



The Motif of Death in William Butler Yeats's Poetry after 1920

Introduction

William Butler Yeats the well-known Irish poet wrote more and more about death (not only about the possibility of his own personal death) in the late period of his life, after 1920.

The motif of human mortality appears in many poems from the late period of his poetry. The aim of the present essay is to select and analyse a few pieces from among his most important works, supporting the statement that death, passing of life and destruction together with it became a key motif in his late poems. But before we start the in-depth analysis of separate poems by the author, it is worth having a glance at the general tendencies and changes that are characteristic of Yeats's poetry, mainly after 1920.

General Changes in the Poetic Style of W. B. Yeats's Late Poems

W. B. Yeats is considered to be one of the most significant poets writing in English by many literary critics. In the beginning of his poetic career he wrote his poems mainly in classical verse forms. He is considered to be one of the latest romantic and one of the first modernist authors at the same time. His earlier poems are “conventionally poetic”, as it can easily be proven by examining his first volumes. His early poetry is considered late-romantic in many senses, since it is largely based on Irish folklore and Celtic Myths. Nevertheless, in his three volumes titled *In the Seven Woods*, *The Green Helmet* and *Responsibilities* that are from the middle period of his poetic lifework he uses a more direct approach to his themes and writes in a much more personal voice. The experience of getting old is a determining motif in the last twenty years of his poetry; for example, in his poem titled *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, he describes what inspired his late works:

*“Now that my ladders gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart”*

In his works after 1920 Yeats deals much more with contemporary problems than topics deriving from myths and folklore, and he mentions his son and his daughters in his late poems more and more frequently.

Some literary critics also state that the author spanned the transition from the 19th century into the 20th century and he created a kind of bridge between romanticism and modernism. All in all, nearly all of literary critics agree that Yeats’s poetic world view derived from a wide range of sources, just to mention a few from among them, Hinduism, Christianity, Voodooism, Romanticism and Modernism, many social and political trends, etc. Such a mixture of ideas served as the basis of his late poetry as well. W. H. Auden criticized his late works as the “deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India”. Yeats did not trust in human intellectuality anymore in his last twenty years, he rather turned to a kind of mysticism and conceived his otherwise very straightforward and deep thoughts in visions, imaginary worlds and timeless pictures. His volume published in 1925, titled simply ‘*A Vision*’ illustrates his delusion of cold intellectuality in a very spectacular way. A kind of dramatic transformation can be observed in the change of his style. His last poetry volumes (*The Tower* – 1928; *The Winding Stairs* – 1929; and

New Poems – 1938) contained some of the most significant images of the twentieth-century poetry, and his Last Poems are considered the best pieces of his lifework.

Although the signs of anti-democracy and the sympathy with Fascism and other political extremities are observable in some of Yeats's late works, his last lines undeniably visualize the rise of Christianity and the coming of a better world after the total destruction of the frail and delusory mortal human world.

As for the motif of death in his poetry, from his late period maybe two poems deserve special attention: *Sailing to Byzantium*, as a vision of his personal death, and *The Second Coming* as a kind of vision about the decline and the collective death of the European civilisation. Henceforth we will make an attempt to discuss the two poems mentioned above in detail, focusing on the motif of death and destruction as the key motifs of Yeats's poetry after 1920.

Sailing to Byzantium – Yeat's Vision of Death and Afterlife

Sailing to Byzantium is one of W. B. Yeats's best-known poems, first published in 1928, in the poetry volume titled *The Tower*. The poem consists of four stanzas, each one is made up of eight ten-syllable lines. It is the description of the poetic speaker's imaginary journey to Byzantium, the capital of the ancient South-Roman Empire, a kind of homeland of eternity in the poem. It is a kind of vision about what can happen to an elderly artist after his death, whether or not he can achieve the dream of probably all artists in the world, eternity. Many critics parallel this one of Yeats's poems and John Keats's classical romantic poem titled *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, since both of them are based on the contrast of human mortality and eternity that may be reached by becoming one with art.

The first stanza of the poem is an introduction in which the poetic speaker describes the mortal world and his former life which he is soon to leave for the sake of another, probably much better and higher form of existence. The speaker describes his mortal life as a land that he does not like and has no more place within it. „That is no country for old men...“, writes Yeats immediately in the first line, as a kind of delusion of the whole mortal existence.

*„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
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies."*

Yeats depicts his whole existence as a kind of seemingly happy, but superficial and declining world in which the circulation of life and death is permanent, but everything must die and nearly nothing represents an eternal value; besides, the "monuments of unaging intellect" are not respected at all, they are "neglected" in the "sensual music"; that is, it is much easier for everyone to think of momentary joys and enjoy life as long as possible instead of thinking about what is valuable and what is not, what is worth dealing with and what is not. Physical joys are much more important than intellectual values, and the poet is disappointed at this kind of world view in his old age. It is also possible that Yeats described not only the human existence in general, but the situation of his own Ireland and his own age. As it can be read in Encyclopedia Britannica:

"[The poem] is grounded in literal meaning as well, for in 1924 the ailing Yeats left Ireland, 'no country for old men,' to view Byzantine mosaics in Italy"

The second stanza of the poem describes the aged man as "a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick"; that is, as a pitiful and helpless creature who has no more power and is subjected to the ignorant and unfair world. According to the poetic speaker, the only chance of an old man to rise up from his pitiful situation is to create artifacts and trying to redeem himself with the power of poetry from his mortality. But in order to be able to do so, an old man has to "learn" a kind of magical song from the monuments mentioned in the first stanza. That is why the elderly poet confesses that, as he writes at the end of the stanza:

*"And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
to the holy city of Byzantium."*

That is, the elderly poet finally arrives at Byzantium, the holy place where it becomes possible to get rid of his tired, mortal human body and liberate his soul, and finally

become one with his own art, gaining a kind of eternity and immortality. Concerning Byzantium, Encyclopedia Britannica writes:

“For Yeats, ancient Byzantium was the purest embodiment of transfiguration into the timelessness of art” (Britannica). While Byzantium has historically been known to be the art and cultural successor of Rome, the speaker also refers to this place as a “holy city”.

The third stanza describes the poetic speaker’s vision after he finally arrived at Byzantium. He asks “the sages”, the wise men of Byzantium to come down to him from God’s “holy fire” and become the “singing masters of his soul”, and he begs to them to liberate his soul from his dying body at the same time. The “holy fire” represents the supernatural and timeless character of Byzantium, the power through which one can liberate himself from his or her mortal constraints and enter into a higher form of existence. It can be seen as a metaphor similar to the Purgatory in the Holy Bible, in which the soul is cleansed, in this case not unconditionally from its sins, but from everything that bound it to its former world, making it capable of reaching eternity. The motif of the fire can also be treated as a similar motif to the fire of the Phoenix, a mythical bird that is consumed by fires time and again, but always resurrects from its own ashes. The poetic speaker also wants to be annihilated on the one hand, but on the other hand he wants to gain the capability of resurrection in another dimension of existence. He is “fastened to a dying animal”, his own mortal and tired human body, and he evidently has to break out of it if he really wants to belong to the supernatural existence, the eternity of Byzantium. Encyclopedia Britannica writes:

“The old man of ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ imagined the city’s power as being able to ‘gather him into the artifice of eternity’ – representative of or embodying all knowledge, linked like a perfect machine at the center of time.”

The fourth stanza is a kind of continuation of the poetic speaker’s prayer for being granted the capability of reaching a higher form of existence. He expresses his desire that once he was finally transformed by the “holy fire”, he would never like to return into any kind of “natural form”, but would rather become a kind of mechanic golden

bird that is able to entertain “the drowsy Emperor” (of Byzantium) “keeping him awake”, singing about “what is past, passing or to come”. That is, he wants to become something that is able to sing the song of time itself, some kind of embodiment of eternity against human mortality, even if it is something lifeless, something mechanical, as if he wanted to somehow unite the features of organic, biological (and necessarily mortal) life with the features of timelessness, eternity and majesty, but if it is not possible to achieve in a form similar to organic life, then let it be mechanic and inorganic. The motifs of “hammered gold” and the “Grecian goldsmiths” strongly resemble to the imagery of Keats’s Ode on a Grecian Urn, as mentioned above. The ancient land of Greece and Byzantium appears in both poem as some kind of embodiment of a higher form of life, existence and culture that survive human mortality, but only artists can reach this kind of existence via their works of art, which is in Yeats’s case is mainly poetry, whereas in Keats’s case all manifestations of art are covered. Furthermore, in the last stanza Yeats identifies himself as a kind of seer who can see the events of the past, sees through the events of the present and is also capable of predicting the events of the future; but since he is in possession of the state of eternity, time is already only a relative category for him.

To sum it up, *Sailing to Byzantium* is one of the most significant pieces of William Butler Yeats’s poetry after 1920. It is one of the key poems as for the motif of death in his poetic work from the examined period. Although the poetic speaker, as an elderly man, predicts his death in a certain way, it is not simply the prediction of physical death, but the vision of an artist about what is possible after death and how it is possible to escape from death and complete destruction. In the poem Yeats does not see his personal death in the future as something that must be feared of, but as a kind of possibility to leave a frail and valueless world at which the elderly poet is already disappointed in order to enter a new reality dominated by perfection and eternity, where only the chosen ones, that is, only artists can reach after their death, becoming one with their works of art. As an artist, Yeats optimistically thinks that his death will not be the death of a simple mortal human, but he will finally become one of the chosen ones who can experience a higher form of existence beyond the mortal human world and finally enter the gates of Byzantium, the holy city where artists can unite with their art, as a kind of reward for their lifelong work in the mortal earth.

Having attempted to make an analysis of the presence of the poet's personal death in Yeats's poetry via examining *Sailing to Byzantium*, henceforth we will make an attempt to discover the motif of collective death in his lifework, via the analyses of his poem *The Second Coming*.

The Second Coming – The Vision of Collective Death

The Second Coming was first published in November 1920, in *The Dial*, and afterwards in Yeats's poetic volume called *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). Strong religious symbolism is used in the poem in order to pinpoint the decline of the European culture and visualise the prediction of the collective death of the western culture or the whole humanity. It is based on a belief that civilisation is nearing to a turning point around the second millennium, the second coming of Jesus Christ, according to the Holy Bible.

The poem was supposedly written as a kind of aftermath of the First World War, and also strongly inspired by the French and German revolutions, and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

*“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 poem, as we can see, starts with an in-medias-res-like overture, a vision-like description of what is in process at the (timeless) moments of the poetic narration. The first passage of the poem is not else but a series of chaotic, ominous pictures, according to which nothing is the same as used to be, something has drastically changed and the world is breaking into pieces, is sinking into anarchy. It is to be mentioned that Yeats uses the word “gyre” in the first line of the poem, a word that is also used in *Sailing to Byzantium* and several of Yeats's poems. According to Yeats's own explanation, by “gyre” he means two conical spirals, one of them situated within the other. The term is to express Yeats's theory of history, which is present in his 1925 poetic value titled *A Vision*.

In the beginning of the second passage the speaker of the poem stops and establishes the following:

*“Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming!”*

Yeats speaks about some revelation that turns out to be the Second Coming. Then the series of chaotic and ominous scenes is continuing, a sphinx or sphinx-like beast is outlined within the lines of the poem:

*“...somewhere in the 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....”*

As Yeats himself claimed it, the notion of such a beast had long captivated his mind even before he wrote *The Second Coming*, around 1904, but later he finally wrote it down in his poem.

Literary critic Yvor Winters writes about the poem:

“...we must face the fact that Yeats' attitude toward the beast is different from ours: we may find the beast terrifying, but Yeats finds him satisfying – he is Yeats' judgment upon all that we regard as civilized. Yeats approves of this kind of brutality.”

That is, the beast described in the poem can be interpreted as a kind of executioner of human civilization who comes to punish instead of Jesus Christ, and the Second Coming, as the title says, is his arrival to earth. A creature that will cause the total destruction of humanity, but in order that a higher form of existence can evolve after everything frail and mortal has perished.

Yeats himself writes in his notes to the poem:

“The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and

of the other to that of its greatest contraction. At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion.”

The poem is closed down with a question:

*“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”*

That is, maybe even the poetic speaker himself does not really know what is coming and what will really happen, but evidently something that must happen out of human will. All in all, it is evidently a kind of vision of complete destruction and collective death, but similar to *Sailing to Byzantium*, a kind of optimistic end is possible even after collective death. If everything mortal is destroyed, perhaps a new world can evolve after the old one is finally judged, punished and annihilated. Annihilation is the precondition of a new beginning, and just like in the case of his own death, he also hopes for a better and higher form of existence after the collective death of the whole humanity.

Interestingly, an article was published in the *New York Times* not long ago that paralleled the imagery of the poem and the Iraqi War that is still in progress even at the moment. That is, it is possible that the prediction of Yeats from 1920 seems to become reality in some way, at least partly, if it is interpreted as the prediction of a destructing war that once will break out in the Middle East; namely in the ancient land of the Holy Bible where Jesus Christ was once born.

Concluding Remarks

Although many of the motifs of death appear in several poems of William Butler Yeats after 1920, in the last period of his oeuvre, *Sailing to Byzantium* and *The Second Coming* are amongst the best known and the most salient poems in which death and destruction appear as key motifs. As the poet started growing old, death and passing became more and more important topics for him in his poetry. But he did not treat death – at least not in all of his poems – as simply the end of life, but as a necessary prerequisite to a new beginning, the gate to a new existence that might be

much higher and much better than the mortal, human existence in which all of us have to live and the constraints of which all of us have to face every day. As a poet, he believed in the idea that man can break out of the constraints of human existence – body, mortality, old age, frailty, weakness, the barriers of time and place, etc. – and gain the capability of entering a new, supernatural world via the power of art. As a matter of fact, Yeats is not at all the first poet who writes down his thoughts about how one can reach immortality through arts, but as one of the most significant poets of the twentieth centuries, he writes about it in a very original and eloquent manner, setting an example to other poets and artists about the power of arts and talent that can even overcome death and passing, if one strongly believes in it.

It is also worth mentioning that although the strong artistic self-awareness is apparent in several of Yeats's poems written before his death, as in the two works discussed above, he did not call himself in each of his works a prophet or artist. In his last poems written not long before his death he does not deal with afterlife so much, but as an old man, reconciles himself to the fact that he must die, just like others.

As he writes in one of his short, haiku-like final poems that was allegedly written down as his own prospective epitaph:

*“Cast a cold eye
on life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!”*