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Poetry Seminar

Essay #1

A Bemuddled Contrast of Human Mortality with Keatsian Immortality  
Through Diction, Imagery, and Symbolism  
In Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium"

William Butler Yeats' lyric poem "Sailing to Byzantium," written in four eight-line stanzas in iambic pentameter, has been called endlessly interpretable, and perhaps even the title itself is endlessly interpretable. Byzantium, present-day Istanbul, no longer exists as it once did, but during the fifth and sixth centuries, it was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. Byzantium stood proud as a center for art and intellect, and even as late as 1926, the publication date of Yeats' poem, one could easily discover remnants of the rich city in museums throughout Europe. The city lived on through the permanence of its art such as its famous gold mosaics, though it eventually decayed itself. How then would the speaker aim to "Sail... to Byzantium" if it no longer remains? Sailing is suggestive of a journey subject to the perils of the sea, much like life is subject to the perils of fate, but by sailing with a purpose to Byzantium, the speaker of

Yeats' poem may hope to achieve immortality as the great city had. Still, sailing is wrought with the unknown and a vitality. Therefore, the poem's title itself gives a first glimpse at the confusing contrast presented by the speaker between mortality and immortality, the transient natural and eternal art. How can one be sailing, journeying, living and still hope for the final destination to be this immortality of Byzantium? The speaker explores this inherent paradox through the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" by showing the contrast between the metaphorical journey of life and the possibility of eternity through careful diction, inventive imagery, and compelling symbolism.

The speaker begins by describing and even lamenting the sensual aspects of mortality, his fate. Yeats describes the transient nature of vitality by sharply contrasting the "young/ In one another's arms" (lines 1 - 2) or the sensual aspects of youth with "Those dying generations" (line 3) in just three lines. This reminds the reader that though a man may be young once, generations of men have died before and so will this young man also die eventually. Yeats' clever choice of diction allows the monosyllabic and alliterative "Fish, flesh, or fowl" (line 5) to bring to mind the choppy, abrupt nature of life itself. The staccato-like rhythm of the phrases used, especially in the first stanza of the poem, allow the reader to experience the pulsing of mortal life. And all of these "Fish, flesh...fowl" (line 5) remember well whatever is born and whatever dies, but they

“neglect/ Monuments of unageing intellect” (lines 7 - 8). Truly all mortal entities praise new members of the cycle of life, and they remember often quite fondly those that come to the close of the gyre of life to make room for the newborns; however, mortality and life give rise to disregard for that which is permanent in the world. Change is vital to mortality and overshadows the power of unchanging immortality.

Yeats further employs imagery to explore the mortality which is so sickening yet so seductive and inescapable for the speaker. The first stanza paints a picture of life with its youth, vitality, disorder, reproduction of the spawning “salmon-falls” (line 4), and final decay and then death. In the second stanza, he then captures the image of a man in his final years not as a kind old soul but rather as a decaying, repulsive “tattered coat upon a stick” (line 10). This lifeless shell of an “aged man” (line 9), analogous to a scarecrow who is of little consequence and only “but a paltry thing” (line 9), reveals the speaker's statement about the agony of the old age to which his mortality has condemned him; after all, “Whatever is begotten...dies” (line 6). The speaker fears that life is only a means to death, and that after one has died, there is no permanent mark left. There can be nothing immortal about humanity, about mortality. He believes that one can be productive no more after one's life has ended, and so the speaker of “Sailing to Byzantium” strives for an undying permanence. He asks that his heart be “consume[d]...away” (line 21) as it is “fastened to a

dying animal" (line 22). The speaker wants his soul, his mortality, to be absorbed into the permanent mosaic art of some ancient wall. The image of the "dying animal" to which his soul is bound presents the idea that the speaker's inner desires are being dragged about by some sick, aged beast. By the curse of mortality, the speaker is unable to free himself or his true soul from this beast, his own mortal body.

Through a pervasive symbolism of birds and of song, Yeats further develops this disgusting mortality of the speaker in "Sailing to Byzantium." The "birds in the trees/ - Those dying generations" (lines 2 – 3) are high-perched in long trees, but those trees are unable to reach the skies of immortality. The spiraling branches must finally expire, as the trees too are only mortal; such trees serve to contrast with the fact that the birds and also the trees are in fact dying. They are moving through the cycle of life from youth to old-age, "Caught in that sensual music [of mortality]" (line 7). The symbolic singing of life is again recalled in the second stanza of the poem, when the speaker declares that he would rather study monuments of significance and permanence like those found in Byzantium than attend the "singing school" (line 13) which sings "For every tatter in... mortal dress" (line 12). Living fully and rejoicing in vitality and ordinary life is secondary to embracing permanence for this speaker, who is hungry for the immortality of the unravished bride upon a forgotten Grecian urn and ready to reject his mortal roots. The speaker wishes to sail the sea to

Byzantium, escape to a world of permanence, and transform himself into a work of art – one that mortal after mortal and even a “drowsy Emperor” (line 29) can enjoy.

This immortality, which is so sought after by the speaker in the poem, is intensified by Yeats' choice and style of language, which purposefully contrasts with the language he uses to portray mere mortality. The flowing words which describe the eternal are decoratively polysyllabic rather than mono- or duosyllabic. The speaker yearns after “Monuments of unageing intellect” (line 8) and the “gold enamelling” (line 28) of the world of art represented by the magnificence of the old city Byzantium. The immortal art has been witnessed by many generations of mortals, yet as it is ageless, the art is still fresh to new eyes. But even art is susceptible to the decay of time, so one has to wonder whether it is possible to achieve the immortality for which the speaker so strives. Perhaps even the glorious art of “the holy city of Byzantium” (line 16) is mortal in a sense.

Yet the poem persists in its plea for immortality through images of the supposed grandeur of endless life and the furthering of the symbols of bird and song. The speaker believes that once he is immortal, he will take “such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make/ Of hammered gold” (lines 27 – 28). Perhaps he believes that unheard melodies are sweeter, but the bride upon the Grecian urn was never able to finish the kiss with her lover. She

was never able to immerse herself in living, but rather she was forced to remain in a single moment forever, never moving forward, and never achieving her purpose. Is this Keatsian form the one which the speaker would like to take as he neglects the “form from any natural thing” (line 26)? The speaker forgets that his saviors, the “sages standing...in the gold mosaic of a wall” (lines 17 – 18), are simply that; they are men which are forever wise and also forever old. He wants the sages to appear and take him from his body into an existence outside of time like a piece of great art. The speaker wishes to exist in the “artifice of eternity” (line 24), but his sages are unable to help him in this endeavor. They are “standing” yet never able to gather him into their eternity. They are entrapped in the gold mosaic of a wall that may one day be demolished for the building of a new shopping center. The gold represents an untarnished brilliance, but it is just as easily melted or displaced as life itself; the sages are immortal only in the sense that they will forever be frozen in time until the day they perish or are destroyed. At least life has not left the speaker frozen in a single time before his day of decay. What is it exactly that the speaker in the poem really desires: a permanent sense of self or his mortality to a fuller degree?

The symbolism derived to describe mortality is reused to depict immortality, muddling the distinction between that which the speaker actually desires even further. The speaker declares his desire to become

hammered into art which is in the shape of a bird, which would “set upon a golden bough to sing” (line 30). The melody of a golden bird, however, would not be heard. Birdsong is produced by “Those dying generations” (line 3), not by some inanimate block of gold that has been shaped to take the form of a “natural thing” (line 26), which the confused speaker believes he dislikes so much. Furthermore, the speaker himself used the bird to symbolize the transient nature of mortality, yet here is the speaker's final desire in the last lines of the poem to become a bird which will sing – a symbol of its ability to change and live – to the nobility of Byzantium. Byzantium itself, timeless as the speaker thinks it is, has crumpled. The bird he wishes to become will also decay should it have the ability to sing. Has the speaker come full circle and now wishes to live in the sensual world? After all, to be stuck forever in a state of permanence is not so romantic as it first seems. The “sages [must] stand... in God's holy fire” (line 17) as perhaps they are martyrs being burned for their faith, but because they are immortal within the gold mosaic, these old men must be forever old and forever burning to their death. Similarly the unravished bride will never know true love and will never be married. The speaker instead wants to sing beautifully to the living as a mortal would, contradicting his previous lament. He wishes to sing “Of what is past, or passing, or to come” (line 32). That is, the speaker wants to chirp sweetly about the past, the present, and even the future- the changing time which

cannot be experienced by the sages burning in the fire.

The speaker in Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" has then encountered a paradox. He wishes to strive for the permanence of art, yet he also has desires to be immersed in the changing nature of life. He is seduced by his own mortal sensuality, but he is aware of his intellectual powers. He feels the transitory nature of life, yet he yearns for a permanent sense of self which will not end. The speaker enjoys the thrills of youth, but he likely understands that he is ageing and eventually even his intellect will decay. Nature, such as the singing of birds, traps him, and still the art of Byzantium calls out to him. Each of these opposing forces appeals to him, but though they are opposing, they mutually depend upon one another. Youth cannot exist without age, and the transient cannot exist without the tensioned concept of the eternal. As in Yeats' "The Lover Tells of the Rose in His Heart," the speaker longs to remake the world, or at least his own personal world, into a "casket of gold" to eliminate any imperfections, but he cherishes those imperfections simultaneously.

Is William Butler Yeats equivocal to the speaker so cleverly masked in his "Sailing to Byzantium?" The speaker, after all, desires to transform himself into a work of art that will last forever, obscuring the distinction between form and content, the artist and his work. Through his poetry perhaps Yeats too desired his own permanence, his own immortality, while still enjoying natural life and its changing course. Yeats then may have



solved the paradox which he explores through "Sailing to Byzantium." He was able to immerse himself in his own life while still striving for permanence through his art, his poems such as this one. "Sailing to Byzantium" tells of the journey of the speaker's searching soul, but applied to Yeats' life it tells of the journey of a poet reaching for immortality through his poetry.