



## Comment on W.B. Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" with reference to the essay of Cleanth Brooks' "The Language of Paradox"

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**Abstract:** W.B. Yeats is a well known poet dealing with the ideological aspects of life through his poems. "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" poems are considered his masterpieces. Here is an attempt to find out how the theory of the modern critic Cleanth Brooks presented in his essay "Language of Paradox" can be applied to these two poems. The real charm and the meaning may be found out by finding out the hidden paradox in the poems.

**Key words:** *Sailing to Byzantium, Byzantium, Paradox, Cleanth Brooks*

"In after time they will speak much of me  
And speak but fantasy."

-Yeats, "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid"

William Butler Yeats is the name of the poet who uttered the above lines. He was born on 13th June 1865, in Sandymount, a seaside suburb of Dublin and he died on 28th January 1939. His death was just before the world war, and because of that he is ranked by many critics as the prominent poet of the 20th century. He studied poetry in his youth, and from an early age was fascinated by both Irish legends and the occult. His ideas go beyond our imagination or the modern images and that is why it remains ideological. His famous works of art are *Crossways* (1889), *The Rose* (1893), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair and other Poems* (1933) etc.

Let us discuss about two of his very famous poems which he composed during his later times: "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium".

"Sailing to Byzantium" is one of Yeats' most famous poems and is considered one of the greatest poems of 20th century. This poem appeared in his poetry called *The Tower* in 1928. In this poem he crafts an effective piece that echoes with longing for a new and immortal life. The very first line of the poem: 'That is no country for old man' ("Sailing to Byzantium" 1) is a reference to the poet's homeland of Ireland. According to some critics, his poem works as an autobiographical reflection on the odd period of his life when he felt to be out of place. The poet shows his unrest and neglecting attitude of young men towards the old. Youth is at its pleasure and juvenile mood. Whatever is found around has born and it will too die one day. Monuments which are unaging are neglected by youth because they are in the flow of sensual music. Poet feels that his heart which is sick with many desires is like a dying animal and asks the sages to take him to the artifice of eternity.

The poem "Byzantium" which he wrote in 1930, Yeats talks about the same place which he talks about in "Sailing to Byzantium", but there's a difference now.

In the earlier poem, the physical life is separated from the spiritual as Ireland from Byzantium, but in the later poem the anger and the undesirable situation of human nature, the crowded images, 'that gong-tormented sea' flood up to the Byzantium itself where they are at last brought under control by 'golden smithies of the Emperor' ("Byzantium" 35). The poem begins with the lines;

'The unpurged images of day recede' ("Byzantium" 1)

Here, the poet talks about the place itself i.e. Byzantium. Every action which took place during the day time has just seized at the moment. He talks about soldiers, who are drunk and are at rest now. The music of the church has just left the effect and the poet says that their images, men, shades are lying in front of him. He feels he hears the crowing sounds of the cocks of Hades. He visualises some light without faggot or other objects. He finds complexities there. He visualises dolphin which is torn and moving in the sea. This is just the surface meaning of the poem. Within this, he shows the life after death and the process of composing a poem is also one of the aspects of the poem.

Let us discuss about one of the New critics whose theory can be applied to two of the poems of W.B. Yeats. "Sailing to Byzantium" is a poem of a voyage to the country of the poet's mind and "Byzantium" is a presentation of the imaginative and ideal state beyond life.



Cleanth Brooks was born on 16th October 1906 and died on 10th May, 1994. He was a prominent American literary critic and professor. He is best known for his contributions to “New Criticism” in the mid-20th century and for revolutionizing the teaching of poetry in American higher education. Brooks applied the methods of this new criticism not only to the modernist texts which were written and for which this methods mainly were created but to the whole canon of English Poetry from John Donne to William Butler Yeats. His best-known works, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry (1947)* and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition (1939)*, discuss about the centrality of ambiguity and paradox as a way of understanding poetry.

“The Language of Paradox” which appeared as a preface to *The Well Wrought Urn*, is completely characteristic of New Criticism in seeking a formula or category with which to identify the special category of literary language. Let us know what a paradox means:

“A Paradox is a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes good sense.”(Abraham 1997: 221)

As modern critics focus or emphasis more on work of art rather than the writer/poet, there are certain aspects of a work of art which they have discussed about. Cleanth Brooks has talked about the ‘language of poem’ which is full of paradoxes in this essay. This essay argues about the literary language’s status as a medium of special meaning, and different than science or scientific discourse. All the generalizations are made out of a close analysis of lyric poetry. Brooks says,

“Few of us are prepared to accept the statement that the language of poetry is the language of paradox.”  
(Language of Paradox)

So he gradually gives his analysis which shows his belief in paradox by saying that,

“Paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry.” (Language of Paradox)

It is wrong to suppose that paradox is wholly intellectual. It is emotional like poetry also.

Paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet’s language .Brooks says,

“It is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as denotations. And I do not mean that the connotations are important as supplying some sort of frill or trimming, something external to the real matter in hand. I mean that the poet does not use a notation at all- as the scientist may properly be said to do so. The poet, within limits, has to make up his language as he goes.” (Language of Paradox)

The dictionary meaning is often violated by connotative meaning for the poet works by ‘contradiction and qualification’. Analogy is the tool with which the poet proceeds in his work. Brooks talks about the language of two types:

- The language of science
- The language of poetry

The language of science is denotative. It is without paradox. It is rigid or fixed. It gives us only knowledge. The language of poetry is denotative and connotative. It is full of paradoxes. It is not fixed and rigid. It gives us insight and wisdom.

Let us discuss how this essay can be applied to Yeats’ two poems.

One thing to note here is that, when one looks at the poem, it’s not necessary to ‘murder to dissect’ likes in a scientific invention what is expected. It is not even cutting the poem into pieces just to highlight the point. The critical analysis here is done with an intention to show how a poem works, how it creates an effect on us in a particular way.

The poetry *The Tower* of which the poem “Sailing to Byzantium” is a part, exposes the merely imaginary and escapist daydreaming of sailing to Byzantium. Cleanth Brooks writes (in his *The Poet as Myth-Maker*, Southern Review, Summer 1938 , which was included in the book *Modern Poetry and Tradition*),

“In every modern nation like the tower,  
Half dead at the top?”

Yeats uses symbols in almost all his poetry. Here *The Tower* itself is the symbol of the poet’s own old age of the civilization to which he belongs. The fate is indicated by the poem’s own ironies. The narration of the series may be called a kind of fall. Yet the volumes darkening decline into history, violence and decay also fulfils the opening poem, singing of what is past, passing or to come. “Sailing to Byzantium” promises that from a sufficient distance- no less than the distance from here to paradise. He is as if visualising something like paradise (an imaginative place considered as the ultimate fine place).

Cleanth Brooks asks whether, in this poem, Yeats chooses idealism or materialism and answers his own question,

"Yeats chooses both and neither. One cannot know the world of being saved through the world of becoming (though one must remember that the world of becoming is a meaningless flux aside from the world of being which it implies)". (Shirley 1987: 17)

The first stanza deals with nature and instinct. Ireland is a country in which all are interested in the sensual pleasure and art and philosophy, "Monument of unageing intellect"("Sailing to Byzantium" 8) are neglected.



The narrator here is in despair because he has reached at his old age and at this time he wants to reach at some place where he can find solace. He wants to sail across the place called Byzantium which is an ideal city for worshipping and wants for himself a form of eternity. On the surface level one shall find such a meaning.

From the beginning of the poem, the poet starts by saying 'that is no country for old man' ("Sailing to Byzantium" 1), now that itself shows that it is not country which is neglecting the poet, he himself is saying that. He is away from them.

This 'fish, flesh, fowl' represent the liveliness, now he paradoxically says, till how much time is it, it is till summer-long. This process of giving eggs is during summer season mainly. He says,

'an aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick', ("sailing to Byzantium" 9-10)

So it would not have soul inside. But Yeats has that soul & wants to learn how to sing and so he is sailing to Byzantium.

Yeats uses symbolism in his poems. He has created "A Vision" for himself and through that he has imagined future life in various forms. In this poem one may find two main paradoxes:

The poet wishes to be out of nature (dead) imagining himself as an artificial bird, yet paradoxically the subject of the golden bird's song is time and the natural process. Yeats is faced with the biggest paradox, for he wishes to become the form that is essential to perfect art, yet despises the very senses without whose perceptions, perfect art would not exist. The narrator feels that the country does not accept the old now. So a paradox here can be stated like, is he really concerned about the people there? He himself was and is a part of this country. Their neglecting someone is not what the narrator should think about. Because he also believes in youth, liveliness, vitality. He very well knows,

"Whatever is begotten, born and dies" ("Sailing to Byzantium" 6),  
But he says,  
"Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect". ("Sailing to Byzantium" 7-8)

'Unageing intellect' is also neglected by young generation because they are under the spell of that sensual music. But why does that old man want to learn to talk about unageing intellect? Here, it shows his attachment with the place and things there. He would not willing go there or leave that place.

The narrator says, so he has sailed 'to the holy city of Byzantium' ("Sailing to Byzantium" 16) to call the sages back from the holy fire of God and want them to be his singing-masters who can consume his heart away which sicks with desire and which is 'fastened to a dying animal' ("Sailing to Byzantium" 22). So again a paradox may be stated that, can those sages come back from their death and can they help him to achieve eternity? Though it is with a religious aspect, but everyone knows that once gone is gone forever, and if it returns then the youth comes again. That shows his desire to be young again or a desire to be liked by the young.

He uses the life with artifice of eternity, but it shows his desire to take place what already exists and wants himself to be added with that. This is the indication of youth and old age again. The young are busy with themselves and are taking their own place amongst and away from old people. So old feels neglected and wants to leave that place. But when he says he also wants to join those eternal beings, will it not neglect someone or will it not be neglected by someone?

The main paradox which can be found is at the end of the poem. After sailing to Byzantium, he wants to get away from the nature, means he wants to meet with the ultimate time or death, imagining himself as an artificial bird, yet paradoxically the subject of the golden bird's song is time and a natural process. Because he says,

"Or set upon the golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come." ("Sailing to Byzantium" 30-32)

Why an unnatural thing would like to talk about a natural thing or of past or even present or the future i.e., to come. It is his desire to stay where he is but with some other form now. He wants that the country or the fellow-citizens should listen to him.

So here, "Sailing to Byzantium" would be appreciated if the hidden paradox is found and what Cleanth Brooks said may come out in a right way.

"Byzantium" is one of Yeats' indubitable masterpieces. The poem "Byzantium" begins where the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" ends. In a very clear expressive way, it is his ineluctable vision. It is his statement in a very comprehensive structure of ideas. A critic named Helen Vendler calls the poem "Yeats' greatest single triumph", adding in that he says that in "Byzantium" the "sense of agonizing balance between opposites which were his primary poetic intuition receives its most acute rendering" (*Later Plays* 114). This poem was first drafted in 1930 and was sent to T. Sturge Moore on October 4, 1930, and he explained that the poem was prompted by Moore's criticism of "Sailing to Byzantium".



“You objected to the last verse of “Sailing to Byzantium” because a bird made by a goldsmith was just as natural as anything else. That showed me that the idea needed exposition.” ( Cleanth Brooks)

The poet here has visualised a place. In a wish to go away from life, he has reached a place which according to him should be full of eternal things. The first scene of the poem talks about the night. The paradox begins from the opening stanza only. The night has fallen but there is no sense of rest or resolution. The Night which would calm down everything does not do the same here with the poet or the country there. The main implication of this somewhat rude revelation suggests the breakdown of the refinement pictured in the final stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium”. Here, at night, the things should be very pious and truthful. But when he says,

‘The unpurged images of day recede’ (“Byzantium” 1)

Shows that the images (men) are not purged yet. So it is the paradox here. The spirits or men should be pious or holy there, in Byzantium. But here there are drunken soldiers. All human beings are complex. He sees some images and shades and he calls them ‘death-in-life’ and ‘life-in-death’. It is a paradoxical situation which is interesting to think about. Life is not smooth here too. Yet there are conditions from, which human beings have to come out.

In *A Vision*, Yeats describes the appeal of Byzantium:

“I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers — though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract — spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of a whole people.” (Yeats 1956: 280)

So it is in Byzantium where Brooks find closeness among religious, aesthetic and practical life and poets and other people made controversy and broke down the spirit.

If one feels that Byzantium is such a place where you may find everything at peace, that imagination is broken here. There is mouth which has no moisture and breath; it has to yell for the superhuman. He talks about miracle then. He sees spirits there. He sees that the sea has brought them all there.

The other paradox can be stated that “The poem “Byzantium” was primarily a description of the act of making a poem” (Ellman 1973: 274). The process of writing a poem needs liveliness, some life to talk about and here the poet talks about spirits which have left one world and has come here. When he talks about the Byzantine Emperor, it is the poet himself which he may want to present. Different images have been put together here and this may be considered as his art of creation. The Golden bird may be considered the poem itself because the bird will sing something and poet will also write something.

‘Cocks of Hades’ are for rebirth. So it is not leaving away from reality which creates interest of audience but the paradoxical situation, that cycle of reincarnating human life. The greater glory of the eternal reality or beatitude which transcends the cycle is all those complexities of life and blood here.

So it is a paradox here that the place which he was talking about where he wanted to reach for leaving whole world and life, presented him variety of options which has created all the visual and taught to live life as it is.

Yeats had a peculiar kind of a visual image and the whole concept of life with himself. He had created ‘a vision’ for himself. He thinks that the history of human life is divided within this 2000 years. So the beginning as well as the end is very significant. The beginning century is very pure and without mixture. The first century itself is of Jesus. It is pure. It is like the movement of the moon as well. It is at its half reaching the sky that it is full moon, and the century is also like that. It’s beautiful during that time.

Here, what Cleanth Brooks said, “The Language of poetry is always the language of paradox” may be proved right. Any poet or rather (now) say every poet would use this kind of a technique to make his poem different than other poems. That language may not always be intellectual that can be imaginative too. Through the above arguments, the paradox may be justified in both the poems of Yeats. Yeats uses this paradox just to create interest in the readers. The hidden meaning is the one which beautifies the poem.



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