first volume of poems, *The Wanderings of Oisín*, appeared to critical acclaim. His attitude is reflected in the works written during his middle-age years in which he writes unsparingly of Ireland as a "blind, bitter land. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923. *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) and *Last Poems and Plays* (1940) confirmed Yeats's reputation as one of the most influential twentieth-century poets writing in English. He died on January 28, 1939, in Roquebrune, France, and was considered indisputably to be the greatest poet that Ireland had ever produced.

Sailing to Byzantium is a lyric poem composed by W.B. Yeats, a leading figure of the Irish literary Revival. It is one of Yeats' most inspired works and one of the greatest poems of the 20th century. This poem was composed in 1926 and was first published in 1928 as a part of his collection "The Tower". In the poem *sailing to Byzantium*, he has used the concept of spiraling gyre to suggest the opposite concepts such as youth and age, body and soul, nature and art; transience and eternity which are, in fact, mutually dependent on each other. It is Yeats's firm statement about the agony of old age and the imaginative and spiritual work required to remain a vital individual in the old age. His solution is to leave the country of the sensual activities and travel to Byzantium, a symbolic city of the world of art, spirituality and poetry.

This poem can be taken as an imaginative journey to Byzantium where sagas become singing masters of his soul and people like great works of art. He desires to be a piece of art to be eternal. He says he will exist into "artifice of eternity."



Figure 1: Sailing to Byzantium

Literature Review of the Poem *Sailing to Byzantium*

This is a popular poem that deals with the poet's search for spirituality. Pruitt affirms that "Byzantium has also consistently as the source and symbol of supremely beautiful and enduring artifacts". She further mentions that in *Sailing to Byzantium* "Yeats intimates the vulnerability of the very artifact that, within the poem, symbolizes immutability". The things employed in this poem have symbolic significance. Vendler opines that "the tattered coat upon a stick acts as a counterpoise to the sages standing in God's holy fire". Similarly, Ure believes that in Byzantium "the soul casting off the body of old age and rejecting the sensual profusion of life, travels and becomes itself a work of art". The golden bird is a piece of art that stands for immortality. Stock believes that "the bird on the golden bough was the form of the poet's [speaker's] own soul; it was the same golden bough that Aeneas carried to the underworld, and thus Byzantium is the world beyond life". MacNeice believes the speaker has in his mind is that, "the poet [speaker] expressed a wish to go on singing but as a golden bird, that is, to be himself a work of art, and so immortal". Unterecker holds the view that "the poet on his golden bough will have become himself one of those monuments he had so admired". Yeats's capability of using figurative language is outstanding. Anbaran remarks that "Yeats uses figurative language to describe his reasons for this travel by presenting some facts about the place he is currently living and the ideal place he has been looking for". The title of this poem is a big symbol. Bharadwaj views *Sailing to Byzantium* as "a symbol of unity combining the realistic, intellectual, emotional and mythical elements into a harmony; the harmony ensuing from a resolution of conflicts or contending claims of his contemporaries". The aged man in the poem represents all the old folks who

have reared their agony that makes them search for peace and spirituality. Ellmann asserts that "an aged man appears in the second stanza, speaks out the true feelings of the poet himself, for the protagonist of the poem is not Yeats but may be described as a symbol of Yeats and of the artist and of man". Admiring Yeats's poem, Yang contends that "Yeats's works have been treated as an integrated whole and the thematic studies have taken a center stage". This poem can be difficult for average readers, but if we consider the unity of a complex pattern of contrasts, parallels and repetition in the poem, it can be well understood. It employs repetition for intensification of the meaning.

Textual Analysis of the Poem

Textual analysis is a broad term that involves analyzing a text from divergent perspectives. Major perspectives are as follows:

The Speaker / Persona of the Poem

The persona of this poem is an old man who asserts that Ireland is no country for old men; therefore he sails to Byzantium for getting spiritual solace and pleasure. Byzantium is an ideal place where people value art, spirituality and the old ones.

Tone

Harmon considers a tone as "the attitude toward the subject and toward the audience implied in a literary work". The tone of the speaker in this poem is meditative and longing. It is meditative as the speaker contemplates deeply on his existence in the sensual, and searches for answers. It has a tone of longing, for he is 'sick with desire'. This poem is also marked with an oracular tone, because the poet composed it in his sixties.

The Substance of the Poem

The speaker of the poem is an old man who, referring to the country which he's left, mentions that it is no country for old men. It is the country of physical and sensual life. The young people enjoy the pleasures of love "The young in one another arms".



Figure 2: The young in one another's arms

The birds sing in the trees. The youthful birds enjoy singing together.



Figure 3: Birds singing in the tree

The salmon jump up during their spawning (laying eggs) period.



Figure 4: Salmon

Lovely fish mackerel swim together in the crowd. Fish, flesh (human being) and Fowl (bird) all admire the season of mating. It suggests that all the creatures are involved in sensual activities and pleasures. All these creatures listen to sensual music but they are unmindful to the imaginative and spiritual works of art "Monuments of Un-aging intellect". The works of art are eternal but those who are involved in physical activities for sensual pleasures are subject to decay and death.



Figure 5: Mackerel

The speaker painfully expresses his agony of being old. He remarks that an old man is an insignificant thing (a paltry thing) merely a tattered coat upon a stick unless his spiritual vigor is alive and active and unless it affords the thrilling experience of beauty in this world. The soul must sing louder in order to compensate for the dying flesh-its "mortal

dress". Here, singing implies two ideas: singing for pleasure and composing poetry. Poetry is a monument of undying art. The best music for the soul of an aged man is the study and interpretation or appreciation of the grand monument of "unaging intellect". The soul should rejoice in its power and magnificence. This is the reason that he has crossed the seas and has arrived in the holy city of Byzantium.

The speaker appeals to the sages (religious martyrs) who are standing in God's holy fire. The holy fire suggests live coal which cleans and purifies the unclean heart. Sagas look like the figures represented in the gold mosaic of a wall. The speaker wants them to come from the holy fire to descend upon him with revolving in a gyre. It means he summons the sages to whirl down from their celestial part of the universe to his natural part. He wants them to become the "singing masters" of his soul and to purify his heart. In other words, he wants them to teach him to listen to spiritual music. He is not able to get rid of his heart with sensual desires clinging to him. In fact, he is not able to understand his own reality in spite of his old age. The speaker believes that only sagas can purge his heart which is full of impurities.



Figure 6: Sagas

He urges them to include him into the artifice to eternity. It means the permanence which great objects of art possess are the main desire of the speaker. It suggests that the speaker by getting rid of sensual desire intends to be transformed into some object of art having an eternal value. He says once he has been taken out of the natural world, he will no longer take his bodily form from any natural thing. He will not desire to be reborn in the same or in any other earthly shape. He likes to be pieces of art, because all living beings are subject to decay and death. He desires to fashion himself as a golden bird which the Grecian artists designed for the pleasure of an emperor. As a golden bird, he will place on a golden branch singing songs of all times past, present and future to an audience of lords and ladies of Byzantium.

Form of the Poem

“*Sailing to Byzantium*” is a lyric poem which consists of four stanzas. Each stanza has eight poetic lines known as Otta rima. Each poetic line is decasyllabic. The poem takes a very old verse form. It is written in iambic pentameter following the rhyme scheme of ababacdd in the first stanza, and abababcc in remaining stanzas. The last two lines in each stanza work as a couplet.

Modes of Expressions in this Poem

Sailing to Byzantium is composed of four stanzas. The mode of expression in the first two stanzas is descriptive. The speaker of the poem describes young boy and girl, birds in the trees, fish in the sea, birds, painful old age and his sailing to Byzantium. The last two stanzas have a meditative mode. The speaker becomes so sentimental and meditative that he considers the sagas his soul’s singing masters. He desires to be immortal by being a golden bird made by the Grecian goldsmiths.

***Sailing to Byzantium* as a Lyric Poem**

This is short poem about a feeling, an emotion or a single idea of the speaker who is old. He considers that Ireland is no country for old men. He is not happy in this country; therefore he sails to an ideal city Byzantium for spirituality. The poem is his subjective expression. It is musical and it has simple diction. These are the features of a lyric.

Poem as a Journey from the Sensual to the Spiritual World

Yeats composed this poem “*Sailing to Byzantium*” in his old age. He comes to realize that youth and sensual life are no longer an option for him. Therefore he commences his journey from the sensual to the spiritual world. He calls his country “no country for old men”. This is the country where young ones are in another’s arms, birds are singing in the trees and fish are swimming in waters. He calls them “dying generations” They all commend summer and sensual music (sexual and physical activities) but neglect art “monuments of unaging intellect.”

Yeats realizes that an aged man is “but a paltry thing”, “A tattered coat upon a stick” unless his soul

rejoices in spiritual activities and gets pleasures in studying “monuments of its own magnificence” Therefore he has sailed the seas and come to the holy city of Byzantium-an ideal place where art is admired and spiritual activities are observed with honor. He believes that he will discard the natural element of his body in favor of immortal spiritual element of his soul. He asks the sages to be his “singing masters” to purify him. He desires to fashion himself as a singing bird made of hammered gold by Greek artists and wishes to be set on a golden bough to sing forever. It means he wishes to be an immortal item of art to rejoice in spirituality forever.

Diction of the Poem

Diction refers to the choice of words or phrases found in poetry or a text. It includes the lexical aspects of style. Longaker and Walker define diction as “word choice and texture of meaning it creates”. The poet has employed simple diction used in a conversational style. Most of the words in the poem are monosyllabic such as ‘that’, ‘is’, ‘no’, ‘arms’ etc. and some are disyllabic such as ‘country’, ‘salmon’, ‘paltry’, ‘commend’ etc. Very few words are trisyllabic such as ‘monuments’, ‘intellect’, Byzantium’ ‘artifice’ etc. This poem employs only four tetra syllabic words ‘generations’, ‘magnificence’, ‘eternity’, and ‘enamelling’. Most of the words are simple, but a word formed with a prefix and a suffix such as ‘unaging’. Some words are formed with suffixed such as ‘-ed’ in ‘aged’, and ‘-ing’ in ‘singing’ etc.

Syntax in the Poem

Harmon asserts that syntax is “the rule-governed arrangement of words in sentences”. Syntactical oddity and inversions are common in poetry. Energy of syntax becomes visible due to the powerful distortions and disruptions of normative syntax. This poem is not difficult from the syntactic perspective. Some verse lines are simple such as “That is no country for old men”, and “An aged man is but a paltry thing”. Some verse lines commence with verbs such as “Caught in that sensual music all neglect”, “Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre”, and “Consume my heart away; sick with desire”. Some verse lines begin with prepositional phrases

such as “Into the artifice of eternity”, “Of hammered gold and gold enamelling”, “To lords and ladies of Byzantium” and “Of what is past, or passing, or to come”. “Nor is there singing school but studying”, “And therefore I have sailed the seas and come”, “But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make” etc are the lines which begin with conjunctions. We can also notice inversion of subject and verb in the line “commend all summer long”. Some verse lines are end-stopped such as “An aged man is but a paltry thing”, “To keep a drowsy Emperor awake” etc., while some are run-on lines such as “And therefore I have sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium” etc. The poet follows a traditional norm of beginning each verse line with the word whose first letter is capital.

What the Poem is About

This poem is a creation of Yeats’s maturity. It deals with his dissatisfaction with his old age in Ireland, his indifference to the activities of the young ones, birds and fish for sensual pleasures, his urge to sail to Byzantium for spirituality, his desire to make sages his masters and his willingness to be immortal by being a golden bird made by Grecian goldsmiths and to be set upon a golden bough to keep on singing about past, present and future to the drowsy Emperor. It presents a tripartite (past, present and future) view of life.

Sound Devices in the Poem

Literary devices are tools used by writers and poets to convey their emotions, feelings, and ideas to the readers. Literary devices bring depth to this poem. This poem involves the following literary devices:

Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line in quick succession. Wales defines alliteration as “the repetition of the initial consonant in two or more words”. This poem is rich in alliteration. There is the repetition of the consonant sound / s / in the lines 4, 11, 13, 15, 17 and 20 “The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas”, “Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing”, “Nor is there singing school but studying”, “And therefore I have sailed

the seas and come”, “Sages standing in God’s holy fire”, and “And be the singing-masters of my soul”. The sound / f / is repeated in the line 5 “Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long”, the sound / b / in the line 6 “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies”, the sound / m / in the line 14 “Monuments of its own magnificence”, the sound / n / in the line 25 “Once out of nature I shall never take”, the sound / l / in the line 31 “To lords and ladies of Byzantium”, and the sound / p / in the line 32 “Of what is past, or passing, or to come”.

Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line. According to Abrams, assonance is “the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds – especially in stressed syllable in a sequence of nearby words”. The vowel sound / əʊ / is repeated in the words ‘no’, and ‘old’ in the line 1 “That is no country for old men. The young”, the vowel sound / ɔ : / in the words ‘caught’ and ‘all’ in the line 7 “Caught in that sensual music all neglect”, / ɪ / in the words ‘holy’ and ‘city’ in the line 16 “To the holy city of Byzantium”. / aɪ / in the words ‘fire’ and ‘gyre’ in the line 19 “Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre”, / əʊ / in the words ‘golden’ and ‘bough’ in the line 30 “Or set upon a golden bough to sing” and / ɑ : / in the words ‘past’ and ‘passing’ in the line 32 “Of what is past, or passing, or to come”.

Consonance

Consonance, which involves the repetition of a consonant sound, is also a musical device in poetry. Cuddon defines consonance as “the close repetition of the identical consonant sounds before and after different vowel sounds”. This poem is rich in consonance. There is a repetition of / ʃ / in the words ‘fish’ and ‘flesh’ in the line 5 “Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long”, / n / in the words ‘begotten’ and ‘born’ in the line 6 “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies”, / t / in the words ‘caught’ and ‘that’, and ‘neglect’, and / l / in the words ‘sensual’ and ‘all’ in the line 7 “Caught in that sensual music all neglect”, / n / in the words ‘monuments’ ‘unaging’ and ‘intellect’ in the line 8 “Monuments of unaging intellect”, / l / in the words ‘soul’ and ‘clap’, and / d / in ‘hands’ and ‘louder’ in

the line 11 “Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing”, / t / in the words ‘tatter’ and ‘mortal’ in the line 12 “For every tatter in its mortal dress”, / l / in the words “gold” and ‘wall’ in the line 18 “As in the gold mosaic of a wall”, / m / in the words ‘come’ and ‘from’ in the line 19 “Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre”, / d / in the words ‘hammered’ and ‘gold’ in the line 28 “Of hammered gold and gold enamelling”, / p / in the words ‘keep’ and ‘Emperor’ in the 29 “To keep a drowsy Emperor awake”, / d / in the words ‘lords’ and ‘ladies’ in the line 31 “To lords and ladies of Byzantium” and / t / in the words ‘what’ and ‘past’ in the line 32 “Of what is past, or passing, or to come”.

Diacope

Diacope is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is repeated with a small number of intervening words. Diacope has originated from a Greek word *thiakhop*, which means “to cut into two.” This literary device is a repetition of a phrase or word, broken up by other intervening words. The poem employs the repetition of the word ‘sing’ with a intervening words ‘and louder’ in the line 11 “Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing” and the repetition of the word ‘gold’ with intervening word ‘and’ in the line 28 “Of hammered gold and gold enamelling”. Such repetition suggests the emphasis of the speaker.

Meter

Meter is a sound device of poetry. Cuddon defines meter as the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in verse. This poem is written in a loose iambic pentameter. The iambic pentameter is formed with 5 disyllabic feet in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one in each foot. For example: And *there* // fore *I* // have *sailed* // the *seas* // and *come*

But the poem is written in a loose iambic pentameter, because the unstressed and stressed patterns in the feet are irregular in some verse lines.

Rhyme

Rhyme is one of the musical devices in poetry. Harmon defines rhyme as “the identity of terminal sound between accented syllables, usually occupying corresponding positions in two or more lines of verse”.

This poem uses the end rhyme. The rhyme scheme of the first stanza is ababacdd and the remaining stanzas retain the rhyme scheme of abababcc. The rhyming words are: young/ song/ long, trees/ seas, neglect/ intellect, thing/ sing/ studying, unless/ dress/ magnificence, come/ Byzantium, fire/ gyre/ desire, wall/ soul/ animal, me/ eternity, take/ make/ awake, thing/ enamelling/ sing and Byzantium/ come. Some rhyming words have perfect rhyme like ‘take/ make’, while other words have slant rhyme like ‘Byzantium/ come’. There is a rhyming couplet at the end of each stanza.

Literary Devices in the Poem

Literary devices make poetry implicit, deep and interesting. They make readers critical and creative. Literary devices employed in this poem are as follows:

Enjambment

It is defined as a thought in verse that does not come to an end at a line break; instead, it rolls over to the next line. Harmon asserts that “enjambment is the continuation of the sense and grammatical construction of a line on to the next verse or couplet”. Example:

“And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.”

Here the meaning of the second sentence takes its completion rolling over the third line.

Imagery

Abrams affirms that “imagery, images taken collectively, is used to signify as the objects and qualities of some perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature”. Kirsznner and Mandell contend that “images enable poets to present ideas that would be difficult to convey in any other way”. Imagery is used to make readers perceive things involving their five senses. “In one another’s arms, birds in the trees”, “O sages standing in God’s holy fire”, “The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas”, “To the holy city of Byzantium”, “As in the gold mosaic of a wall”, “Of hammered gold and gold enamelling”, “To keep a drowsy Emperor awake”, and “Or set upon a golden bough to sing”. appeal to

our visual sense. The reader sees and makes meaning according to his visual perception. "Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre". This line retains complex imagery. It appeals to our visual, kinesthetic and abstract senses. The word 'come' indicates kinesthetic image, 'fire' is a visual image, whereas 'holy' is an abstract image.

Metaphor

It is a figure of speech used for an implied comparison between different objects. Cuddon defines metaphor as "a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another. A comparison is usually implicit; whereas in simile it is explicit". There are three metaphors used in this poem. For example, "A tattered coat upon a stick, unless". Here, the poet compares himself to a scarecrow. In "And fastened to a dying animal," he compares himself to a dead animal. In "For every tatter in its mortal dress," he compared the body with a dress that will be worn out someday.

Oxymoron

It is a figure of speech in which contradictory terms appear in conjunctions. Cuddon defines oxymoron as "a figure of speech which combines incongruous and apparently contradictory words and meanings for a special effect". For example: "Consume my heart away; sick with desire", here sickness presents desire and desire suggests passion.

Personification

Personification is to give human qualities to inanimate objects. Wales assumes that "personification is a figure of speech or trope in which inanimate objects; animate non-human or abstract quality is given human attributes". For example, "Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing." Here, the 'soul' is treated as if it has human sentiment, desire, feeling and emotion.

Symbol

Cuddon defines symbol as "an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or 'stands for something else". Yeats has employed 'Byzantium' as a symbol of 'a city of cultural value, art and spirituality'. Jeffares maintains that "Yeats regarded Byzantium

in the eight century as the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy, a city with a unified culture". 'Sailing to Byzantium' symbolizes the search for the spirituality by voyage to that city. It can be considered as a journey from the sensual to the spiritual world.

Themes of the Poem

There are several themes that are common throughout the poems of Yeats. Many poems by Yeats deal with the themes of his persistent fear of growing old and with the state of his restlessness. We find such things in the poem *Sailing to Byzantium*. One of the most stunning poems reflecting implicit fear of aging of Yeats occurs throughout *Sailing to Byzantium*. Therefore the major themes of this poem are "An Imaginative Journey to the Land of Art", "Life and Art," "Striving for Permanence", "Poetry and Art as the Sources of Pleasure", "Two Opposite Sides of Life", "Fear of Death", "Fear of Growing Old", "immortality of Art" etc.

Conclusion

Sailing to Byzantium consists of four stanzas. Each stanza has 8 verse lines written in a loose iambic meter. In the first stanza, Yeats defines Ireland as no country for old men. Sensual activities of young folks, birds and fish are ephemeral. He assumes that people are deaf and blind to the art of unaging intellect. In the second stanza, he describes the grief an old man whom young folks consider a useless and valueless thing. In the third stanza, he moves the reader to a new place Byzantium where he (speaker) notices sagas standing in God's holy fire on a wall. He desires to make them the singing masters of his soul. In the Fourth stanza, he mentions, in a meditative tone, his desire to be a golden bird made by Grecian goldsmiths to be immortal for singing songs to the Emperor, lords and ladies of Byzantium. This poem is rich in literary and sound devices. Mode of expression is very impressive. The mode of expression commences with a description and mingles with meditation. One of the striking features of this poem is its symbolic title that indicates a journey of a speaker from the sensual to the spiritual world. It is a sort of search for spirituality, peace and hope required in the old age.

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Appendix I: Text of the Poem

Sailing to Byzantium

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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