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Deciphering Meanings through Poetic Devices in W.B. Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" and "Byzantium"

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Abstract
Literary devices have long been used by writers to enhance their writings, beautify it, as well as convey deeper meanings attached with the written word, implicitly traversing beyond the pages to augment the readers' imagination. The techniques, styles, and strategies available to the writer empowers their poetic license, enabling them to create artistic pieces that are admired for centuries. Such tools in the hands of writers such as William Butler Yeats turn into weapons that fight under the spirit of Irish Nationalism and help navigate complexity surrounding mysticism – all through words that spread and impact the twentieth century literary scene. Moreover, Yeats's founding of the Symbolist Movement in English poetry in turn bestowed significance on such techniques of writing, making this analysis of his most important contributions – "Lapis Lazuli and "Byzantium" – through the lens of literary devices even more consequential. The intention of this article thus, is to interpret meanings through his treatment of literary devices.

Keywords: W.B. Yeats, poetic devices, symbols, metaphors, Byzantium, Lapis Lazuli, mysticism

The long accomplished literary career of William Butler Yeats (1865-1989) started with Romanticism of the nineteenth century to gradually be influenced by Modernism[i] of the early twentieth century. From esoteric mysticism to politics and cynicism – in all his transitions, he demonstrated preoccupation with "fresh images,"[ii] that rendered his fantasies into art and developed his aesthetic view founded on the relationship between art and life. While in "Byzantium" (1930), he expounds on the spiritual journey of the soul through art, in "Lapis lazuli" (1936) he defends that art as a living, moving, mental process, analogous to life itself. In that process, he uses imagery, personification, juxtaposition, and symbolism to give prominence to something to which he accords such immense notability.

In the first stanza to "Lapis lazuli," Yeats offers the background to the poem:

> "Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out, Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls" (Yeats, lines 5-6)

He draws parallels between King Billy of Organge, who pitched in bomb-shells at the Battle of Boyne[iii] in 1690 and his modern counter-part, Kaiser Wilhelm II whose zeppelin and airplane had harried the English in the First World War. By referencing the war phobia and panic that gripped Europe at the time, he offers insight into the various ways art was

perceived amidst the apprehension of air-raids and raining incendiary bombs. However, he subtly undercuts the frustration with art by deliberately using colloquial phrases: "sick of," "everybody knows or else should know," "if nothing drastic is done," "beaten flat." The use of the word "drastic" in line 5, which is meant to show the "hysterical women['s]" urgency of defeating threat, rather displays Yeats' fatalistic view of the mindlessness and brutality of social action. Katherine Snipes inferences this from the word's literal implications of violence and Yeats' intentional colloquial[iv] diction. The aggressive crudity of the verse[v] expresses his impatience with the belief that poets perform no function within the political and social milieu. In fact, the whole concept of art is referred to contemptuously as "palette and fiddle-bow."

To present his arguments against this belief, he uses the repetition[vi] of the word – "gay." Used throughout the poem, the word acquires different meanings as the poem progresses. It is introduced as an anti-thesis of the tragic, denoting the bright, the cheerful, the buoyant and perhaps, even the frivolous. The juxtaposition[vii] of "tragic" versus "gay" is exemplified in the characters of Hamlet and Lear, who are tragic protagonists with tragic endings, but who "Do not break up their lines to weep." As characters in a play, they speak their lines clearly, observe their rhythms and sonorities and delight in the beauty of those rhymes. Thus, Yeats indicates that "gay" is this beauty that "transforms all that dread." On the face of it, this gaiety and gladness of poets and artists seemed to be out of tune when calamity was looking in the face but, now, they symbolize a source of strength and power to transform life.

Here, Yeats also uses the trope of a play, where the "great stage" holds the conventional meaning of world's-a-stage, but the tragic figure is gay through participation and sensitive awareness of his role. By "all perform their tragic play" (Yeats, line 9), Yeats allegorizes[viii] all of mankind and reminds us that we too ramble like Hamlet and rage like Lear – we too face sorrow and loss – but, the crowning moment is before the curtain drops. "Curtain" then becomes a vivid metaphor[ix] for death and disaster, which Yeats clarifies as "Blackout." Snipes emphasizes on the lines following this as:

> "The uncompromising abruptness of the stop after 'out' with the explosive contradictory impressions of blackness and blazing, Heaven and extinction coming down as a bomb – or as a final cataclysmic insight – is 'Tragedy wrought to its uttermost,' both as art and as life." (Snipes, 15)

In lines 25-26, rhyme and repetition describe the cyclicity of history: hordes of invaders swoop in on "camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back", wipe out civilizations, only to decay and die eventually. Following this, after Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Yeats uses Callimachus as an allusion[x] to allude to the nature of destruction and construction. Together, these concepts juxtapose the cataclysmic waves of destruction and suffering that humanity has faced and continues to face, with the joy of rebuilding, forsaking individual defeat.

Finally, Yeats describes the personified embodiments of Chinamen in the carvings of lapis lazuli, where stone, cracks, and dents, become avalanches or falling water or lofty snowy slopes, and a musician[xi] is invited to play. He immediately imagines the smell of

cherry blossoms and the climb up the mountain, from the vivid colors of the carvings. The life instilled in them transforms into a journey which ends at an imaginary half-way house from where they contemplate the tragic drama which is behind them and below them. Snipes suggests that by describing the unheard "mournful melodies," Yeats has made the actual seem fake and the mythic seem live. Personification[xii] has made supposed "ancient glittering eyes" more authentic than the false strident voices of hysterical women. Thus, the final "gay" stands for everything that is life-affirming and speaks of the value of human effort.

On the other hand, "Byzantium" weaves mythology and symbolism in and out of scenes of spiritual transformation. The imagery[xiii] is intense and fantastical as human souls, in order to regenerate, undergo transformation involving metaphysical fire (illumination) and water (purification). The first stanza sets the tone of the poem, in which "the fury and mire of human veins" invite an atmosphere of darkness, depth and surrealism.

William Empson is quick to point out that Yeats' studies of esoteric philosophy, mythology and mysticism play into his extreme use of symbols in "Byzantium." For instance, the dolphins symbolize resurrection, as they are associated with Aphrodite and Apollo[xiv] or even guides to the unconscious because of their capability to form deep relationships with human beings. In fact, the imagery of Byzantium itself is so profound, that Yeats suggests this definition:

> "Describe Byzantium as it is the system towards the end of the first Christian millennium. A walking mummy flows at the street comers where the soul is purified, birds of hammered gold singing in the golden tree, in the bower, offering their backs to the wailing dead that they may carry them to Paradise." (Empson, 71)

Byzantium is thus, not confined to the allusion of a historical city of the Holy Roman Empire, but wholly embodies the mystic Paradise. While Byzantium of the distant age was a site of innumerable wars, the "unpurged images of day" and "drunken soldiery" also indicate the bloody realities of the Irish Freedom Struggle which concerned Yeats immensely. The massive casualties after the war seem to warrant purgatory and art becomes the best refuge for it. Even the dome of the church which he alluded to as the Church of Hagia Sophia in Byzantium "distains" as men have become unworthy of this vault of heaven.

Then the poet sees an image—hardly identifiable—of a spirit from the land of the dead. Its description as "Shade more than man, more image than a shade;" is juxtaposed with the very real human veins in the previous line, highlighting the virtual existence of this being. Yet, the imagery extended to this transient being is specific – "Hades' bobbin bound in mummy cloth." The alliteration used in "bobbin bound" seem to provide reality to this imagination. This paradox, in its appearance, is accentuated by the "superhuman" quality that Yeats ascribes it by calling it death-in-life and life-in-death. Interestingly, Empson notes:

> "If we interpret it as a part of the poetic process, imagination resolves the differences in the raw materials supplied by the physical world. The poet in that mystical state destroys all the differences between life and death. He is both living and dead—dead to the world and living in the world of spirit." (Empson, 88)

Thus, Yeats successfully employs his own quality in personifying the image he creates for us. The marginal distinction between life and death creates an intermediary stage of suffering and purgation which foreshadows[xv] the destiny of other souls in the rest of the poem.

The golden bird[xvi] in the next line, symbolizes the eternity and glory of art like the dome mentioned in the first stanza. Its golden color paints the image of the golden age of Byzantine art, which stands for the glory of eternal reality, transcending "all complexities of mire and blood." "More miracle than bird or handiwork" gives the bird a timeless quality, which Empson suggests, signifies the unattainable made real. The allegory of Hades and Hades' "cock" is used to indicate the continuing cycle of reincarnating human life, in opposition to the trivialities of that which each life concerns itself with.

Fire too, is personified with the characteristics of the spiritual realm as "no steel has lit [it]; nor storms disturb [it]." Yeats details this magnificence and power of fire in his essay, *A Vision* (1925)[xvii]:

> "...we may escape from the constraint of our nature and from that of external things, entering upon a state where all fuel has become flame…"

Empson notes that the metaphysical fire is both a literal fire where souls purge themselves, and a metaphorical fire, full of intense energy and passion, complimented by the ecstatic dead dance of the souls: "Spirits from the physical world— 'blood-begotten'—come here and by dreaming their former experiences expatiate for their sins."

Finally, after the souls have been purified, the struggle with the "mires" of flesh is repudiated for the spiritual in the "gong-tormented sea" and the smiths of the emperor arrive to work on them and give them inimitable images. The last stanza is embedded with literary devices: amplification[xviii] of resurrection through "dolphins" and "golden smithies;" analogy[xix] of the "sea" as life; and anthropomorphism of the "sea" that is tormented by the realities of the physical world.

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Notes:

[i] A movement characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional ways of writing in both poetry and prose fiction writing.
[ii] Line 39 of "Byzantium."
[iii] A battle in 1690 between the forces of the deposed King James II, and those of King William III who, with his wife Queen Mary II, had acceded to the Crowns of England and Scotland in 1689.
[iv] Colloquialisms are words and expressions that become commonplace within a specific language, geographic region, or historical era. Authors use it as a literary device to give personality and authenticity to their characters.
[v] Snipes also suggests that the impending doom of war is alluded to through the reference of a ballad called "The Battle of the Boyne," which was popularly known at the time.
[vi] Repetition is a literary device that involves intentionally using a word or phrase for effect, two or more times in a speech or written work.
[vii] Juxtaposition is a literary device which places two concepts or objects next to or near each other, thereby highlighting their innate differences and similarities.
[viii] As a literary device or artistic form, an allegory is a narrative or visual representation in which a character, place, or event can be interpreted to represent a hidden meaning with moral or political significance.
[ix] Metaphor is a common poetic device where an object in, or the subject of, a poem is described as the same as another otherwise unrelated object.
[x] An allusion is a literary device that references a person, place, thing, or event in the real world so that the reader can relate to the emotion expressed by the poet, without being expressed directly.
[xi] In order to complete the trio of arts, musician is invited after drama and sculpture have already been discussed.
[xii] Personification is a poetic device where animals, plants or even inanimate objects, are given human qualities – resulting in a poem full of imagery and description.
[xiii] Imagery is a literary device used in poetry, novels, and other writing that uses vivid description that appeals to the readers' senses to create an image or idea in their head.
[xiv] Reference is found within Greek literary tradition.
[xv] Foreshadowing is a literary device used to give an indication or hint of what is to come later in the story. Foreshadowing is useful for creating suspense, a feeling of unease, a sense of curiosity, or a mark that things may not be as they seem.
[xvi] Possibly from a story of a mechanical golden bird that would 'sing' from a tree in the gardens of a Byzantine emperor.
[xvii] Quoted by William Empson in his essay (refer to Bibliography).
[xviii] Amplification is a poetic device where a writer embellishes a sentence to emphasize or exaggerate certain points.
[xix] An analogy is a literary device used to compare similarities between two unrelated things as a way to make a point through the comparison.