

## *A Mysticism Approach to Yeats' Byzantium*

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**Abstract:** William Butler Yeats is the most famous poet in the history of modern Irish literature. He is called 'the greatest poet of our time' by T.S Eliot. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925. He has a strong interest in mysticism and has made unremitting exploration of it throughout his life. Mysticism is an important source of Yeats's life creation. From the early collection of Irish folklore and mythology to the formation of the later mysterious system, Yeats constructed his own set of mythological systems. Yeats' mysticism is particularly evident in his poem 'Byzantium'. His poems are full of mystery due to the combination of Irish folk mythology, Swedish mysticism philosophy, Judaism and Christian doctrine, Indian Buddhist thought, ancient Greek and ancient Egyptian mythology and other factors. Among them, his poems are famous for the symbol of Oriental mysticism. This paper makes a detailed interpretation of 'Byzantine' and then implements the analysis of this masterpiece in each section. Based on this analysis, this paper focuses on the interpretation of mysticism in poetry and its impact in order to achieve a better understanding of the mysticism embodied in poetry and provide a valuable reference for future research on related issues.

**Keywords:** Yeats, Poetry, Byzantine, Mysticism

### 1. Introduction

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, when the spiritual crisis of modernity was gradually aggravated with the rationalism dominated by scientism, people tried to make two choices: on the one hand, they used literature, art and other means to express the crisis in different degrees; Fighting it in every way, including the above. In the view of hermeneutics, the means of expression itself becomes an effective act of resistance and rebellion. In other words, on the one hand, people's creation is the expression of the dilemma of "modernity"; on the other hand, this expression constitutes the rebellion and dissolution of "modernity", which causes the spiritual crisis. The Irish

poet William Butler Yeats was one of the representations in this era to struggle with the spiritual crisis of modernity. His unique way of fighting and the resulting efforts to save himself from the plight of others (his nation) have a high humanistic value.

In a dilemma, Yeats began to transcend the paradox of modernity and rescue the human spirit in poetic art, and the main means of his poetic creation had obvious mystical characteristics. Nevertheless, due to his complex relationship with the times and the nation, it can be seen that the scepticism of modern British philosophy, the traditional aristocracy and the mysticism of Ireland and England together contributed to the strong mysticism of Yeats' poetry. The poet completed the transcendence of paradox and self-salvation and used poetry and spiritual cultivation to build a unique alternative religious belief of non-Christ [1].

This paper uses the method of literary analysis to analyse and explore the mysticism embodied in Yeats' Byzantine poem. Apart from that, based on the contributions made by the predecessors in this related topic, the article analyses and studies from different perspectives and then draws on some new things. Moreover, this paper aims to explore the 'immortal soul' defined by Yeats through the mysticism reflected in the author's 'Byzantine'. As Fu Hao stated in his article "Yeats' Mysterious Philosophy and Its Influence on Literary Creation", the knowledge and practice of mysterious philosophy provided Yeats with a rich theoretical foundation of symbolism and symbolism in his early creation and provided his late creation not only with superficial metaphors but also with a deep philosophical background, thus perfecting his self-justified personal myth. Mysticism practice method is always related to his literary creation process. These extremely personal 'secret' factors not only determine the external style of his works but also affect the internal texture so that he can be unique in the history of modern literature. 'Apart from that, Wu Lan focused on the interpretation of mysticism in poetry and the convergence of Eastern and Western cultural images.

## 2. Background of Byzantium and Yeats

From the 1880s to the 1930s, William Butler Yeats has been influential and productive in the English literary world. He has an infinitive passion for creativity and a high artistic standard that has grown over time. As well as writing poems, he also started the Irish Literary Revival with his friends. They set up Abbey Theatre and contributed to the Irish War of Independence in their own way. Because of his contribution and reputation, he served as a member of Parliament of the Irish Free State after it was independent.

Two of Yeats' poems have the word "Byzantium" in their title: *Sailing to Byzantium* and *Byzantium*. The latter is a further elaboration of the former. Both are generally recognised as masterpieces.

*Sailing to Byzantium* and *Byzantium* were published in 1927 and 1932 separately. By this time, Yeats was over 60 years old. In 1922, he was elected to Parliament, and in 1923, he won the Nobel laureates in literature. Before *Byzantium* was written, he suffered from lung congestion. In 1930, after being healed from the deadly Malta Fever, he started to write *Sailing to Byzantium*. His poem writing skills and repetition have already reached the apex, but unfortunately, he was in his old age. His poems of *Byzantium* showed his attitude towards approaching death: only an immortal soul could resist the mortal body. That is his combined understanding of poetry and philosophy, which was successful.

From Yeats' perspective, the underlying motivation of the world's developments is contradictions between opposites. The main point of artistic creation is integrating opposites. Yeats' motivation for writing poems is the contradictions between mind and self (spirits and flesh): the mind longs for immortality, but the self is engrossed in individual desires. Artists should put relentless effort into creating their masterpieces to seek after an intense and pure spiritual realm as

fire. For the souls imbedded in these beautiful creations to experience eternal existence, the mind should transcend self-imposed limitations and master self.

The ancient Greek city Byzantium has its origin in a myth that contains opposition. A Greek prince and son of Poseidon were given a Delphi Oracle to set out on a voyage, which said he would find what he wanted opposite a group of blind men. When he arrived at Golden Horn Bay, he found the land on the shore was a perfect place to build a city, and when he looked across to the other side and found that a city had already been built there, he understood the meaning of the oracle: how could any other than a group of blind men give up such a privileged position and choose the other side?

In the book *A Vision*, Yeats mentioned, “I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato”[2]. He believes that in early Byzantium, life was religious, aesthetic and practical. Artists were impersonal. They did not impart personal will to their own works. They were immersed in their subject matter and created for all human beings. Their works seemed to be done by one and shared the same image [3].

Thus, when Yeats wrote the title of his poem *Sailing to Byzantium*, he did not want to visit the city now called Istanbul but rather to show his search for an ideal state of existence and artistic expression that would bring together various opposites, which means artists overcome the opposition of mind and self, unites their thoughts and behaviours, and creates works of art with the complete beauty while integrating the “unity of being”.

### 3. Analysis of Imagery in *Byzantium*

Both imagery and diction are very important components of poetry; Yeats recorded the germ of this poem in a diary entry at the end of April 1930. Obviously, compared with *Sailing to Byzantium* under a full moon phase in the poem, *Byzantium*’s time was set five hundred years back. It came to this phase, which is the fifth phase of the two-thousand-year cycle of the Christian faith; the classical culture has been fading like the dim night star; however, the original religious power reached its peak, and cathedral bells resounded through the sea under the starlight. Based on this background, there will be a detailed analysis of Byzantine and the mysticism of Yeats, exploring this poem’s fantastical imagery and precise diction. As the scholar Fu Hao commented on Yeats: “His knowledge and practice of mystical philosophy provided a rich theoretical foundation of symbolism and symbolism for Yeats’s early works, and not only provided superficial metaphor but also endowed deep philosophical background for his later works, thus improving his self-justified personal myth [4].”

In the first stanza, the poet makes a general statement about Byzantium a thousand years ago by using three opposing sets of things: secular, religious and artistic. In the first and second lines, the guards, who are the protection and rule of the city, are drunk and asleep. Moreover, the chaos of the day was not dealt with, and the drunken soldiers were part of the chaos as well. All of these were indicative of the loose discipline of the army and the disorder of the city. In these two lines, the guard and the urban order constitute a secular and political opposition; It is worth mentioning that by calling the daytime scene “images”, Yeats also conveys the idea that the real world is a phantom compared with the higher and more constant world of the soul. In the third and fourth lines, the “night resonance” is the song of the night walkers and the chiming of the cathedral bell, which represents the religious power governing the spiritual aspect of people, and the night walkers; judging from the first draft, we inference they refer to prostitutes. The religion of asceticism and the prostitute who instructs to indulge in lust constitute the religious opposition; In the last four lines, the star-lit or moonlit dome, referring to the dome of Sophia Cathedral as a masterpiece of immortal art, disdains the paradoxical mix of mortals. This is the artistic opposition between an immortal

work of art and a mortal body that is a natural thing and will die eventually. By the way, starlight and moonlight are important symbols in mysticism, and we think that it also represents the mysterious natural forces watching over the immortal works of art. They are the embodiment of the goddess and have some connection with the mysticism advocated by Yeats. In short, Byzantium was not a paradise at this time but a city full of contradictions and trapped in a state of natural sleep in this stanza.

In the second stanza, Yeats mentions image and shade, which are the subject of intense study by Yeats, who is proficient in metaphysics and the occult. In “Anima Mundi” and “A Vision”, Yeats gives a detailed exposition of the world stratification and transformation relationship between the living and the dead, the material and the spirit [5]. He believed that ghosts are the spirits of people after death, a gaseous existence. The phantom is a gaseous projection in front of the mind of a prophet or artist. It is neither a ghost nor a human form; it is a manifestation of collective wisdom and abstract ideas. Yeats was most strongly influenced by Nietzsche’s ideas, and there is clear evidence of this, for example, in referring to the apparitions of the soul as superhuman, and the “death-in-life and life-in-death” is also used in the *Aeneid* to describe Aeneas who transcends life and death with a golden bough. The mouth that has “no moisture and no breath” here refers not to the breathless mouth of the dead but to the state of meditation or trance when the human soul comes out of the flesh without breathing, to the breath-holding mouth of the living, to artists and prophets who enter into a state of self-forgetfulness. In addition, Yeats uses a high degree of musical beauty in the rhythm and content of this verse to achieve hypnotic and incantation effects. It is worth mentioning that Yeats, who is good at using “symbols”, is believed to have taken on the sacred task of conveying the secrets of the universe, so he wrote the images of poetry from the perspective of “magic”[6].

After a simple observation, it can be found that there are parallel sentence patterns and expressions in the second and third stanzas. In the description of the process of seeing visions and obtaining artistic inspiration in the meditating state, Yeats began to describe and display the corresponding works of art, the complete embodiment of beauty, after displaying the phantom of “superman”. Just as the apparition of “superman” is neither a man nor a ghost, the “bird or golden handiwork” is neither a bird nor an artefact; it is something more magical than birds and artefacts. Like Nietzsche, Yeats also regarded art as the highest form of existence and was meaningful only under aesthetic observation. Beauty was the only outlet from the mundane world. Ancient Greek artisans made legendary mechanical birds that sang automatically, which are not natural objects. It is an immortal being perched on a branch of gold and has the power to awaken the dead like the male crows of Hades, which means that the perfect work of art will evoke passion and inspiration again and again in the eyes of later generations. “the star-lit golden bough” show the temporal background. Starlight is the weak star of the millennium cycle of traditional power, and moonlight is the millennium cycle of the most powerful religious month. In Yeats’ theory, the moon is the symbol of subjectivity, and religion suppresses subjectivity, so the moon is not bright. The golden bird has the power of awakening but also has the power of mocking and mocking the earthly world of rapid growth and decay of natural things. The golden bird of the immortal soul is a creature of wisdom and passion, a transcendent being as bright as the moon in the dark ages.

The fourth and fifth stanzas are closely related so that they can be analysed together. The fourth stanza ostensibly depicts the ghost dancing on the stone floor of Byzantine night, burning the fire of purgatory, shedding all the complex earthly concerns and being purified, they can ride dolphins to the other side of heaven. This is the ancient Greek and Roman myth. In the poem, he juxtaposes this image with the image of a goldsmith forging a golden bird, as well as the image of a ghost dancing in the fire of purgatory with the image of a goldsmith achieving spiritual transcendence in the process of artistic creation. Marble was widely used in Byzantine city buildings, and the emperor’s

stone floor could be either the ground on street corners or the stone floor on gold workshops. The term “blood-begotten spirits” is even more interesting. Suppose it is the ghost of the dead; in that case, there is no need to add an adjective, so it is also likely to describe the following scene: In the creation process of goldsmiths, the soul danced in opposition with the body, broke away from the body, got rid of the bondage of self-consciousness, became a ghost and saw the phantom of superman, which inspired by some intellectual existence in the collective unconscious, was ignited the flame of inspiration and created extraordinary works of art. “Dying into a dance, An agony of trance, An agony of flame” are the three steps of soul purification and transcendence. This is also in line with what he has always believed: the tragic heroes in ancient Greek tragedies tried their best to fight against the unchangeable fate, saw the truth of life in the failure, fell into a trance of pain, and finally gave up themselves, but achieved transcendence by giving up. It has also been suggested in the mystic world that these images are actual scenes that Yeats saw during his meditation.

The fifth stanza of the imagery of Raphael sculpture opened; however, according to some researchers, there is no Raphael sculpture of a dolphin carrying a ghost across the sea. Yeats may have referred to another sculpture of a dolphin or another mural of a related subject, but it may also be a combination of memories. The purified ghost is carried or can harness the dolphin, the incarnation of the primal impulse of life, across the sea of senses that merges all life consciousness to the other side. This image is immediately transformed in the second line into the image of the goldsmith entering eternity through the work of art created in his hands. Dolphin waves in the sea of the senses when the mortal goldsmith dances on the marble floor of the Gold workshop in the transcendental dance of the soul, which separates the waves of sense consciousness and desire. There were medieval clerics who said God had sealed fields full of flowers, wooded mountains, fish and melting snow in marble. Because of its fine and smooth texture of fusion, marble is also often used in Yeats’s poetry to point to the fusion and transcendence of the soul, the immortal and the divine. The last three lines of the poem, generally regarded as the greatest lines in the history of English literature, present the process of the artist overcoming self-limitations with a magnificent image to create perfect works of art and achieve immortality on the sea of all life consciousness, showing the transcendence of the beauty of art to the ordinary and the redemption of life. “dolphin-torn” and “gong-tormented sea” means the sea of life consciousness is in perpetual turmoil, disturbed by two opposing forces: the dolphin, representing the life instinct and the primal impulse, and the bell, representing the religious power. The aesthetic existence and the pursuit of immortal artistic creation are the ways to transcend the material world. The creative efforts of generations of people generate images of this sea. Ancient Greek goldsmiths, golden birds and marble sculptures containing images of dolphins inspired Yeats’s Byzantine poems. Additionally, the dolphin, representing the divine messengers in mysticism, also carries Yeats’s fantasy and longing for another world. In William Empson’s paper, on some such grounds, we even can admit the presence of the Christian God the Father [7]. “In the mediumistic condition”, said Yeats (A Vision III. 8), “it sometimes seems as if dreams awoke and yet remained dreams” this also reflects Yeats’s mysticism and the reality of the world he saw in the dreamland.

#### 4. Results

Yeats uses much religious imagery in his poetry, creating a world independent of reality for his readers through his highly divine imagery. This not only adds a touch of obscurity to Yeats’ poetry but also creates a unique logical structure within the poetry and the poet’s way of understanding the world. For example, Yeats explained himself in his essay, “I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed”[8]. Although the world imaged by Yeats’ poetry is unrelated



to any part of the real world, it reflects the facts of human existence and realistic social conditions. For example, the “drunken soldiers” mentioned in the poem reflect the chaotic urban order. The ringing of the bells in the night represents the invasion and oppression of the individual freedom of humans by religion. The beginning of the poem “Byzantium” was used by Yeats to represent the society of that time; perhaps out of avoidance of scientism and rationalism, Yeats chose to use another more unique and mysterious narrative style to present the world of the present.

Secondly, after the connection between the world of the poem and the real world is over, the main character of the poem chooses to escape from reality, which is also an expression of the pain that real life brings to human beings to some extent. At this stage, Yeats uses “meditation” to imagine the exit of his real world and utopia. According to Miss Murphy’s comment, she said “Blood-begotten spirits probably human ghosts who, haunting the flame-mosaic pavement, are purged of their complexities of fury by its grandeur [9]. The phrase describing them is a parenthesis so that the account of the flames begotten of flame continues as ‘Dying into a dance’.” It is also here that the poem is not only linked to reality but also to art. This leap in thinking is reasonable to the very mysterious imagination mode itself. The utopia Yeats chose is ancient Greek mythology, which is also part of mysticism. This mythology expresses a philosophical view of existence which is that art is the highest form of existence; it is also the goal that the main character of the poem has been pursuing. This attitude toward life, art and forms of existence determines the depth of this poem.

Thirdly, Yeats returns to discuss mysticism once again. He discusses the pleasure a soul can have and expresses the extent of this pleasure in a concrete way. This soul is free from reality and transcends self-consciousness, which is a philosophical relationship between body and consciousness, and it is clear that in Yeats’s poem, it is possible for consciousness to transcend the body. Moreover, the time of human existence is not just confined to the physical body, which is a rebellion against scientific thinking, and it also expresses Yeats’ attitude toward death that only an immortal soul can resist a dead body.

Finally, out of escape from the vast world of science and the dominance of religious ideology, mysticism became the only way for the author to imagine a utopia, while in the world of mysticism, he expresses in an unfettered consciousness his attitude towards living and death and the value forms of human existence. It can be said that the value of the poem “Byzantium” lies not only in its close connection with the social context but also in the fact that it involves many other areas of reflection, such as philosophy, which provide the reader with more room for interpretation. Moreover, Paul said, “The kind of belief that involves consent, however, allowed Yeats to experiment with modes of exploration that many of his readers still find dubious...Imagining doubt allows Yeats to ponder different kinds of belief and their significance to his work”[10]. From the beginning to the end, the poem is very richly layered and interlocked, with mysticism throughout, which in turn coats the poem with a unique charm.

## 5. Conclusions

This research analyses some specific images of poetry from the perspective of mysticism according to Yeats’ personal background and social background. According to Yeats, when he was young, he was interested in three things: a literary form, a philosophical idea, and a national belief. Yeats has always adhered to the faith of his youth, integrating philosophical thoughts into national beliefs, transforming them into symbols representing the emotions and beliefs of the whole nation, and interpreting and eulogising the great motherland. The inexhaustible ancient and sacred traditions of the Irish have created the inexhaustible great poet Yeats in literary history, and Yeats himself has become the spokesman of the Irish with his immortal poems for Ireland.

The poet integrated three pairs of things, body and spirit, short and eternal, reality and dream, into a complete thought so that Byzantium achieved the balance of aesthetics, spirit, politics and society. As the peak of human civilisation, Byzantium is an ideal place for the harmony and unity of spirit and material, art and politics and religion, and individual and society. Therefore, the poet took Byzantium as the anchor of the spirit, moving from the lax and declining real world to the brilliant and harmonious ideal world, leaving the world behind, away from the stupidity of the mind, getting rid of the bondage of the body, and pursuing the eternity of art and spirit.

The attraction of Byzantine brilliant art to poets is only superficial, and its deep intention is to use the past to describe the present, hoping that Ireland can have the brilliance of Byzantine in the Middle Ages and then become the centre of world civilisation.

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