

**Poetry**  
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**William Butler Yeats**

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## William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

- Historical and Literary Context
- W. B. Yeats
- “The Second Coming” (1920)
- Analysis
- An Interrogative Reading
- “Sailing to Byzantium” (1928)
- Analysis
- A Platonic Reading



The first modernist poet that we see is William Butler Yeats who lived between 1865 and 1939. We will pay attention to historical and Literary context; see the life of Yeats briefly and then analyse two poems “The Second Coming” and “Sailing to Byzantium.” We will offer two readings, special critical readings for these poems.

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## Historical and Literary Context

- Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian cultural climate
- Irish Rebellions (1916, 1920)
- Irish Independence (1922)
- World War I (1914-1918)
- World War II (1939-1945)
- Persistence of Romantic and Victorian Poetry
- Modernist movement led by Ezra Pound
- Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922)
- James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922)
- Yeats’s *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921)
- Yeats’s *A Tower* (1928)



When we come to the Historical and Literary Context, we see that Victorian Poetry was there, Edwardian and Georgian cultural climate was there. We have Irish Rebellions in 1916, 1920 and then Irish Independence in 1922. We have also these two great World Wars; First World War and Second World War.

In spite of all this, in literary terms we find the persistence of Romantic and Victorian Poetry, in Edwardian and Georgian Poetry and against which we have this modernist movement led by Ezra Pound. We have key text of this modernist period in Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and when it comes to novel, we have James Joyce's 'Ulysses' and then we have Yeats's own poems 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer' and we also notice Yeats's 'A Tower.'

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## Two Poems: Context



- "The Second Coming"
- A lyrical poem of 22 lines with two verse paragraphs
- Written in 1919 and published in 1920
- The theme of anarchy and uncertain future
- Title of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)
- "Sailing to Byzantium"
- A lyrical poem of 32 lines in 4 stanzas
- Written in 1926 and published in 1928
- Exploration of an alternative outlook on life
- Never visited Byzantium but saw the Byzantine art in Italy, read deeply into Byzantine history and culture



We will have some background information about these two poems, so that we can appreciate them much better. "The Second Coming" is a lyrical poem of 22 lines with two verse paragraphs. It was written in 1919 and published in 1920. Yeats deals with the theme of anarchy and uncertain future in this poem. This poem has given the title for Achebe's famous novel 'Things Fall Apart' published in 1958.

Next poem is "Sailing to Byzantium" which has 32 lines in 4 stanzas. It is also a lyrical poem written in 1926 and published in 1928. It explores the alternative outlook on life. It appears that many modernist poets were looking for something elsewhere. In the case of Yeats, he never visited Byzantium but he saw the Byzantium Art in Italy, read deeply into Byzantium history and culture and he found some meaning in Byzantium Art.

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## The Second Coming - I



Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere 5  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.



## The Second Coming - II



Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, 20  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?



First let us read this poem “The Second Coming.”

‘Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The Falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert,

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds,

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle



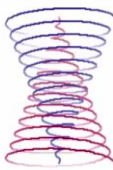
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

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## Thematic Contrast

- Center and Periphery
- Order and Disorder
- Innocence and Experience
- The Best and the Worst
- Animal, Human and Divine
- Light and Darkness
- Birth and Death





The Thematic Contrast we have in this poem is between center and periphery, order and disorder, innocence and experience, the best and the worst kinds of people, animal, human, divine characteristics, light and darkness, birth and death. Here we have a picture of this gyre moving around which starts from one centre to the periphery and then it is a continuous moment.

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## Poetic Devices

- **Allusion:** The Second Coming (title)
- **Asso/Allit:** Turning and turning in the widening gyre (1)
- **Consonance:** blood-dimmed tide is loosed (5)
- **Symbol:** the falcon (2) - the world
- **Allusion:** The second coming (10, 11) - return of Christ
- **Symbol:** desert birds (17) - death
- **Symbol:** a shape with lion body - sphinx (14) - Anti-Christ
- **Symbol:** darkness (18) - chaos
- **Alliteration:** darkness drops (18), stony sleep (19)
- **Symbol:** sleep (19) - death



We have a number of poetic devices in this poem like Allusion: ‘The Second Coming,’ the title itself is a kind of reference to The Second Coming of Christ. We have Assonance and Alliteration, both in the same line ‘turning and turning in the widening gyre.’ Consonance,

we have in ‘blood-dimmed tide is loosed.’ We have indicated the Consonance through the highlight ‘d’ with red colour; similarly, in the previous line we have indicated assonance through blue colour and alliteration through underlining.

We have a symbol in the falcon and also the world. The Allusion, as he said earlier, is the second coming referring to the return of Christ and then, we have symbols in the desert birds referring to death and the symbol again in the shape with lion body-sphinx perhaps referring to Anti-Christ. We have symbol again for darkness in terms of chaos. And then we have alliteration: darkness drops, stony sleep. This stony sleep further has another one device called transferred epithet. Then we have symbol of this sleep for death.

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## Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

- **Occasional partial rhymes:** hold, world, man, sun
  - **Repetition of words:** turning, surely, second coming
  - **Line Length:** Average of 10 syllables in each line
  - **Meter:** iambic pentameter with variations
- Turning | and tur | ning in | the wi | dening | gyre (5+)
- The fal | con can | not hear | the fal | coner; (5)
- Things fall | apart; | the centre | cannot | hold; (4+)
- Mere a | narchy | is loosed | upon | the world, (5)
- **Trochee:** Turning; **Spondee:** Things fall;



We have some occasional partial rhymes in this poem: hold, world, man, sun. We have a number of repetitions of words in turning, surely, second coming. The line length is ten syllables in an average in every line. Then we have this iambic pentameter with many variations. Despite the fact that Yeats is a modernist poet, he used iambic pentameter whereas Pound wanted to break this Iambic pentameter.

Let us see these four lines here. We have indicated the number of feet in brackets five plus, four plus means, there we have the variation:

“Turning and tur|ning in|the wi|dening|gyre, (5+)

The fal|con can|not hear|the fal|coner; (5)

Things fall|apart;|the centre|cannot|hold; (4+)

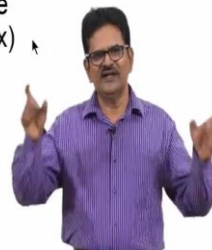
Mere a|narchy|is loosed|upon|the world.” (5)

We have variation in this meter, trochee we have, spondee we have, trochee in ‘turning,’ spondee in ‘things fall.’

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### Overall Impression

- “The Second Coming” questions the relevance divine redemption for human beings in the wake of WW I and the failure of the First Coming of Christ.
- Yeats was profoundly concerned with the sufferings of the Irish in the hands of the British, both of which were not saved either by Catholic or Protestant forms of Christianity.
- The First World War further signified the arrival of the great violent and aggressive beastly creature (sphinx) which could not bring peace but destruction and bloodshed.
- The poet interrogates the Western civilization which failed to create a peaceful social order through its central religious and cultural beliefs.



To give an overall understanding of this poem, we can say as follows, “The Second Coming” questions the relevance of divine redemption for human beings in the wake of the First World War and the failure of the First Coming of Christ. Christ came to the world to redeem humanity but the world wars did not indicate the real meaning of the Coming of Christ. Yeats was profoundly concerned with the sufferings of the Irish people in the hands of the British, both of which were not saved either by Catholic religion or by Protestant religion.

Both are forms of Christianity, it is a clear case of this failure of religion to protect the people. The First World War further signified the arrival of the great violent and aggressive beastly creature (sphinx) which could not bring peace but destruction and bloodshed throughout Europe. The poet interrogates the Western civilization which failed to create a peaceful social order through its central religious and cultural beliefs.



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## An Interrogative Reading

- Why do 36 poems of Yeats end with questions?
- “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” (TSC)
- H R Jauss holds that lyric is monologic but Feldman argues that Yeats makes his lyrics dialogic through questions.
- The Yeatsian poem is “an interrogative lyric that presents knowledge as a form of dialogical engagement”
- The knowledge created by the poet and the reader is hybrid knowledge.
- Interrogative poetry reveals what we know and more importantly what we do not know
- We become one with the poet by sharing our knowledge to complement the poet's. (Feldman, 2014)



We have an interrogative reading of this poem or all the poems of Yeats by Feldman. He raises a question, why do thirty-six poems of Yeats end with questions? It seems he has counted all the poems which have questions at the end. So here he says “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” He takes this as a question for his discussion.

Another critic H. R. Jauss holds that lyric is monologic but Feldman argues that Yeats makes his lyrics dialogic through questions; using questions in his poems has given Yeats a chance for dialogue with the readers with humanity. The Yeatsian poem is “An interrogative lyric that presents knowledge as a form of dialogical engagement.”

The knowledge created by the poet and the reader is hybrid knowledge. It is a mixed knowledge. Interrogative poetry reveals what we know and more importantly what we do not know that why Yeats is a great poet. We become one with the poet by sharing our knowledge to complement the poet says, Feldman in his article published in 2014. So, this kind of interrogative reading of Yeats poetry is useful to understand how readers also contribute, compliment meanings to poems.



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## Sailing to Byzantium - I



**That is no country for old men.** The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,  
—Those dying generations—at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long 5  
**Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.**  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect.



## Sailing to Byzantium - II



**An aged man is but a paltry thing,**  
**A tattered coat upon a stick,** unless 10  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
**Monuments of its own magnificence;**  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come 15  
To the holy city of Byzantium.



### Sailing to Byzantium - III



O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.           20  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into **the artifice of eternity.**



### Sailing to Byzantium - IV



Once out of nature I shall never take           25  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing           32  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.



Let us move onto the next poem, Sailing to Byzantium.

“That is no country for old men. The young

In one another's arms, birds in the trees,

- Those dying generations- at their song,

The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,

Fish, flesh or fowl, comment all summer long

5

Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect.”  
An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless 10  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come 15  
To the holy city of Byzantium.  
O sages standing in God’s holy fire,  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul. 20  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal,  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.  
Once out of nature I shall never take 25  
My bodily form from any natural thing,

But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing 32  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.” vers libre

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### Thematic Contrast


- Youth and Old Age
- Birth and Death
- Emotion and Intellect
- Holy and Ugly
- Sages and Fornicators
- Time and Eternity
- Man, Animal, and Art
- Past and Future
- Body and Soul
- Art and Life




This poem has this thematic contrast between youth on the one hand and old age on the other, birth and death, emotion-intellect, holy and ugly, sages and fornicators; people who involve in sexual acts and controllably, then we have time and eternity, man, animal, art, past, present and future, body and soul. Finally, Yeats was always interested in the conflict between Art and life that is why we have a poem like this, which deals with art in art.

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**Poetic Devices**



- **Imagery:** nature, fertility; “The young  
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees” (2-3)
- **Alliteration:** fish, flesh, or fowl (5)
- **Metaphor:** An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick (9-10)
- **Consonance:** tattered coat upon a stick (10);
- **Assonance:** clap, hand (11),
- **Alliteration:** singing school but studying (13)  
monuments, magnificnce (14), sailed the seas (15)
- **Assonance:** To the holy city of Byzantium (16)
- **Allusion:** the Emperor and the golden bird (31-32)
- **Metaphor:** mental journey to Byzantium for a spiritual  
transcendence through art




These poetic devices contribute to an understanding of this poem, how this poem has been made into an art. We have the imagery of nature and fertility in these two lines “The young in one another’s arms, birds in the trees.” On the one hand human beings we have fornicating and on other hand we have birds in the trees singing. We have alliteration in fish, flesh or fowl. The metaphor is clearly seen in; an aged man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick. When we have a coat, torn coat on a stick, we can see the old man’s picture. Consonance, we have in tattered coat upon a stick. Assonance in clap and hand, alliteration again in signing school but studying, monuments of magnificence sailed the seas. Complex rhythmic pattern we have in this lines that is why we have highlighted and also underlined that means ‘m’ is one alliteration and ‘n’ is another kind of consonance.

Further we have consonance to the holy city of Byzantium. Allusion is there in the Emperor and the golden bird in mythical stories. We have the metaphor of ‘mental journey to Byzantium for a spiritual transcendence through art.’ Yeats quoted always through transcend this human life to reach a high level of life in art.

We must remember that, Yeats was trying to communicate through different kinds of medium that was available to him at that time through his wife. He was interested in astrology, he was interested in many kinds of images, symbols, he created his own symbols in a book called “A Vision.” He was always trying to communicate and understand the nature of life and transcend the limitations of life through art.


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## Rhyme, Rhythm and Meter



- **Stanza Form:** Ottava Rima (eight lines)
- Introduced to England by Thomas Wyatt; exploited by Lord Byron in *Don Juan*
- Four stanzas of eight lines each in blank verse
- **Rhyme:** ABA, BAB, CC; young, trees, song; seas long, dies; neglect, intellect (Stanza I)
- **Meter:** Iambic pentameter with variations

That is | no coun | try for | old men. | The young →  
In one | ano | ther's arms, | birds in | the trees,  
—Those dy | ing ge | nera | tions—at | their song,  
The sal | mon-falls, | the ma | ckerel-crow | ded seas.



Let us see the rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. The stanza form of this poem is called Ottava Rima, it has eight lines and this form was introduced to England by Thomas Wyatt, our Elizabethan poet, Sonneteer that we saw earlier. It was exploited further by Lord Byron in his famous poem 'Don Juan.'

This poem has four stanzas of eight lines each in blank verse. We have rhyme; this is represented in ABA, BAB, CC. So, ABA, the middle line B starts the next set B and then we have CC. We have young, trees, sing, seas long, dies, neglect, intellect in Stanza one. We have Iambic pentameter with many variations:

“That is no country for old men, the young

In one another's arms, birds in the trees.

Those dying generations at their song,

The salmon- falls, the mackerel-crowded seas.



We have this enjambment as well. That is why we have indicated 'the young in one another's arms.' We also have full stop in the middle of the first line: 'That is not country for old men.' End-stop we have but this line continues there after this stop, strong stop. We have also caesura in 'one another's arms.'



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### Overall Impression

- The poem deals with the theme of ageing and the soul's aspiration for transcendence into art.
- An old man has an option to feel depressed on seeing an unfit country of passionately living men and women but then he can choose to sail to the city of great art and become immortal.
- The poet asserts that the human spirit can achieve immortality through the Byzantine art of painted/sculpted sages and birds singing to the audience.
- Yeats sings his vision of eternal life beyond the sickness of life through a search for healing in "an artifice of eternity."



Here we have the overall understanding of this poem, the poem deals with the theme of ageing and the soul's aspiration for transcendence into art. An old man has an option to feel depressed on seeing an unfit country of passionately living men and women but then he can choose to sail to the city of great art and become immortal.

The poet asserts that the human spirit can achieve immortality through the Byzantine art of painted/ sculpted sages and birds singing to the audience. Yeats sings his vision of eternal life beyond the sickness of life through a search for healing in "An artifice of eternity" that he could see in Byzantine Art.

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### A Platonic Reading

- Yeats's perfect poem (Notopoulos, 1959)
- One of the great lyrics of the twentieth century
- A remarkable Platonic lyric for its exploration of the contrast between the earthly sensual delight and the eternal intellectual bliss
- Driven by the waste land of his personal life to Plato
  - **Stanza I:** A Platonic view of mortality
  - **Stanza II:** Platonism and Sailing to Byzantium
  - **Stanza III:** The wisdom of the singing masters
  - **Stanza IV:** The golden bird's song of eternity
- Plato's *Republic* Book X and the myth of Er
- The soul of Orpheus turns into a swan and that of Thamyras into a nightingale.
- Similarly, Yeats's soul chooses the golden bird



We have a Platonic reading here. This poem is called ‘Yeats’s perfect poem’ by Notopoulos. He calls this one of the great lyrics of twentieth century. It is a remarkable Platonic lyric for its exploration of the contrast between the earthly sensual delight and the eternal intellectual bliss. This poem is driven by the waste land of Yeats personal life to Plato. In Stanza one, we have a platonic view of mortality.

In stanza two we have Platonism and sailing to Byzantium and in stanza three the wisdom of the singing masters and in the fourth stanza we have the golden bird’s song of eternity. In Plato’s Republic Book Ten, we have this myth of Er. In this myth, we have the soul of Orpheus turning into a swan and that of Thamyras turning into a nightingale. Similarly, Yeats’s soul chooses the golden bird to sing eternally.

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## Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- W B Yeats
- “The Second Coming” (1920)
- Analysis
- An Interrogative Reading
- “Sailing to Byzantium” (1928)
- Analysis
- A Platonic Reading



We have the summary of this lecture here, we saw the Historical and Literary Context of W B Yeats, a modernist poet who wrote a number of poems including the two poems we have chosen to discuss, “The Second Coming” published in 1920, “Sailing to Byzantium” published in 1928. We offered two readings of these poems; an interrogative reading for “The Second Coming” which ends with a question and the second poem “Sailing to Byzantium” which deals with the soul’s quest for eternity and we offered a Platonic reading for this poem.

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Some references are here for you. Thank you, Explore and Enjoy.