



Yeats's Sailing To Byzantium – An Old Man's Liberation From The Sensual World

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Abstract:-

William Butler Yeats has been called the principal representative of the symbolist movement in English literature. Byzantium is one of the most impressive symbols in his poetry. In this poem Byzantium Yeats laughs at the absurdity of the scarecrow body of the old man and yet retains his dignity and seriousness. The laughter is drowned in the noble music announcing the voyage to the holy city of Byzantium. Sailing to Byzantium is pertaining to the problem of an old age. Byzantium is a symbol for unity and perfection. Yeats sailing to Byzantium is pre-eminently a personal poem which deals with the problem of old age which often haunted him. An old man feels miserable in this world of reality, being unfit for the sensual life. Yeats therefore finds comfort by escaping to the city of Byzantium which represents a world of art, a world which is eternal and timeless. The poet in Sailing to Byzantium describes an uncongenial Country in the beginning as we look at that country through his eyes. "That is no country for old men." The contemplation of monuments of unageing intellect alone can justify in old man's existence and which cannot be produced in modern world. Sailing to Byzantium has strongly influenced the minds and hearts of the readers. It has sharpened their sense of the seriousness and reality of the motivations of creative minds. It is a poem which redirects our attention to the basic choices of our lives, and to the way in which these choices affect our perspectives. The present study focuses on Yeats's poem Sailing to Byzantium as an antidote for an old man's liberation from the sensual world. It also highlights the chaotic modern times, symbols used in the poem, symbolic significance to Byzantium and Yeats's glorification of art.

Keywords:- Yeats, Byzantium, Liberation, Sensual, monuments, intellect.

William Butler Yeats has been called the principal representative of the symbolist movement in English literature. He belonged to the European movement of which the French have been leaders. Yeats knowledge of the French language was so meagre that he could not have read the difficult French poems or literature to which he was indebted. In an essay called "The Symbolism of Poetry," Yeats wrote: "When sound and colour and form are in a musical relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion." His symbolism was based upon the poetry of Blake, Shelley, and

Rossetti. The example of Blake taught Yeats the use of magical symbols in poetry. Shelley's poetry confirmed his symbolic system. When Symons and others told him about the French symbolist poets, Yeats welcomed them following the same road, as fellow transcendentalists and occultists who had, like Blake and Shelley, hit upon symbolism as the only possible way to express what they had experienced.

Byzantium is one of the most impressive symbols in his poetry. Byzantium is the holy city which is an idealized Ireland and a timeless paradise. The second symbol is the image of himself. His image as a terrible and dynamic old man. According to Yeats old age is not decrepitude but a spiritual adventure. Here is an old man who is sailing to Byzantium and achieves a true unity of life. The subject of this poem Byzantium is the quest for a timeless existence transcending the world of sensuous experience. "Sailing to Byzantium was written by Yeats as an old man; and this poem contains images throbbing with the vitality of life: "That is no country for old men....." Against this concrete picture of instinctive life is seen the figure of the old poet at once slightly ridiculous and yet frightening:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick....."¹

In this poem Byzantium Yeats laughs at the absurdity of the scarecrow body of the old man and yet retains his dignity and seriousness. The laughter is drowned in the noble music announcing the voyage to the holy city of Byzantium. The first poem is a picture of a voyage from the material world to the holy city of eternity. The second is the vision of the city from the inside where the soul is depicted 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". In the second poem, Byzantium is a purgatory and paradise.

Sailing to Byzantium is pertaining to the problem of an old age. The problem of an old age is resolved by the suggestion that an old man must withdraw into the city of Byzantium where he can have peace and happiness among 'the monuments of unageing intellect.' Sailing to Byzantium is prominently symbolic poem where Byzantium represents the world of intellect, spirit and art. It has been general rule that an old man cannot be happy in his life and in the world of senses. Therefore, he must withdraw to an ideal world where he may be happy in the midst of monuments of unageing intellect. In the ideal world of Byzantium, his soul will be definitely transformed into a golden bird singing upon a golden bough to the lords and ladies of Byzantium. The old man will become himself one of the monuments which he admired and appreciated very much.

Byzantium is a symbol for unity and perfection. Yeats withdraws to Byzantium and its golden age because he felt that they represented a kind of unity and perfection such as the world had never known before or since. "The poet sees a sort of miracle. It is a golden bird or is it something else or is

it an unusual bird on starlit golden bough? It can crow like the cocks of hell, or scorn other birds of petals and all the changes which flesh is heir to,”² Yeats believed that in early Byzantium, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, and that the architect spoke to the multitude. He saw in Byzantium culture what he called the unity of being, a state in which art and life interpreted each other. Sailing to Byzantium reflects the poet’s interest in Byzantium’s art and culture. Byzantium becomes a symbol of a perfect world. Yeats rejects this world of birth, reproduction and death and makes up his mind to sail to Byzantium where he will defeat time because he will go to the world of art and art is timeless and permanent.

Yeats discards the sensuous and sensual music made by the birds, on the contrary, he favours the ethereal and eternal music made by the birds of Byzantium of gold enamelling. He leaves a country of sensual and fleshly life and sails to Byzantium which is the symbol of the ideal. In sailing to Byzantium Yeats describes an aged man else a worthless skeleton. According to Yeats an old man can have some meaning or significance to his life by escaping from this world of sensual pleasure and mortality into the world of spirituality and art. This world of spirituality and art is represented in this poem by the city of Byzantium. The world of senses is not an appropriate place for an old man or an old man is no longer fit to live in this world of the senses. An old man must withdraw into the world of the intellect and spirit. Byzantium represented the unity of all aspects of life and the perfection of art. According to Yeats the escape to Byzantium means not only an escape from sensuality and mortality but also from impurity, ugliness, and corruption. “The solution suggested by Yeats in the two Byzantium poems is not practical but ideal and impossible. However, these poems have their value even today because the ugliness, the corruption, and the spiritual barrenness have been aggravated in our time.”³

Yeats sailing to Byzantium is pre-eminently a personal poem which deals with the problem of old age which often haunted him. An old man feels miserable in this world of reality, being unfit for the sensual life. Yeats therefore finds comfort by escaping to the city of Byzantium which represents a world of art, a world which is eternal and timeless. His solution to the problem of old age is different in his ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul,’ in which the Self rejects the Soul’s appeal for abstract life and spiritual meditation. The Self emphasizes the right to live in the world of senses, no matter what humiliation, despair and disappointments of that life may be. The tower is also a personal poem of Yeats. He suggested that with old age he should turn aside from the more intense aspects of life and “be content with argument and deal with abstract things.”

The poet in Sailing to Byzantium describes an uncongenial Country in the beginning as we look at that country through his eyes. “That is no country for old men.” The country in the poem represents the world of nature. Nature belongs to the young and to the animal world. It is characterized by mating and giving birth and the process is terminated only by death which makes room for more

dying generations caught in the round of sensual music. The poet does not despise the sensual life but he feels that an old man is merely a 'tattered coat upon a stick,' a scarecrow, and can therefore never derive any satisfaction from it. Those dying generations of the world's birds sing songs to the body which distract people from the contemplation and meditation of monuments of unageing intellect:

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.

The contemplation of monuments of unageing intellect alone can justify in old man's existence and which cannot be produced in modern world. An old man cannot be a singer of the sensuous world. He cannot be a bird in the tree. The old man i.e. the poet chooses to inhabit an artificial Byzantium bird that will sing. In that shape he will not have to feel his living body decay as he does now, and will not have to pray to be delivered of it. An old age excludes a man from the sensual joy of youth. The world appears to belong thoroughly to the young. There is no place for the old. This is very bad, except that the young also are excluded from something. "Rapt in their sensuality, they are ignorant utterly of the world of the spirit. Hence if old age frees a man from sensual passion, he may rejoice in the liberation of the soul; he is admitted into the realm of the spirit; and his rejoicing will increase according as he realizes the magnificence of the soul. But the soul can best earn its own greatness from the great works of art; hence he turns to those great work but in turning to them he finds that these are by no means mere effigies or monuments but things which have souls also; these live in the noblest element of God's fire, free from all corruption."⁴Hence he prays for death in order to release from his mortal body.

There are two major divisions which divide the poem in half the first two stanzas presenting art as inanimate, the second, two, as animate. In the first two stanzas of the poem the images are described as passive objects - they are called "monuments" and they are merely objects of contemplation. In the later stanzas, they are treated as gods which can be prayed for life or death. It is capable of motion from sphere to sphere, as instructor of the soul, as sages possessed of wisdom:

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall.

Stanza I presents a rejection of passion and II an acceptance of intellect and then turning on the realization that art is insouled, stanza III presents a rejection of the corruptible embodiment, and stanza IV presents an acceptance of the incorruptible. "There is an alternation thus of negative and affirmative; out of passion into intellection, out of corruption into permanence. Passion must be condemned before the intellect can be esteemed. The intellect must operate before the images can be

known to be insouled. The realization that the images are insouled precedes the realization that the body may be dispensed with. And the reincarnation of the soul in some changeless medium can be recognized as a possibility only through the prior recognition that the flesh is not the necessary matter of the soul.”⁵

The development of thought in the poem may be traced briefly that a mortal bird in natural trees sings a song of sensual joy appreciating mortal things, of “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies”. On the contrary, an artificial and immortal bird set in an artificial tree sings an eternal song of spiritual joy in praise of eternal things, of “What is past, or passing, or to come.” Similarly, a living thing is to be found as an inanimate artifice, “a tattered coat upon a stick”, incapable of motion, speech, sense or knowledge and what had appeared to be inanimate artifice is found to possess a soul, and hence to be capable of all these. Since time immemorial, the Greek empire of Byzantium was famous for its architecture, sculpture, mosaic, and painting. In short, Byzantium won everlasting glory by virtue of its arts. Yeats adopted Byzantium as a symbol representing some of his most cherished values. He adopted Byzantium as a symbol in his poetry to signify most of the goals which he aimed at, particularly in his old age. Sailing to Byzantium means making a voyage to a world vastly different from this world of materialistic and sensual interests. An old man finds that his old age has deprived him of the pleasures of the body and that it has rendered him incapable of enjoying what he calls ‘sensual music’. According to this old man old age is a curse. However, Yeats seeks a method by adopting which an old man can find a substitute for the sensual pleasures which he has lost. And that method is to sail to Byzantium which means to enter the realm of art. This realm is eternal and permanent which gives pleasure to an old man. Byzantium symbolizes a world not only of art but also of spirituality. To Yeats, spirituality is perhaps the highest virtue that man can aspire to and art is equally to be cherished because it is timeless and eternal. “Of course, literally speaking, even art perishes in course of time, and in the long run, but, relatively speaking, men die while the art created by them survives. Men are mortal while art is immortal. The artist dies, but the architecture or the paintings or the frescoes created by him continue to exist. Art is thus one of the chief glories of mankind and is, therefore, not inferior to spirituality.”⁶

Sailing to Byzantium has strongly influenced the minds and hearts of the readers. It has sharpened their sense of the seriousness and reality of the motivations of creative minds. It is a poem which redirects our attention to the basic choices of our lives, and to the way in which these choices affect our perspectives. It helps us to experience the weaknesses of the human condition in a light that lends them dignity. It offers us indisputable proof of the power of a poetic symbol to create relationships and meanings around itself, relationships and meanings which depend upon nothing else but the intensity and depth with which the symbol is conceived. Now-a-days in the modern world the spiritual and moral values are decaying and disintegrating not only in the larger cities but also in the hamlets of the small villages. Human life is short lived and temporal. In the life of a man an old age is

a tattered coat upon a stick. So the old man in the poem rejects all physical incarnation, because all human beings or living beings are subjects to mortality and death. So an old man wants to become eternal and imperishable. For that he would take the shape of a golden bird – a bird – designed by Grecian goldsmiths to entertain the emperor. As a golden bird, he would be beyond decay and would be therefore unlike the ‘dying generation’ of real bird. As a golden bird, he will be placed on golden bough, and will sing songs of all times (the past, the present and the future) to the audience of the lords and ladies of Byzantium. His song will be about spiritual ecstasy i.e. the soul clapping its hands and singing. His song will be surrounded, not by the young lovers, but by an audience that is elegant and abstract.

“It is generally accepted, for example, that Byzantium is for Yeats a city of art to which the soul might escape whenever the pressures or sheer corruption of the world in particular and the physical universe in general become too much to bear. Sailing to Byzantium which does seem to express a desire to escape from the decay and tedium of cyclical nature and which also mentions a golden bird.”⁷ Sailing to “Byzantium is essentially an abstract and symbolic story of an old man who faces the problem of an old age, death and regeneration. So finally he taken a decision. An old age excludes a man from the sensual pleasures of youth. The world belongs thoroughly to the young generation. There is no place for the old men. An old man is not a man at all. He is an empty artifice, effigy merely, of a man; he is “a tattered coat upon a stick”. The Young are also excluded from something like rapt in their sensuality, they appear ignorant entirely of the world of spirit. An old man rejoices in the liberation of the soul when old age frees a man from sensual passions. He is admitted into the realm of the spirit; and his rejoicing increases according as he realizes the magnificence of the soul. However, the soul may earn its own greatness from the great works of art and therefore he turns to those great work. He finally finds that these are not merely monuments but objects which have soul too; these live in the noblest element of God’s fire, free from all corruption. So he pleas for death, for release from his mortal body: and since the insouled monuments exhibit the possibility of the soul’s existence in some other matter than flesh, he wishes reincarnation, not now in a mortal body but in the immortal and changeless embodiment of art. It is a highly symbolic poem. “Byzantium represents the world of intellect, spirit and art. An old man cannot be happy or at peace in the world of the senses. He should therefore withdraw to an ideal world where he can be happy in the midst of “monuments of unageing intellect” and where his soul will be transformed into a golden bird singing upon a golden bough to the lords and ladies of Byzantium. On that golden bough the old man will himself become one of those monuments which he had so admired.”⁸

Sailing to Byzantium is one of Yeats’s noblest poems even though it is meant for old age generation. It is providing consolation, comfort, and solace to the old men who have lost the capacity to enjoy worldly pleasures, so in this sense it is not a mean achievement. Any aged man would find

this poem to be a source of the great inspiration and a source of all the pleasure which he needs as a substitute for what he has lost in his life. To withdraw from this sensual world into a world of intellect, spirit and art is the message of Sailing to Byzantium to an old men.

Conclusion:

To sum up, it may be concluded that Sailing to Byzantium is an antidote for an old man's liberation from the sensual world. The problem of an old age may be definitely resolved only if an old man withdraws into the city of Byzantium where he can have peace and pleasure among "the monument of unageing intellect." In the ideal world of intellect, spirit and art, his soul will be definitely transformed into a golden bird singing upon a golden bough of Byzantium. He would become himself one of the monuments which he admired a lot. An old man's liberation from the sensual world is possible merely by admitting himself into the realm of intellect, spirit, and art of Byzantium.

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