Byzantium

SUMMARY

The speaker paints a picture of the ancient, almost legendary city of Byzantium. Here, the dirtied, not-yet-purified visions of the daytime world fade away. The Emperor's drunk army has finally gone to bed; the sounds of the nighttime city are fading, and the songs of the people walking the streets (or perhaps the sex workers) fade away beneath the sound of a ringing church bell. Above these streets, soaring domes lit by the stars or the moon seem to look down scornfully on humanity—on people's silly complications, all their rage and their messiness.

The speaker sees a vision that could be a man or a ghost—but no, it's more like a ghost than a man, and more like a vision than a ghost. It makes the speaker think of a spool of mummy bandages, wound up by Hades (the Greek god of the Underworld): that spool, unwinding, will form a path toward another world. This vision's dry, mummified, unbreathing mouth can summon living mouths to follow it to the land of the dead. The speaker honors this mummified figure as an image of something more than human. It unites death with life and life with death.

Now, the speaker sees what seems like a miracle, a bird or a golden sculpture—but no, it's more like a miracle than a bird or a sculpture. Sitting on a golden branch under the light of the stars, this bird can crow like one of Hades's own roosters—or, made haughty and cynical by the moonlight, it can mock ordinary, living birds and the living branches of trees: in its unchanging golden beauty, it's above all the mess and violence of life.

In the middle of the night, the speaker says, the streets of the Emperor's city reflect mysterious flames—flames that don't come from burning wood, that were never lit, and that can't be blown out by storms. These flames come only from other flames like them. And in these flames, flesh-and-blood people can escape the mess of human life for a moment, participating in an agonizing, ecstatic dance of death, somehow burning up spiritually in flames that couldn't even scorch their physical sleeves.

A whole crowd of ghosts, the speaker says, ride on the backs of dolphins through seas of mud and blood. But the Emperor's glorious, golden metal-crafting workshops hold these seas back. Marble floors for dancers break through all the mess and complication of human life. The awe-inspiring visions of art create more visions—even the vision of that sea itself, ripped by dolphin's backs and haunted by the ringing of the church bells.

THEMES

ART, TRANSCENDENCE, AND IMMORTALITY

In this poem (which is a kind of sequel to Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium"), the speaker observes a mysterious world in which art transcends the muck of mortal life, creating everlasting beauty out of mess and death. Imagining a journey through the ancient, mystical city of Byzantium, the speaker marvels at its "moonlit dome[s]" and its golden birds standing on "starlit golden bough[s]"—works of art that are so much more beautiful and eternal than living people that they seem to "scorn" their creators. But without those mortal makers, of course, these artworks couldn't *exist*! Art, this complex poem thus suggests, is paradoxical: the deathless beauty that art presents wouldn't be there without the "mire" (or muddy mess) and "blood" of everyday life.

Imagining a journey through the streets of Byzantium (the ancient sacred city that once stood on the ground of modern Istanbul), the speaker marvels at the city's glorious art and architecture:

- For example, the city's "dome[s]" rise up to the sky, lit by the moon and stars—as if they belonged more to the heavens above than the earth below.
- A statue of a golden bird standing on a "starlit golden bough" especially catches the speaker's attention. Its "changeless" (or unchanging) "metal" seems infinitely more beautiful and lasting than the regular old flesh and wood of the living bird and branches it imitates.

Art, these reflections suggest, can create a kind of eternal perfection that's far removed from the "mire and blood" of everyday life and death. These artworks are *so* beautiful and perfect, in fact, that they seem to "disdain" (or look down on) all the everyday life going on at their feet—at the rowdy "drunken soldier[s]" and 'night-walkers" stumbling off to bed.

And yet, it takes messy, mortal human beings to *create* all that perfect, deathless art in the first place; art can't make itself. *Someone* had to *imagine* and *build* those domes and that golden bird. And the "golden smithies" (or goldsmiths' workshops) where this artistic creation takes place are run by the same kinds of people who are lolling around drunk in the streets even now, and who will one day die.

Immortally beautiful art, the speaker sees, thus has a symbiotic, give-and-take relationship with mortal people. Elaborating on

this idea, the speaker envisions a dried-up, mummy-like "shade" (or ghost) and hails it as something "superhuman," containing both "death-in-life and life-in-death." Symbolically, this strange image suggests that people and art give life to each other in turn:

- Like this mummified figure, the artwork of Byzantium *preserves* something: the visions and ideals of people who are long dead.
- The artworks wouldn't exist without the dead, and the dead's dreams wouldn't go on existing without the artwork.

As the poem ends, the speaker imagines "spirit after spirit" traveling on "dolphins" (as the dead were said to in Roman mythology)—an endless procession of ghosts cruising over seas of mud and blood. But, the speaker concludes, the work of the "golden smithies," the glorious work of artists, can "break" this infinite "flood' of death. "Fresh images" of immortal, heavenly art rise right out of the "mire" of human life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BODY AND THE SOUL

"Byzantium" can be read as an exploration of the relationship between the body and the soul. Wandering the imagined streets of Byzantium, the poem's speaker is fascinated by the contrast between the city's beautiful, spiritual art and the messy, rowdy people who *make* that art. The speaker also understands that, against all odds, the glory and the mess are *intertwined*—that they need each other. Read symbolically, the poem suggests that the immortal *soul* (symbolized by that everlasting art) needs the mortal *body*. However, it also suggests that people must cast off the "fury and the mire" (the muck and mess) of their mortal lives in order to achieve a kind of spiritual purification in death.

Throughout the poem, the speaker associates Byzantium's art with deathless perfection—a kind of beauty that might call to mind paradise, the afterlife, or the world of the spirit. The city's magnificent domes are "starlit" and "moonlit," reaching for the heavens; its golden bird statues seem like perfected versions of ordinary mortal birds. The works of art, in other words, are *ideal* and *unchanging*. And, symbolically, they suggest the immortal perfection of the spiritual world. Unlike mortal bodies, these pieces of art will never age or die.

However, these artworks are surrounded by "mire and blood"—by all the mud, mess, and fleshy limitations of the physical world. The people who live around those domes and golden birds are "drunken soldier[s]" and "night-walkers," fighters and sex workers dealing with the bodily matters of survival and sexuality.

At first glance, the airy, heavenly artworks couldn't seem to have less to do with the human chaos around them. But, as the speaker observes, those apparently divine artworks couldn't exist without human artists. In just the same way, people's bodies and spirits are intimately connected: there's no way to dream of a perfect spiritual afterlife without first living in a human body! The deathless spirit, the speaker thus suggests, *needs* the mortal body.

The poem's mysterious images of dancers "dying" in a purifying "flame" and a mummy's wrappings unraveling to create a "winding path" also suggest that people can hope to move into a world of spiritual perfection and beauty after death—but only once they're purified of the "mire and blood" of mortal life. Perhaps the pain and fear of dying, leaving the body behind, are the sacrificial "path" one must take to reach the eternal world of spirit.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The unpurged images ...
... great cathedral gong;

"Byzantium" begins with a transition: the fading away of the daytime world and the coming of night. In a city that readers can guess must be the ancient Byzantium of the poem's title, the streets are finally starting to quiet down after what sounds like a big evening.

The "Emperor's drunken soldiery," his rowdy soldiers, are "abed" at last, no longer making a ruckus. As a "great cathedral gong" (a mighty churchbell) rings, "night-walkers' song"—the sound of late-night partiers making their way to bed—"recedes."

There's a lot of receding going on here, in fact. "Night resonance"—the sound of the night—"recedes," and the "unpurged images of day recede"—a moment of epistrophe that suggests a general fading and dimming of life in the streets. As the waking world pulls back like the tide, a different kind of atmosphere creeps into the city.

This change might be a purification. If the "images of day" are "unpurged," they're *unclean* somehow, not yet washed of some unknown taint. That it takes the solemn, holy sound of a "great cathedral gong" to shoo them away suggests a juxtaposition not just between night-world and day-world, but between something sacred and something profane.

Consider, too, just how wide and mysterious the idea of the

"images of day" might be. Perhaps these "images" are just the sights and sounds of all those messy drunkards stumbling off to bed. But perhaps the "images of day" are also the way that people see in the daytime in general. The sound of the "great cathedral gong" rings in a different way of perceiving the world, not just a quieter time of night. The poem is on its way to the land of dreams.

Even in these few words, readers may already have a vivid mental picture of the poem's setting. The mere name "Byzantium" summons up visions of an ancient city crowned with temple domes and glittering with mosaics. The "Emperor" who seems to rule here, similarly, suggests a long-ago time; he'd have to be a very distant Emperor indeed, from a time before the Roman Emperor Constantine conquered Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople. The drunken soldiers and night-walkers could come from any time or place, but they're living in what feels like an enchanted, legendary city.

The chanting rhythms of these first few lines might also put readers under a spell. The first three lines here are written in iambic pentameter—that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this:

> The Emp- | eror's drunk- | en sold- | iery are | abed;

But this lilting, steady, familiar rhythm breaks in line 4, which both changes its feet to trochees (the opposite of iambs, with a DUM-da rhythm) and shortens to tetrameter, with only four strong stresses:

> After | great cath- | edral | gong;

That change in the rhythm mimics just what it describes. The nightlife of the city goes on at a steady iambic pace—until that "great cathedral gong" rings and the whole world changes. Keep an eye on the shifting meter as the poem goes on: it will evoke not just the poem's landscape, but the speaker's vision of another world, one that just touches our own.

LINES 5-8

A starlit or ...
... of human veins.

Once the "cathedral gong" rings and the streets are silent, the poem's gaze turns upward. Above the city, the "starlit or [...] moonlit dome[s]" of Byzantium's churches look down on humanity—literally and metaphorically.

Sparkling with heavenly light, these personified domes seem to "disdain[] / All that man is," to gaze in silent scorn at all the fuss below them. The "fury and the mire of human veins"—that is, the passion and the muddy mess of human feeling and human bodies—seems pretty lowly from where the domes sit.

The juxtaposition between the "fury" of humanity and the calm, celestial disdain of these "domes" suggests that Yeats is returning to a favorite theme: the relationship of humanity to art and the physical to the spiritual. Readers who are familiar with an earlier poem of his, "Sailing to Byzantium," will know that he'd used the glorious art and architecture of Byzantium in a similar way before:

- In that poem, he imagined an old man sailing off to the long-lost city, begging its immortal artworks to teach him how to immortalize his own soul (since his body clearly isn't going to last).
- Alluding to Byzantium once more, this poem is in conversation with that earlier work. On this second poetic visit to Byzantium, something similar seems to be going on: there's a clear contrast between the bodily, pleasure-seeking messiness of the "drunken soldiery" and the eternal, celestial beauty of those "domes."

The domes have escaped "all that man is": they're perpetually beautiful, they're immortal, they won't age and die, they're without human passions, they don't make drunken fools of themselves.

What's more, they've reached a certain kind of divine simplicity. Among the things they "disdain" are "all mere complexities": that is, all the paltry little troubles with which people are so unaccountably obsessed.

The idea of a complexity—a difficult, knotty problem—being a *mere* complexity suggests that these domes see the world very differently from people. The kinds of complexities that mortal human beings deal with might not seem "mere" at all from an earthbound perspective: consider the complexities of politics (hinted at by those drunken soldiers) or the complexities of love and sex (which those 'night-walkers" might summon—perhaps they're not just nighttime wanderers, but sex workers).

To humanity, these issues pose endless difficulties; to the domes, those "complexities" are really beside the point. The shortened meter here—"All that man is" and "All mere complexities" are both punchy lines of trimeter—suggests that, in the celestial world of the domes, all humanity's problems can be balled up and thrown away in an instant.

These domes, in other words, represent a different way of seeing the world, a perspective that comes from a higher place. As wonders of art, this speaker suggests, the domes touch a spiritual world in which the concerns of mortal life are irrelevant. In the domes' starlit nighttime world, the "unpurged images of day" fade to nothing.

LINES 9-12

Before me floats ...
... the winding path;

From the first stanza's picture of Byzantium, where rowdy, complex human life is juxtaposed with the serene, spiritual life

of art, the speaker turns suddenly to another "image," a vision on top of a vision. Take a look at the way the speaker uses repetitions and chiasmus in these cryptic lines:

> Before me floats an **image**, **man** or **shade**,
> **Shade** more than **man**, more **image** than a **shade**;

First, a shock: floating suddenly in front of the speaker is an "image" that might be either a living man or a "shade," a ghost. But then, slowly, the speaker investigates this apparition: *no, it's certainly more a ghost than a man, and no, it's really more an image than a ghost*.

The repeated language here suggests that the speaker is having an almost hallucinatory experience, then recognizing it as such. This ghostly figure is certainly more an "image," a vision, than it is a real, embodied thing. But it's only "more" one thing than another, not *clearly* a man, shade, or image; there's something uncertain and in-between about this "image."

The word "image" itself has appeared before. Readers might think back here to the poem's first line, in which the "unpurged **images** of day recede." Then, the word "image" suggested a kind of illusion, and an "unpurged," unclean one at that. This second "image" seems closer to an image of the night, something closer to the heavenly world of the domes than to the muddle-headed "complexities" of the drunken soldiers.

In literature, nighttime visits from a "shade" tend to herald truthful revelation: consider Dante meeting Virgil in the dark wood, or Hamlet's encounter with his dead father on the battlements of Elsinore. This shade seems to play a similar role, the speaker observes in a complicated metaphor:

> For **Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth**
> May **unwind the winding path**;

The images here suggest that this floating shade resembles the corpse of an Egyptian king: he is 'Hades' bobbin," a spool of thread (or rather, of "mummy-cloth," the bandages wrapped around a mummified body) held by the Greek god of the underworld himself. Those tight-wound bandages, oddly, will "unwind the winding path," making a straight road toward… what?

Here, readers might take a moment just to soak in the atmosphere of these lines. Here is a floating image that is also a ghost that is also a preserved body—something between alive and dead, imagined and real, belonging to the dark world of Hades. And the images of *unwinding* to provide a *path* suggest that this eerie figure is going to guide the speaker. This apparition's purposes may not be clear, but readers can sense that the sight of it is about to give the speaker an epiphany, a moment of sudden insight.

LINES 13-16

> *A mouth that …*
> *… death-in-life and life-in-death.*

Gazing at the floating, mummified "image" or "shade" or "man," the speaker felt as if the sight of it were about to "unwind the winding path," offering a route toward some mysterious destination. In these lines, it seems that this destination may be a fate much like that of the shade's itself. Its "mouth that has no moisture and no breath"—that is, its very, very dead and dried-up mouth—has the power to "summon" *more* "breathless mouths." In other words, it can call people to the land of the dead. The "winding path" it offers leads to the realm of Hades.

But it's also something more. The speaker isn't just having an Ebenezer Scrooge moment here, a visit from a ghost that points toward his future grave and warns him to mend his ways. For this "shade" is also in some sense alive and active. Remember, it's wrapped up in protective "mummy-cloth"; preserved, it's as enduring as those disdainful "domes." This spirit, something between a man and an image and a shade, is also something between humanity and artwork, something between a drunken soldier and a moonlit dome.

That's why the speaker doesn't just gawp at it in terror, but "hail[s]" it as "the superhuman": a translated figure that, while it is or was in some sense a "man," is *more* than human.

Being "superhuman" in this sense means being in a liminal (or in-between) state. The speaker explains:

> I call it **death**-in-**life** and **life**-in-**death**.

This figure, these repetitions suggest, can't be pinned down. It's eternally hanging between dead and alive, man and shade, and it's an "image" besides, a vision.

In other words, again, this superhuman figure is a lot like one of the personified domes that looked down on humanity in the first stanza. Like those domes, it's high up, floating; like those domes, it manages to be alive in a very different way than a human being is alive. Paradoxically, though, it had to die in order to reach this kind of aliveness. Its powerful, preserved afterlife was created through the artistry of mummy-cloth.

Readers may begin to get the sense here that this eerie figure lives in a zone *between* humanity and an artwork. In other words, it can be read as a symbol of the artist:

- Like this mummified figure, artists can reach a "superhuman" state, living on after their deaths through their works. The "winding path" this shade offers might move toward *immortality* as much as mortality.
- But reaching that kind of "life-in-death," this image hints, might demand accepting "death-in-life": sacrificing one's life to the quest for "superhuman"

artistry.

(Note, as well, that the images of this stanza seem deeply influenced by the works of the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote both of the artist as a superhuman "floating" figure and of an eerie undead creature called "Life-in-Death." These allusions play into a point the speaker will make later on: art inspires more art!)

LINES 17-20

Miracle, bird or ...
... of Hades crow,

The relationship of the mummified "shade" to artwork and artistry grows clearer at the beginning of the third stanza. The phrasing and language here run parallel to the first lines of the second stanza:

> Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
> More miracle than bird or handiwork,

Once again, repetitions suggest that the golden bird the speaker looks at now rests somewhere in the middle of several categories. As a miracle, a bird, and a piece of "golden handiwork" at once, it suggests the sheer power of art:

- Being both a golden sculpture and a bird is what *makes* it a "miracle": brilliant artistry brings this cold metal bird to life, or to a kind of "life-in-death" similar to that of the "superhuman" image.
- Both shade and bird have a weird vitality of their own, one not quite like the life of a living person or a living bird—and that life feels miraculous.

Like the shade, too, this bird is associated with "Hades," crowing like one of his "cocks." This simile suggests that both bird and shade have the power to *summon* or *awaken*. Just as the shade's dry, "breathless" mouth could call other "breathless mouths" to follow its "path," this bird's imagined rooster-like crowing might call people out of a metaphorical sleep of ignorance and into a new kind of awareness.

But like the "dome" of the first stanza, this bird and the "golden bough" upon which it sits are "starlit," associated with the night and the heavens—not with the "unpurged images of day." This rooster of the underworld might even wake people *from* those clogged-up daytime illusions.

Bird, shade, and dome thus all work in a similar way. "Float[ing]" high above the mess of everyday life, they speak to a starry spiritual world that's eternal, beautiful, and untroubled—a world that humanity can reach toward only through art.

LINES 21-24

Or, by the ...
... mire or blood.

The golden bird's artistic perfection doesn't just reach *toward* the "starlit" heavens, but *away* from the "mire and blood" of ordinary human life. This bird, the speaker goes on, is "by the moon embittered," made not just beautiful and celestial but "scorn[ful]" by its contact with the heavens. In its "glory of changeless metal," it feels infinitely above any "common bird."

An ordinary everyday bird, after all, is anything but "changeless." It's mortal, and it will die—and for those reasons among others it's certainly not perfect. The golden bird, meanwhile, will live forever, serenely sailing above the "complexities" with which the living struggle. (This isn't the first time such a bird has symbolized immortal perfection in Yeats, either: see this bird's similarly glorious cousin in "Sailing to Byzantium.")

Here, though, the poem starts to introduce a paradox. Certainly, this golden bird is a miracle of artistry, and certainly its beauty seems to touch something eternal and spiritual. But it's also a piece of "golden handiwork"—and there's no handiwork without *hands*. This bird might rise above the "mire and blood" of mortal human life, but it also must rise out of them.

Similarly, the golden bird's scorn for its living, "common" counterpart raises certain questions. On the one hand, this bird seems not just like a miracle of art, but like a vision from the spirit world: the speaker seems to feel that this immortal, glorious bird is a *perfect* bird, the ideal of a bird of which all living birds can only ever be flawed copies. However: how is a poor old human artist even to begin to imagine an eternal, perfect bird without first having seen a living one?

Art, the first three stanzas of the poem have claimed, can get much closer to immortality and perfection than human beings can. Perhaps a longing for that immortality and perfection is part of what drives people to *make* art, to answer the "breathless mouth" of the shade or the "crow" of the "cocks of Hades." But though artists can reach up for the "starlit" heavens through their artwork, they can't altogether escape the "mire and blood" on the ground.

To be an artist, the poem is beginning to suggest, is to sit somewhere in the middle of opposites: between perfection and imperfection, between death-in-life and life-in-death, between the stars and the mire.

LINES 25-27

At midnight on ...
... begotten of flame,

The speaker's vision now turns from the parallel shade and bird back down to the streets of Byzantium. Now that it's "midnight" and the "unpurged images of day" have well and truly "recede[d]," something mysterious is beginning to happen on the ground. Down on the "Emperor's pavement," a fire is

burning.

This fire, however, doesn't follow the usual rules of fires:

> Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
> Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flames,

In other words, this fire doesn't burn up any bundles of firewood, and nobody had to strike a spark off a flint to start it. Wind and rain can't blow it out. Rather, its "flames" are "begotten of flames": only fire could start this eternal and imperturbable fire. (Note that this repetition of the word "flames" is specifically an example of the device diacope, which Yeats uses quite a bit in this poem.)

These flames that don't need fuel and can't burn out are not physical flames, but immortal, perfected images of flame. In that sense, they have the same kind of relationship to real flames that the golden bird had to "common," real-life birds:

- Perhaps they're "begotten of flames" because they're artistic images of the ideal of fire, fieriness itself.
- Or perhaps they're "begotten of flames" because they're idealized images modeled on the real thing: real-life fire inspires artistic fire.
- Perhaps, paradoxically, both of these things are true at once!

Either way, the flames have power to "beg[et]" (or give rise to) more of themselves, just as the "shade" of the second stanza—a ghost which, remember, the speaker insisted was more an "image" than anything—has the power to beckon people to follow its "winding path" toward the world of the "superhuman," creating more "breathless mouths" just like its own.

Symbolically speaking, then, these flames can be read as the fires of creativity and inspiration: in a sense, they're images of what it feels like to be deeply moved by images! Contact with these visionary flames inspires artists to make *more* visions of flame, which can set more artists alight. This is a vision of a mystical artistic eternity.

While all the poem's earlier images of spirit and art have been high up in the air—the "float[ing]" shade, the bird perched on the "starlit golden bough," the airy church "dome"—now the fire is right down on the "pavement," a lot closer to all that "mire and blood" the speaker has longed to rise above. Mysterious and complex though it is, this image is also quite literally coming down to earth.

LINES 28-32

Where blood-begotten spirits ...
... singe a sleeve.

When the fires of creative and spiritual vision begin to burn, the speaker goes on, they attract people like moths. "Blood-begotten spirits"—that is, living people, born of all that puddling messy "blood" that symbolizes mortal humanity throughout the poem—are drawn to enter these sacred flames. More than that, they're purified by them. Burning in the creative fire, they're able to discard the "complexities of fury" that usually dog them, escaping or transcending the struggle and passion of human life.

This artistic and spiritual experience, then, is ecstatic in the oldest meaning of the word: it takes people out of themselves. It's therefore also *purifying*. Getting rid of their "complexities," these "blood-begotten spirits" might finally have some respite from the "unpurged images of day," all their mundane concerns and their struggles to survive.

But such a purification demands a sacrifice—and a painful one, as this moment of anaphora makes clear:

> Dying into a dance,
> An agony of trance,
> An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

That double-agony and that dying dance again summon up the earlier idea that to reach the "superhuman" through art is to experience both "death-in-life and life-in-death." Paradoxically, there's no reaching the immortality of the shade and the golden bird without dying first: going through a kind of agonizing sacrifice, giving up something of one's everyday life, allowing oneself to be "purged" of everything that usually matters. That "flame" might only be an "image," unable even to burn a single thread of a "sleeve," but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt.

Making or experiencing great art, in other words, can be out-and-out terrifying. In order to reach as close to the "superhuman" as one can get on earth, one has to suffer through a kind of sacrificial purification, leaving behind everyday ways of seeing the world and allowing visions from the spiritual realm to burn right through one's body.

Perhaps the body itself even has to be left behind. In the earlier "Sailing to Byzantium," the speaker reached out to the world of art and the spirit precisely *because* his body was old and dying; there, he hoped to escape his body at death and enter the immortal world of the golden bird. For this speaker, there's a similar sense that the body and spirit, entangled at birth, might need to be disentangled: the "blood-begotten," fleshly part of a person holds the "spirit" part back.

But this death doesn't have to be read literally. An intense spiritual or artistic vision, the poem suggests, can create "death-in-life and life-in-death," allowing one to leap beyond the limitations of one's own body.

LINES 33-37

Astraddle on the ...
... furies of complexity,

All through this poem, seemingly separate images have turned out to mirror each other: the disdainful starlit dome, the golden bird, the hovering shade, and the eternal flames all symbolically speak of the glory and pain of artistic and spiritual vision. Meanwhile, intense repetitions have kept the "mire and blood," "complexities," and "fury" of mortal life steady as a bass line under all that visionary music, continually juxtaposing the spiritual and the earthly. The final stanza will bring all these elements together one last time.

The first lines of the final stanza take in a grand and eerie sight: an apparently endless procession of "spirit after spirit" riding on the backs of dolphins (as ancient Roman ghosts were said to) over seas of "mire and blood." In fact, that "mire and blood" somehow is "the dolphin's"—it *belongs* to the dolphins. There's one big mish-mash here of all the messy stuff of mortality, mud and blood and dolphin-flesh interlinked.

The only thing that can "break," or interrupt, this endless "flood" of souls and blood are "smithies," metalworker's shops. The "golden smithies of the Emperor," as the speaker cries, stand firm like cliffs in the midst of all the "mire and blood."

These "golden smithies"—words which could equally suggest the workshops of goldsmiths and glorious workshops *made* of gold—might take readers back to the "golden handiwork" of the deathless bird back in the third stanza. Immortal works of art, this image suggests, are the only things that can stand up to the relentless tide of death.

Here, again, there's the old paradox of art: smithies need smiths (or metalworkers, here representing artists in general). Those artisans are riding through the mud on dolphin-back, too, just as flawed and mortal as anyone else.

The image of *smithies* in particular, though—not temples or palaces, but workshops—suggests that mortal artists can immortalize themselves through self-sacrificial labor. Metalworking, after all, requires flames, just like the visionary flames in which "blood-begotten spirits" purified themselves in the previous stanza.

To "break the flood" of death and touch immortality, this strange image suggests, artists must throw their whole mortal lives into the visionary flames of art.

That point is only emphasized by the speaker's callback to the previous stanza (and diacope) in these lines:

> Marbles of the dancing floor
> Break bitter furies of complexity,

Just as the smithies "break the flood," the "marbles of the dancing floor"—an image that recalls the "Emperor's pavement" upon which spirits "dance[d]" in the fire—"break bitter furies of complexity." Notice that, not for the first time in this poem, "mire and blood" is linked to "furies of complexity" here: mortality and emotional struggle go hand in hand.

Reaching out to the spirit world and the world of art, the parallel images of metalsmithing and dancing thus suggest, is both painful and rapturous, laborious and freeing. Art-making is at once like sweating over a metalworker's crucible and dancing in a sacred fire.

LINES 38-40

> *Those images that ...*
> *... that gong-tormented sea.*

"Byzantium" is a poem of endlessly circling repetitions. This is fitting for a poem about reaching out for immortality and eternity. Its very last lines are no exception:

> Those images that yet
> Fresh images beget,
> That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

The diacope on the word "images" here echoes in more ways than one:

- The word "images" echoes both the "unpurged images of day" in the poem's first line and the "image, man or shade" that reveals itself as the "superhuman" in the second stanza.
- The idea of one image that begets another hearkens back to the "flames begotten of flame"—the fires of creative inspiration.

This multiplying echo works like two mirrors set up opposite each other. In these lines, images create images create images create images, on and on forever. In other words: the work of the "golden smithies of the Emperor," the work of the artist, inspires more artists to reach out beyond the "unpurged images" of their day-to-day lives and into the image-world of the spirit. Art begets art.

This infinite cycle of "golden" creativity, however, arises from the very "mire and blood" it hopes to escape—and depicts it, too. Take another look at the anaphora (and the unforgettable alliteration) in the poem's closing line:

> That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

Being "dolphin-torn" and "gong-tormented," the parallel phrasing and echoing sounds here stress, are related conditions:

- Remember, the "sea" of "mire and blood" is "dolphin-torn" because it's overwhelmed with the spirits of the dead riding on dolphin-back. Death, in other words, is everywhere, and ceaseless.
- But that flood of death is what *makes* this sea "gong-tormented"—kept in a constant state of agitated longing by the sacred sound of the "cathedral gong"

evoked in the first stanza.

The "mire," "blood," "fury," and "complexities" of human life, in other words, are in a complicated relationship with the sacred world of art and the spirit. Mortal beings, this poem argues, aren't content to just live and die like thoughtless animals. Their sense of holiness, perfection, and the ideal leads them to reach out from the messy mortal world toward eternity. That messiness, strangely enough, thus "begets" the quest for art and spirit.

Notably, then, this poem doesn't end on the image of a golden bird or a deathless spirit, but on the sea of "complexities" and death. It takes a mixture of "mire and blood" and eternal "flame," this closing image suggests, to reach for the "superhuman."

SYMBOLS

THE GOLDEN BIRD

The poem's brilliant golden bird statue symbolizes spiritual and artistic perfection.

Made of "changeless," precious, never-tarnishing gold, this bird is better than any "common bird": it's perfectly beautiful, and it can never die. In fact, it's so sublime that it seems to "scorn" its earthly counterparts. It thus stands for an ideal, the imagined perfect version of an imperfect mortal bird—the kind of spiritual form that, in this speaker's opinion, great art reaches toward.

Note, too, that this bird also appears in "Sailing to Byzantium" (the earlier work to which this poem is a kind of sequel), and plays a very similar role there.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-24:** "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork, / Planted on the starlit golden bough, / Can like the cocks of Hades crow, / Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud / In glory of changeless metal / Common bird or petal / And all complexities of mire or blood."

BYZANTIUM

As in its sister poem, "Sailing to Byzantium," Byzantium here symbolizes the ideal, spiritual world of art.

The ancient Greek city of Byzantium is a real historical place, but one with a legendary aura. A seat of many world religions (notably early Christianity), it was renamed Constantinople after the Emperor Constantine (who also declared it the capital of the Roman Empire), and later became modern-day Istanbul.

By the time Yeats wrote this poem, "Byzantium" was more a myth than a place. But the ancient city's glorious architecture and mosaic art remains, reflecting a long and mythic history.

In this poem, the city's starlit church domes and golden statuary represent the kinds of spiritual ideals that can only be reached in art. These immortal works lead the speaker to reflect on how human artistry can carry people toward a kind of immortality of their own.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** "The unpurged images of day recede; / The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed; / Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song / After great cathedral gong; / A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains / All that man is, / All mere complexities, / The fury and the mire of human veins."
- **Lines 25-32:** "At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit / Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit, / Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame, / Where blood-begotten spirits come / And all complexities of fury leave, / Dying into a dance, / An agony of trance, / An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve."

THE SHADE

The eerie "shade" (or ghost) the speaker hails as "the superhuman" is a symbol of artistic immortality.

The speaker greets this image of a floating, mummy-like figure as "death-in-life and life-in-death"—words that suggest this figure is neither here nor there, neither dead nor alive. That in-between situation has a lot in common with both great works of art and great artists. Art, of course, never dies—and the artists who make enduring works live on even after their deaths *through* their art. (This poem itself, which has outlived Yeats by nearly a century, is a useful case in point!)

Such immortality, however, may come at a cost. Artists who wish to touch this "superhuman" immortality, the mummified figure suggests, might first have to first *sacrifice* their lives to art.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-16:** "Before me floats an image, man or shade, / Shade more than man, more image than a shade; / For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth / May unwind the winding path; / A mouth that has no moisture and no breath / Breathless mouths may summon; / I hail the superhuman; / I call it death-in-life and life-in-death."

POETIC DEVICES

PARADOX

"Byzantium" is founded on a paradox. In this poem, the real world of mortal human beings and the ideal world of art and spiritual perfection are opposites—but they also rely on and grow out of each other.

This poem's perspective on the world is, in one way, Platonic. That is: like the philosopher Plato, the speaker feels that the physical world is really just a *shadow* of a perfect spiritual world. The miraculous "bird" of "golden handiwork" that appears in the poem's third stanza provides a good example of this philosophy:

- This gorgeous statue is linked to the divine: "starlit" and "moonlit," it's symbolically closer to the heavens than to earth.
- In fact, it represents the eternal *ideal* of a bird, the most perfect bird there could possibly be. For that reason, it "scorn[s]" the "common bird" of imperfect, mortal flesh and blood.

Art, the poem thus suggests, can reach into the world of perfect, eternal images and bring a glimpse of them back to earth. There's a complication here, though: you can't have art without artists, and artists are no more perfect and immortal than that "common bird." They roll around in the "mire and blood" of everyday life with everyone else.

Strangely enough, then, the ideal world comes in contact with the real world *through* imperfect, messy mortality. Artists and art, the poem suggests, live paradoxical lives, reaching out to touch the divine from the muddy ground where they stand.

The speaker's strange image of a mummified "superhuman" figure suggests that the rewards of such efforts might be a kind of immortality: like this preserved "shade," artists who make great works might reach a kind of immortality. (This famous poem, which has considerably outlived its author, might be read as a case in point!)

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

REPETITION

Repetitions give the poem its chanting music and reflect its paradoxes.

This repetition is often structural (for example, the anaphora of "All that man is / All mere complexities). The speaker also repeatedly turns to the same words and images, highlighting their importance.

A few words in particular thread through the whole poem: "fury," "complexities," "mire" (or oozy mud), and "blood." Often appearing alongside each other, sometimes varied through polyptoton (*complexity / complexities* and *fury / furies*, for instance), these words always call up the mess and difficulty of mortal life:

- The "mire and blood" and the "furies of complexity" are the struggles of being human, with a fleshy, failing body and a lot of problems to solve—problems that, in this speaker's vision, simply don't exist in the world of spiritual perfection here symbolized by Byzantium.
- However, as these words reappear across the poem, they also remind readers that art inspired by visions of that spiritual world is also made by muddy, bloody human hands. Paradoxically, it takes a mortal, fallible, embodied human artist to reach for the perfect world of the spirit.

The poem also mirrors this stretch for spiritual perfection with repetitions that evoke an ecstatic "trance." Listen to the anaphora in these lines, for instance:

> Dying into a dance,
> An agony of trance,
> An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

Besides its hypnotic, chant-like sound, this repetition suggests that the "trance" and the "flame" here are one and the same: an experience of artistic rapture is like being entranced and burnt up all at once, with a kind of ecstatic, delicious pain.

And such experiences make people want more, as this moment of diacope suggests:

> Those images that yet
> Fresh images beget,

In other words, the kinds of artistic experiences that put people in contact with the spiritual world are so moving that they make people want to reach out again—perhaps by making artistic "images" of their own. Repetition underscores the idea that art inspires art, ecstasy inspires ecstasy, and creative "flame" is "begotten of flame."

Eddying, swirling chiasmus also reflects this eternal cycle of creation. Consider all the chiasmus in the speaker's vision of a ghostly, mummy-like "superhuman" figure, for instance:

- This vision, the speaker says, is hard to pin down: it's "man or shade, / Shade more than man, more image than a shade" (line 10).
- The speaker hails it not only as "the superhuman," but as "death-in-life and life-in-death" (line 16).
- And like the visionary flames, it summons people to

follow it and become like it: "A mouth that has no moisture and no breath / Breathless mouths may summon" (lines 13-14).

The inside-out, circling shape of these repetitions suggests the strange (and perhaps frightening) attractiveness of artistic immortality. The "breathless," dead-and-alive figure represents both the immortality of art and the afterlife of a great artist—and his eerie, hovering presence invites more artists to try to follow in his path, just as "flame beg[ets] flame" later in the poem.

That association between the "superhuman" figure and art gets even clearer when the speaker describes a golden statue of a bird in the next stanza:

> Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
> More miracle than bird or handiwork,

These repetitions, echoing the language that introduced the ghostly "superhuman" figure, also stress that both the "shade" and the bird live in the middle of Venn diagrams, not quite one thing or another: they might be "more" a miracle or "more" an image than they are a "bird" or a "man," but they're also all these things at once, crossing category boundaries to create something new.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The," "images," "recede"
- **Line 2:** "The"
- **Line 3:** "Night," "recedes," "night"
- **Line 5:** "starlit"
- **Line 6:** "All"
- **Line 7:** "All," "complexities"
- **Line 8:** "The," "fury," "the," "mire"
- **Line 9:** "image"
- **Lines 9-10:** "man or shade, / Shade more than man, more image than a shade;"
- **Line 11:** "Hades'"
- **Line 12:** "unwind the winding"
- **Line 13:** "mouth," "no breath"
- **Line 14:** "Breathless mouths"
- **Line 15:** "I"
- **Line 16:** "I," "death-in-life and life-in-death"
- **Lines 17-18:** "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork,"
- **Line 19:** "starlit golden bough"
- **Line 20:** "Hades"
- **Line 23:** "bird"
- **Line 24:** "complexities," "mire or blood"
- **Line 26:** "Flames," "nor"
- **Line 27:** "Nor," "flames," "begotten," "flame"
- **Line 28:** "begotten"
- **Line 29:** "complexities," "fury"
- **Line 31:** "An agony of"
- **Line 32:** "An agony of"
- **Line 33:** "mire and blood"
- **Line 34:** "Spirit after spirit," "The smithies"
- **Line 35:** "The golden smithies"
- **Line 37:** "furies," "complexity"
- **Line 38:** "images"
- **Line 39:** "images"
- **Line 40:** "That," "that"

JUXTAPOSITION

By juxtaposing images of the messy "mire and blood" of life with the sublime "golden" perfection of art and the spiritual world, the poem investigates how the real and the ideal, the imperfect and the perfect, both oppose and support each other.

In the first stanza, there's a clear contrast between the human and the divine in the juxtaposition of people and art:

- The speaker describes city streets only recently emptied of rowdy "drunken soldiery" and "night-walkers"; above them, the glorious "moonlit dome[s]" of churches and seem to look down in "disdain" on "all that man is."
- Here, art is "above" people both literally and figuratively. Those perfect domes skim the stars while people wallow around on the ground with their messy feelings and their mortal bodies.
- Note, too, that the spiritual world is associated with night, while the "unpurged" everyday world is connected to the day—a juxtaposition of apparent opposites.

Later on, though, the poem will suggest that the perfection of immortal art and the imperfection of mortal beings *aren't* pure opposites:

- When the speaker contrasts an astonishing statue or mosaic of a "golden" bird sitting on a "starlit golden bough" with a plain old "common bird," there's again a sense that the golden bird is a vision of something ideal, and "scorn[s]" its "common," flesh-and-blood counterpart.
- However, there's a question here about whether that golden bird could exist *without* the "common bird": how could artists grasp the idea of a perfect bird without the example of a real one? The ideal, spiritual visions of art, this juxtaposition suggests, are all wrapped up in the imperfect world.

This complicated tension between mortal imperfection and divine perfection comes to a climax in the final stanza, where

the speaker imagines a "flood" of ghosts riding over seas of "mire and blood." That "flood" can only be broken by the "golden smithies of the Emperor": by the kind of deathless artistry that both *touches* and *represents* the perfection of the spiritual world. This last juxtaposition reminds readers of the big paradox here: people only have mortal hands with which to reach for immortal glory.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 28-32
- Lines 33-37

ALLUSION

There's a double layer of allusion in this poem: to the ancient city of Byzantium, and to Yeats's own past poetical vision of that city.

This poem is a kind of sister to Yeats's earlier "Sailing to Byzantium"—a poem in which an old man, preparing to leave life behind, reaches out for the world of eternal beauty he glimpses in art. In that poem, Byzantium symbolizes that perfect spiritual world; it plays a similar role in this poem.

This time around, though, the speaker seems to have a more complicated idea of the relationship between reality and the ideal. Where in "Sailing to Byzantium" the speaker seems to long to leave the imperfect physical world behind completely (though with some regrets), here the speaker explores a paradoxical connection between real, bodily existence and ideal, spiritual existence. The artwork that brings people close to divinity, the speaker can't help but admit, has to grow out of the "mire and blood" of life: sacred art is made by earthly artists.

One image in particular links these two poems: the golden bird. In "Sailing to Byzantium," a gorgeous golden statue of a bird symbolizes eternal beauty and worth. In "Byzantium," another such statue is both miraculous and intimidating: in its perfection, it's so far above any "common bird" of flesh and blood that it seems to "scorn" them.

Perhaps Yeats chose Byzantium as his symbolic place of perfection because of its real history. Byzantium was a great city, one of the major seats of early Christianity and the home of countless ancient religious traditions. It's known in particular for its great churches (like the "domes" of this poem) and its breathtaking mosaic art (like the glittering sages in "Sailing to Byzantium"). But it's also a long-lost city, almost a legend: first it became Constantinople when the Roman emperor Constantine declared it his capital, then it became modern-day Istanbul. Alluding to this city, Yeats draws on its blend of myth versus reality, sublime art versus messy life, and eternal divinity versus earthly political squabbling.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "After great cathedral gong; / A starlit or a moonlit dome"
- **Lines 17-24:** "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork, / Planted on the starlit golden bough, / Can like the cocks of Hades crow, / Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud / In glory of changeless metal / Common bird or petal / And all complexities of mire or blood."
- **Lines 25-26:** "At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit / Flames that no faggot feeds,"
- **Line 35:** "The golden smithies of the Emperor!"

ALLITERATION

Intensely musical alliteration helps to give this poem its ecstatic, almost hypnotized tone.

For instance, listen to the sounds from the fourth stanza (lines 25-30):

> At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
> Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
> Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
> Where blood-begotten spirits come
> And all complexities of fury leave,
> Dying into a dance,

The echoing /fl/ and /f/ sounds here suggest the flutter of the very flames these words describe. The strong /b/ and /d/ alliteration that follows builds on those repetitions, helping to evoke the rhythmic sounds of the wild "dance" those "blood-begotten spirits" perform in the visionary fire.

Back in the first stanza, meanwhile, a spell of alliteration prepares readers for some of the poem's major ideas:

> A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
> All that man is,
> All mere complexities,
> The fury and the mire of human veins.

The ringing /d/ sounds of that disdainful church dome contrast with the muddier /m/ sound of "man," "mere," and "mire"—all words that suggest humanity's smallness, imperfection, and mess. The internal slant rhyme of "mere" and "mire" strengthens that connection between "mere" human beings and the metaphorical and literal "mire" (or mud) they wallow in.

Alliteration works like this throughout the poem, elevating and intensifying its language.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "resonance recedes"

- **Line 4:** "great," "gong"
- **Line 5:** "dome disdains"
- **Line 6:** "man"
- **Line 7:** "mere"
- **Line 8:** "mire"
- **Line 11:** "bobbin bound"
- **Line 12:** "unwind," "winding"
- **Line 13:** "mouth," "moisture"
- **Line 14:** "mouths may," "summon"
- **Line 15:** "superhuman"
- **Line 20:** "Can," "cocks," "crow"
- **Line 23:** "Common," "bird"
- **Line 24:** "complexities," "blood"
- **Line 25:** "flit"
- **Line 26:** "Flames," "faggot feeds," "steel"
- **Line 27:** "storm"
- **Line 28:** "blood-begotten"
- **Line 30:** "Dying," "dance"
- **Line 32:** "singe," "sleeve"
- **Line 34:** "Spirit," "spirit," "smithies"
- **Line 36:** "floor"
- **Line 37:** "Break bitter," "furies"
- **Line 40:** "torn," "tormented"

VOCABULARY

Recede (Line 1, Line 3) - To fall back or diminish.

Unpurged (Line 1) - Unpurified; not yet cleaned or washed away.

Soldiery (Line 2) - Soldiers, army.

Abed (Line 2) - In bed.

Night-walkers (Lines 3-4) - These "night-walkers" might just be people out for a late-night stroll—but they might also be sex workers.

Disdains (Lines 5-6) - Looks down on, scorns.

Mire (Line 8, Line 24, Line 33) - Mud—especially the sucking, hard-to-escape mud of a bog or swamp.

Shade (Lines 9-10) - A ghost; the spectral form of a dead person.

Hades' bobbin (Line 11) - "Hades" was the Greek god of the underworld. A "bobbin" is a spool of thread.

Embittered (Line 21) - Made cynical and sour.

Flit (Lines 25-26) - Flicker; pass over lightly and quickly, like a bird.

Faggot (Line 26) - A bundle of firewood.

Begotten (Lines 27-28) - Born from.

Singe (Line 32) - Scorch, burn slightly.

Astraddle (Line 33) - Riding, sitting with legs to either side.

Smithies (Lines 34-35) - Workshops for craftspeople who work with metals.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Byzantium" echoes its earlier sister poem, "Sailing to Byzantium," but with a difference. Like "Sailing to Byzantium," "Byzantium" is written in eight-line stanzas (a.k.a. octaves)—five of them, in this case. But while the earlier poem was written in formal *ottava rima*, this poem is not.

These similarities and differences reflect the evolution of Yeats's thoughts (and perhaps the speaker's). In "Sailing to Byzantium," the speaker, a weary old man, imagines leaving the land of youth behind to make a journey to the mythic city where he hopes to learn immortality from the sages represented in ancient mosaics. The speaker in *this* poem, speaking from Byzantium rather than planning to embark for it, seems both a little ambivalent about the glory of Byzantine art (which seems to "scorn" and "disdain" mere mortals here, not just transcend them) and a little more ready to explore the connection between the everyday and the eternal.

The same-but-different form of this poem might thus reflect a philosophical development, a variation on a theme.

METER

"Byzantium" uses a metrical scheme of Yeats's own invention. The poem is written mostly in iambs—that is, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. The first three lines of each stanza are written in iambic pentameter—lines of five iambs in a row, as in line 9:

> Be**fore** | me **floats** | an **im-** | age, **man** | or **shade**,

After that, things get a little more complicated. The stanzas start to introduce lines of tetrameter (four feet in a row) and trimeter (three feet), often in iambs but sometimes in trochees (the opposite of iambs, with a DUM-da rhythm, as in "**com**mon"), and sometimes in accentual meter, sticking to a regular number of *stresses* without keeping to predictable *feet*. The stanzas always close on another pentameter line.

Each stanza, then, uses a pattern that's at once regular (across the poem) and unpredictable (line to line):

- Three lines of iambic pentameter
- A line of tetrameter (as in the trochaic tetrameter of "**Af**ter | **great** ca- | **the**dral | **gong**")
- Another line of iambic pentameter
- Two lines of trimeter (as in "I **hail** | the **su-** | per **hu**man")

- And a concluding line of iambic pentameter.

The overall effect is a sense of gathering intensity, vision, and surprise. The longer, more thoughtful pentameter lines seem to evaporate away, cooking down into those short, powerful trimeter lines, then stretching out again at the end of the stanza. This rhythm helps to give this poem its mystical tone, tracing the speaker's movement in and out of strange, flashing visions.

RHYME SCHEME

The weaving rhyme scheme of "Byzantium" runs like this:

AABBCDDC

That regular pattern, however, is pretty subtle, almost subliminal: a whole lot of the rhymes here are slant, like "recede" and "abed," "is" and "complexities," "summon" and "superhuman." They also cut across the shapeshifting meter, pairing longer and shorter lines. The overall effect is more murky, echoey, and suggestive than orderly and ringing—a flavor that chimes with the poem's mystical tone.

SPEAKER

Readers only learn about this speaker indirectly; there's no hint of this person's age, gender, or circumstances. What the speaker sees and thinks on a visionary wander through Byzantium, though, reveals that they both long for and fear the perfection of art and the beauties of the spiritual world.

The speaker's awe at Byzantium's shining domes and golden birds is tempered by a sense of awestruck fear, perhaps even shame. A perfect golden statue of a bird, the speaker feels, must "scorn" real birds for their relative drab imperfection. Only through a series of strange visions can the speaker come to terms with a mystery: art's perfection *needs* messy, mortal humanity to come into being. It takes a journey through the "mire and blood" of everyday life to reach the spiritual perfection that art embodies here.

In short, this speaker is an idealist, a mystic, and an artist—and thus not unlike William Butler Yeats himself.

SETTING

"Byzantium," readers might not be surprised to discover, is set in Byzantium, an ancient city renowned for its glorious sacred art. The speaker's visit there seems more visionary than literal, for Byzantium no longer exists. First, it was renamed Constantinople by the Emperor Constantine; then, it became the modern city known as Istanbul. While many of the Byzantine Empire's treasures remain in Istanbul, Byzantium itself is only a romantic vision.

That legendary mood perfectly suits the speaker's purposes. With its timeless population of "soldier[s]" and "night-walkers" and its glittering "dome[s]," the poem's Byzantium is a symbolic city of the body and the spirit, a place where the mess of everyday life and the perfection of art coexist.

Yeats often returned to an imagined Byzantium in his poems, perhaps in part because of its spiritual history: it was a major seat of early Christianity, with a legacy of glorious mosaic art.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) is widely considered the most influential Irish poet in modern history. He was the central figure of the Irish Literary Revival (a.k.a. the Celtic Twilight), a movement that brought renewed attention to Ireland's literature, culture, and Gaelic heritage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For his contributions to his country's poetic heritage, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923.

He began writing around the age of 17; "Byzantium" was one of his later works, appearing in the 1930 collection *Words for Music Perhaps, and Other Poems*. His influences were wide and diverse, including Irish mythology and folklore, the poetry of the English Romantics (Wordsworth, Blake, and Keats in particular) and the writings of the French Symbolists (such as Stephen Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud).

"Byzantium" can be read as a companion piece to Yeats's equally famous "Sailing to Byzantium" (1926). Both poems are the work of an older writer reflecting on his art and the transcendence he's sought through it; of "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats said, "I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul..."

This poem also reflects Yeats's deep interest in mysticism and the occult. The golden birds, starlit domes, and deathless flames of "Byzantium" speak to Yeats's belief in a kind of collective human unconscious (the "Spiritus Mundi"), from which poets could draw cryptic, powerful images and symbols like water from a well.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Yeats was a prominent public figure, the first Irishman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was integral to the Irish Literary revival, which was a key part of the Irish push for political and cultural autonomy. Indeed, Yeats's Irish patriotism was in part the reason why so much of his early poetry is overtly political. "Easter, 1916," for example, was written in response to an (ultimately unsuccessful) Irish uprising against British rule.

By the time Yeats published this poem in 1930, though, he was

moving away from political poetry and into a more mystical style. "Byzantium," like "Sailing to Byzantium," is a soul-searching poem of artistic transcendence and heavenly perfection—themes that aren't attached to any particular time, place, or event.

However, even this unearthly idealism had some unsavory political implications: preferring grand national mythologies and overarching philosophical systems to individualistic democracy, Yeats sympathized with the rising fascist governments of the early 20th century.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/5XXC1uPGIBs)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Yeats's life and work at the Poetry Foundation's website. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)
- Yeats's Influence — Listen to a radio program discussing Yeats's complex legacy as an artist and a thinker. (https://www.npr.org/2020/11/28/939561949/opinion-reading-william-butler-yeats-100-years-later?t=1651527554457)
- A Celebration of Yeats — Read an article about the 2015 celebration of Yeats's 150th birthday. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/28/irish-poet-wb-yeats-150th-birthday-celebrations)
- Yeats's Voice — Listen to a recording of Yeats performing his own poetry and get a feel for his sense of music. (https://youtu.be/u2FT4_UUa4I)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- Adam's Curse
- Among School Children
- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- A Prayer for my Daughter
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- The Song of Wandering Aengus
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- When You Are Old

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