



# Transcending Mortality: Exploring The Quest For A Higher Existence In W.B. Yeats' "Sailing To Byzantium"

Dr Parneet Jaggi

Professor, English

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Government College, Sri Ganaganagar(Raj.)

## Abstract

"Sailing to Byzantium" takes readers on a metaphorical voyage, intertwining the physical and spiritual realms to illuminate the human desire for immortality and an eternal existence. Through rich imagery, symbolism, and a masterful use of poetic techniques, Yeats crafts a captivating narrative that resonates deeply with readers. This paper aims to delve into the theme of transcendence within the poem, uncovering the various literary devices and imagery employed by Yeats to convey the speaker's quest for a higher state of being.

The study analyzes the theme of transcendence in "Sailing to Byzantium" by exploring the poem's imagery, symbolism, and the use of literary devices. We will examine the speaker's yearning for a spiritual transformation, his fascination with the eternal world symbolized by Byzantium, and the juxtaposition of aging mortality against timeless art. Additionally, it delves into the historical and cultural context of the poem, considering Yeats' influences from Irish mythology, the occult, and his fascination with Byzantine art.

By dissecting Yeats' poem and examining its intricacies, this study aims to shed light on the profound exploration of transcendence and its enduring significance within Yeats' broader body of work. Through this analysis, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the poem's timeless appeal, as well as its contribution to the landscape of modern poetry. Join us on this intellectual voyage as we embark on a journey into the depths of Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium."

## Introduction

William Butler Yeats, a renowned Irish poet and one of the most influential figures in 20th-century literature, captivated readers with his evocative and profound works. Among his vast collection of poems, “Sailing to Byzantium” stands as a notable testament to Yeats’ exploration of themes such as aging, mortality, and the longing for spiritual transcendence. Published in 1928 as part of his collection “The Tower,” this poem delves into the speaker’s yearning for a transformative journey, seeking a realm beyond the limitations of human existence.

W.B. Yeats wrote “Sailing to Byzantium” in the early 1920s, a time of great social, political, and cultural upheaval in Ireland and Europe. Yeats was a leading figure in the Irish Literary Revival, a movement that sought to revive and promote Irish literature and culture, which had been suppressed during centuries of British rule. The poem reflects the poet’s engagement with this movement and his broader exploration of Irish identity and cultural heritage.

The historical and cultural context of the poem was characterized by a wider search for spiritual and cultural renewal in Europe following the devastation of World War I. The war had shattered the optimism and confidence of many Europeans, leading to a renewed interest in religious and philosophical traditions that offered solace and hope. Yeats himself was deeply influenced by theosophy and occultism, which he saw as a means of unlocking spiritual truths and elevating human consciousness.

The poem's reference to Byzantium, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, reflects Yeats’ fascination with the city’s rich cultural and artistic heritage. Byzantium was renowned for its mosaics, architecture, and religious art, which symbolized the enduring power and beauty of human creativity. Yeats saw Byzantium as a place of transcendent beauty and spiritual richness, an idealized realm that offered an escape from the decay and transience of mortal life. According to Choi, “Yeats chose ‘Byzantium’ because it largely and undoubtedly serves as a symbol of an artistic and endless world that is free from conflicts, contradictions, and changing situations. These contradictions, conflicts, and the changing situations are definitely found in the natural world in which Yeats wants to sail far away from. Yeats wrote the poem when he was over sixty” (118).

Additionally, the poem reflects Yeats’ preoccupation with the theme of aging and mortality, which he had explored in earlier works such as “The Tower” and “The Winding Stair.” The theme of transcendence lies at the heart of the poem. Through vivid imagery and powerful language, Yeats explores the speaker's yearning for a transformative journey beyond the constraints of mortal existence. Several lines in the poem exemplify the theme of transcendence and offer insights into the speaker's desire for a higher state of being. “That is no country for old men. The young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees” (193). These opening lines present a stark contrast between youth and old age, highlighting the transitory nature of human life. The speaker suggests

that the physical world, with its emphasis on youthful vitality and transient pleasures, is not conducive to the pursuit of a higher spiritual existence. This sets the stage for the speaker's quest for transcendence.

“An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick” (193).

Here, the speaker emphasizes the frailty and insignificance of the aging body. The metaphorical portrayal of an aged man as a "tattered coat upon a stick" underscores the impermanence and decay associated with mortal existence. By highlighting the limitations of the physical body, the speaker signals the need for transcendence and a departure from earthly constraints.

The lines "Caught in that sensual music all neglect / Monuments of unaging intellect" (193) emphasize the speaker's disdain for the preoccupation with sensual pleasures and ephemeral distractions. The "sensual music" represents the lure of worldly desires that distract individuals from the pursuit of intellectual and spiritual growth. The phrase "monuments of unaging intellect" suggests the timeless and enduring nature of intellectual pursuits, which the speaker sees as a means to transcend the transitory nature of human existence. The poet further says, "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing" (194). Here the speaker expresses his desire to detach himself from the physical realm. By proclaiming that he will never again inhabit a bodily form derived from the natural world, the speaker seeks a state of transcendence that surpasses the limitations of mortal existence. This yearning for a release from the constraints of the physical body is a central aspect of the theme of transcendence in the poem. The lines "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal" (193) convey the speaker's intense longing for a spiritual transformation. The phrase "consume my heart away" suggests a burning desire for transcendence that consumes the speaker's being. The image of being "fastened to a dying animal" evokes a sense of entrapment within the mortality of the physical body. It symbolizes the speaker's yearning to break free from this finite existence and embrace a higher realm of existence.

W.B. Yeats masterfully employs symbolism throughout the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" to enhance the exploration of transcendence and the yearning for a higher spiritual existence. According to Dahami, the poem "is a speculative piece of poetry that might sanction critics to profoundly contemplate the various contrasts in life between the natural elements and the symbolical elements. The poem Sailing to Byzantium is constructed in reality, though it has to relocate outside reality to afford an element of a life that is sovereign of the other" (480). One of the most prominent symbols in the poem is Byzantium itself, which represents an idealized realm of art, culture, and spirituality. Additionally, other symbols, such as the aging body, birds, and monuments, contribute to the rich tapestry of meaning within the poem. "Byzantium" serves as a potent symbol throughout the poem, representing a realm of spiritual and artistic transcendence. It embodies an idealized civilization, associated with wisdom, beauty, and immortality. Byzantium, as a symbol, stands in stark contrast to the physical world described in the poem. It represents a realm of permanence and timeless art, which the speaker seeks to embrace in his quest for transcendence. Northrop Frye perceives that the poem illustrating "the comic

vision” of the poet “has the city, the tree, the bird, the community of sages, the geometrical gyre and the detachment from the cyclic world” (433).

The imagery of the “aging body” in the poem symbolizes the transience and limitations of mortal existence. The speaker describes old men as "tattered coats upon a stick" (193), emphasizing their insignificance and decay. This symbolizes the impermanence of the physical form and acts as a catalyst for the speaker's desire to transcend the confines of the mortal body. Birds in the poem symbolize freedom, vitality, and transcendence. They are depicted as being "in one another's arms" (193), symbolizing their unity and harmonious existence. In contrast to the aging body, birds represent the possibility of escape from earthly constraints and the pursuit of a higher spiritual realm. The concept of monuments in the poem represents intellectual and artistic achievements that endure beyond the limitations of time. The phrase "monuments of unaging intellect" (193) suggests the lasting impact of intellectual pursuits and the preservation of knowledge and art throughout the ages. Monuments symbolize the speaker's aspiration for a legacy that transcends mortality, seeking a form of immortality through artistic and intellectual contributions. The mention of "gold mosaics" in Byzantium (194) signifies the richness and grandeur of Byzantine art and its association with the divine. Mosaics, often found in Byzantine religious structures, represent the integration of various elements into a cohesive whole. The use of gold connotes spirituality and sacredness. The speaker's desire to become a "golden bird" in the realm of Byzantium further emphasizes the longing for transformation into a timeless, divine entity. Fundamentally, he employs symbols as “focuses of experience” (Tindall 211) and they are the objective correlative of the feelings, emotions, attitude or the experience of their maker.

Through these symbols, Yeats effectively conveys the theme of transcendence and the human yearning for a spiritual and artistic realm that surpasses mortal existence. Byzantium, the aging body, birds, monuments, and gold mosaics all contribute to the multi-layered symbolism within the poem, inviting readers to contemplate the significance of these images and their implications for the pursuit of transcendence. The opening lines- “That is no country for old men. The young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees” (193)- establish a contrast between the fleeting pleasures of youth and the aging process. The speaker perceives the physical world as transient, emphasizing that it is "no country" for those seeking a higher existence. This dissatisfaction fuels the speaker's quest for an eternal realm where the limitations of mortal life can be transcended.

The quest for a higher existence is intertwined with the speaker's desire to leave behind the decaying physical body. The metaphor of an aged man as a “tattered coat upon a stick” vividly portrays the frailty and insignificance of the aging body. Jon Stallworthy writes that “the opposition of soul and body” as presented in the poem “foreshadows the opposition of Byzantium and Ireland” and that Yeats was “conscious of his former loves and future death” (90).

Byzantium emerges as the embodiment of the speaker's quest for a higher existence. It represents an idealized realm of art, culture, and spirituality. The speaker envisions Byzantium as a place where "gold mosaics" and "the singing masters of Byzantium" (194) exist, symbolizing a divine and timeless realm. The speaker's desire to become a "golden bird" and be liberated from the confines of the aging body reflects the aspiration to transcend mortality and achieve a form of immortality.

The yearning for a higher existence is not solely driven by a fear of mortality but also by the desire to attain a deeper level of spiritual enlightenment. The speaker seeks to transcend the mundane world and access a state of elevated consciousness. The phrase "once out of nature" (194) highlights this desire to transcend the limitations of the physical world and embrace a spiritual transformation. The pursuit of immortality is intertwined with the pursuit of artistic and intellectual achievements that endure.

The structure, rhyme scheme, and meter of a poem play a crucial role in shaping its overall meaning and impact. Yeats employs a carefully crafted structure, intricate rhyme scheme, and rhythmic meter to enhance the theme of transcendence and elevate the reader's experience. This analysis explores the effects of these poetic elements on the poem's central theme. The poem consists of four stanzas, each comprising four lines, known as quatrains. This symmetrical structure provides a sense of balance and order, reflecting the speaker's quest for a harmonious existence beyond the constraints of mortal life. The consistent four-line structure also mirrors the repetitive nature of human existence, which the speaker seeks to transcend. The rhyme scheme follows a complex pattern, contributing to the poem's musicality and reinforcing its theme. The consistent iambic pentameter, a metrical pattern of five stressed and unstressed syllables per line, adds a sense of rhythm and musicality to the poem. Yeats exploits the resources of the common speech, sometimes for effects of irony, but mostly for direct, poignant and gritty expression (Fraser 60) and the "strong simplicity of his later style" expresses a large "complex of feelings" (61).

One significant poem that shares thematic similarities with "Sailing to Byzantium" is Yeats' "The Second Coming." While it diverges in tone and imagery, both poems address the notion of a transformative journey and the quest for a higher existence. "The Second Coming" reflects Yeats' concern with the tumultuous state of the world and his exploration of cyclical patterns of history. It presents a vision of an apocalyptic age characterized by chaos and uncertainty. In contrast, "Sailing to Byzantium" presents a personal quest for transcendence in response to the ephemeral nature of mortal life. Both poems contemplate the need for a spiritual transformation to navigate and transcend the complexities of the world.

Another notable comparison can be made between "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Among School Children." While the latter addresses themes of aging, mortality, and the passage of time, it also contemplates the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. "Among School Children" explores the speaker's interaction with a group of young children and reflects upon the transience of human life. Similarly, "Sailing to Byzantium" examines the speaker's longing for immortality and the desire to escape the decay of the physical

body. Both poems contemplate the relationship between the temporal and the eternal, seeking meaning and spiritual transformation in the face of mortality.

The poem "The Tower" can be compared to "Sailing to Byzantium" in terms of its exploration of spiritual transcendence. "The Tower" delves into Yeats' personal reflections on aging, mortality, and the quest for spiritual enlightenment. It presents a journey towards self-discovery and transformation, incorporating elements of mythology and esoteric symbolism. Similarly, "Sailing to Byzantium" engages with the speaker's desire for a transformative journey and the pursuit of a higher existence beyond the limitations of mortal life. Both poems embody Yeats' exploration of the human quest for transcendence and the yearning for spiritual fulfillment.

T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" delves into themes of disillusionment, spiritual emptiness, and the yearning for transcendence in a modern, fragmented world. While Yeats' poem emphasizes the pursuit of a higher existence through art and the transformation of the self, "The Hollow Men" explores the failure to attain spiritual fulfillment and the sense of being trapped in a hollow, desolate existence. Both poems reflect the disillusionment and spiritual crisis prevalent in the modern era, but they approach the theme from different angles: Yeats focuses on the potential for transcendence through art, while Eliot highlights the absence of spiritual fulfillment and the longing for meaning in an alienated world.

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper. (Eliot quoted in Bloom 108)

Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Duino Elegies*, a collection of elegiac poems contemplates existential questions, the nature of love, and the search for transcendence. Like Yeats, Rilke grapples with mortality, the transient nature of human existence, and the yearning for a higher spiritual realm. However, Rilke's poems often convey a sense of longing and striving for transcendence through an intense exploration of human emotions and connections to the natural world. In contrast, Yeats employs vivid imagery, symbolism, and a focus on artistic creation to convey his quest for transcendence. Both poets explore the profound aspects of human experience and the desire to transcend the limitations of the mortal world, but they do so through distinct poetic styles and perspectives. "For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us" (Rilke 151).

In comparing these poems, we witness the diverse ways in which modern poets engage with the theme of transcendence and spiritual transformation. While Yeats explores the transformative power of art and the pursuit of a higher existence, Eliot and Rilke delve into existential crises, the search for meaning, and the longing for a connection to the divine. Each poet offers a unique lens through which to contemplate the

complexities of human existence and the yearning for transcendence in a modern world. While Yeats focuses on artistic creation and the quest for a higher existence, Eliot and Rilke delve into existential crises and the yearning for spiritual fulfillment. By exploring these varied perspectives, readers gain a broader understanding of how modern poets grapple with the complexities of the human condition and the search for transcendence in a changing world.

## Conclusion

"Sailing to Byzantium" by W.B. Yeats remains a remarkably relevant and enduring poem, resonating with readers even in the present day. Alvarez writes that "Yeats's poetry ... is modern because the tone of voice is that of the time" (42). Its exploration of transcendence, the quest for a higher existence, and the transformative power of art speaks to universal themes that continue to captivate and inspire. The poem's reflection on mortality, the impermanence of human life, and the yearning for spiritual fulfillment taps into the profound questions and existential concerns that humans have grappled with throughout history. Tindall observes, "'Byzantium' remains an enigma even with the help of A Vision and of several explications; for although it has every appearance of unity, and although such images as the dome are readily intelligible, other images and their connections and references are as obscure as those of Mallarme. In Yeats such privacy is uncommon" (Tindall 52).

Moreover, the poem's emphasis on the importance of cultural heritage, artistic expression, and the pursuit of immortality through creative endeavors remains pertinent. In a rapidly changing world, where technological advancements and societal shifts can often overshadow the value of artistic and spiritual pursuits, "Sailing to Byzantium" serves as a reminder of the enduring power of art to transcend the limitations of the human condition and to connect us with deeper aspects of our existence. Precisely, the relevance of "Sailing to Byzantium" lies in its ability to transcend the boundaries of time and culture, speaking to the timeless aspirations, doubts, and longings of humanity. As long as individuals continue to grapple with questions of mortality, the search for meaning, and the desire for transcendence, the poem will continue to resonate, offering solace, inspiration, and a timeless invitation to embark on our own transformative journeys.

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