

Byzantium

-by W. B. Yeats

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Introduction to the poem

Byzantium is one of the most famous poems from Yeats's pen. It is also one of his most difficult poems. It was composed in 1930. It admits of two kinds of interpretations- literal and symbolical. In literal interpretation, Byzantium is an ancient city. In history, Byzantium was the capital of the Eastern division of the Roman Empire. It was famous for its architecture, gold enamel, and gold ornaments. In 395 A.D., it was ruled by an emperor who was one of the two sons of Theodosius. It was captured by the Turks in 1453 and was named Constantinople. But one of the western critics, Prof. Bullough, expressed his view that Byzantium, in the poem, is the city of the soul. It is an "a vision of the city from the inside where the soul is imagined first as a walking Mummy and then as the Emperor's golden bird whose "glory of changeless metal is contrasted with the complexities of mire and blood." Taking a clue from Yeats's statement that he believed in the concept of the self, as enunciated in the Upanishads, Indian scholars have then given the poem a symbolical interpretation in the context of the philosophy of the Upanishads. Here Byzantium is the walled city of the human body. Inside it, there stood the palace of the Emperor, who is the soul. The palace is the mind. It may also be called the soul's castle. The symbolical theme of the poem is a representation of the soul's *death-bed-dream state*. It happens to the human soul when a man lies dying.

Stanza-Form, Metre, Rhythm, Diction, and Style

Each stanza is made up of eight lines. The first four lines make two heroic couplets. Then the fifth line and the eighth line rhyme with each other. The sixth and seventh lines make up a couplet again. The longest line is iambic pentameter. The shortest one is an iambic trimeter. The stanza form is elegiac. The stanza pattern is the same that Cowley used in his elegy for William Harvey. Yeats himself used this stanza pattern first of all in his Elegy for the death of Major Gregory. The meter of the poem is iambus with variations here and there. The diction of the poem is simple, natural, and forceful. A majority of the used words refer to death or things related to death. The style is grave and thoughtful but highly imaginative. The poet is here in search of a tale-telling, lyrical, surprising, terrifying, but also a philosophical style. He achieves great success in his effort.

Analysis of the poem

The poem consists of five stanzas. It admits of a symbolical analysis as follows:

In the first stanza, the poet has represented the first stage of the death-bed-dream state, The dying man's gross body is the walled city. His mind has been represented as the castle of the Emperor. It is Byzantium. The dying man's sense-organs, his eyes, ears, nose, etc., are the soldiers of the Emperor, on their watch-towers. When Death attacks the walled city, the Emperor's soldiers are paralyzed by the shock. The mind is the Emperor's castle. In the *Upanishads*, it has been called *Sukshma-sharira* (i.e. the subtle body). Sensing the fall of the city near, the Emperor causes the great gong of the castle to be rung. It is a to the powers of the bodily sense-organs (i.e. eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin, as the sense of touch) to drawback to their respective brain-centers in the subtle body. They come back, and

each of them passes before the Emperor, singing the services it has done to him. The result is that memories of sensual pleasures and privations flash through the mind. The Emperor (also called the *Jivatman*, or the Self) is drowned in grief. God, called Brahman in the *Upanishads*, treats the Emperor's grief as unworthy of notice.

In the second stanza, the speaker is the Soul. When it is drowned in grief, all the experiences of its present life, called *Karma*, get condensed into a special knowledge. It is called, in the *Upanishad*, "Vasna." The Soul looks to *Vasna* for help, considering it "death-in-life" and "life-in-death." Soon "Vasna" creates an image on the screen of the mind (called *Manas*). In this stanza, the Soul speaks of itself as "I."

In the third stanza, the Soul is delighted to see the image of his next world. It has wonderful power and the *Jiva* feels that it can enable him to feel scorn for the dying gross body, its Heart, and all his grief born of his concern for them.

In the fourth stanza, a full series of next world images appear *on the Manas*. The sight of the series of future world image puts an end to the *Jiva's* grief. Just as he attaches himself to them, the exit of the heart is brightly lit up. To use Yeats's words, "on the Emperor's pavement flit flames."

In the fifth stanza, the *Jiva* gets ready to depart from the defunct gross body. The departments of the subtle body break the continuity of the mind's sea and pack up. The *Indriyas* merge in the *Manas*. The *Manas* together with the future world images merges into the *Buddhi* so that the mind's lake gets dried up. Then the *Jiva* riding astride the *Buddhi*, which is being carried on by *Prana* and guided by *Karma*, leaves the defunct gross body for the embryo of his next world.

Text and its Explanations

In these lines, the poet tells about the self (i.e. the Atman). The mixed shadows of day drawback. Night falls on Byzantium (a walled city). The Emperor's drunken (given to drinking) soldiers are abed. Gradually night sounds also decline. Then the gong (a big metal disc that is struck with the wooden or iron hammer) of the great cathedral, St. Sophia's Cathedral, sounds. Thereafter the night-walkers' song [i.e., a song of the ghosts] is heard. The Cathedral's starlight or moonlight (lighted by the moon) dome [i.e. the

Bishop or God] is indifferent to man's nature which is marked by complexities, passions, and the mud of heartfelt wishes. Soon the poet sees a metal picture or human appearance before him. He asks himself whether it is a human form; or a ghost. It looks like a ghost more than a human form; or rather, it is more an appearance than a ghost. [he is filled with fear.] For if it is a ghost, it may call up a number of ghosts. And a row of ghosts from the world of the dead may come up the winding stair. So he addresses the ghost. He calls it a spirit : [Or, so he prays to God. He considers it a matter of life and death.] Then a miracle happens. The image changes into a bird, or rather a bird of goldwork of skill (a bird made of gold and a work of skill). Yet it is more a marvel than a bird or handiwork. It is perched on a starlight golden bough of a golden tree. It can crow like the cocks of Hades [to greet the dawn]. Conversely, being embittered by the moon, it can, is made of gold, express scorn for ordinary birds, flowers [and fruits], and even human beings, at night. At midnight, there lightly move about the Emperor's road a number of flames. They are not lighted with a piece of steel and a flint by somebody. They continue to burn without any sticks for fuel. They are not disturbed by a storm even. [They are supernatural]. They come from one single flame. And then there come to those flames .disembodied souls of dead human beings. All those disembodied human souls begin to dance into those flames. And they die there either from the tiresomeness of their dance, or of the intensity of their joy, or they die of the heat of the supernatural flame that can't burn up the matter but can burn up disembodied souls. But soon those spirits, riding astraddle on the mire-smeared dolphins and other kindred fish come out of the sea of flames, one after another. Then the flames appear to be smithies, the gold smithies of the Emperor. Soon they cut up the sea of flames. The spirits change into bitter, passionate, violent women. The still increasing flames abruptly vanish at the sound of the gong. The form of the dolphin-torn sea-of-fire also vanishes. The sea of darkness, disturbed by the sound of the gong, swallows up those passionate violent spirits.

Important Question

Make a critical estimate of the poem "Byzantium."