

MOMENTARY PLEASURE AND EVERLASTING ECSTASY IN YEATS' *SAILING TO BYZANTIUM*

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Article Received: 26/11/2025

Article Accepted: 27/12/2025

Published Online: 28/12/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.12.474

Abstract:

Satisfying the senses, all enjoy but mostly till the glow of the skin in the world, while wrinkled skins are worthless for all these satisfactions. That an old man does not connect successfully with the sensual pleasures thread barely; because of the time-bound phenomenon of the body of human beings which contains both, the senses and the *Soul*. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was a prominent figure in the realm of the modern Irish Literature in English, whose lyrics incorporate symbolism, imagism, mysticism, romanticism and lyricism. Impact of the scriptures like the *Bible* and the *Vedas* has given an outstanding leading path of the lyrics, those are advocating the route of enlightenment, religion, glory, spirituality, serenity and metaphysical prosperity. Superiority of the *Soul* over the *Senses* are one of the most relevant themes of this poem. This research article explores the themes of the momentary pleasure and the everlasting ecstasy in Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*. At the age of around 63, the poet composed the lyric in 1928 is a profound exploration of the human desire for transcendence and the quest for eternal life. Through the deep study of the poem, this article argues that Yeats presents a contradiction between the momentary pleasures of the physical world of the senses, and the permanent ecstasy of the spiritual realm. The article examines poet's imagery, symbolism, spirituality, and philosophical ideas to convey the notion that true happiness and fulfillment can only be achieved by surpassing the limitations of the corporeal life-span.

Key-Words: Pleasure, Ecstasy, Byzantium, Yeats, Soul

Introduction

Fulfilling the senses, all enjoy but mostly till the glow of the skin in the world, while wrinkled skins are worthless for all these satisfactions. That an old man does not connect successfully with the sensual pleasures wholly—because of the time-bound phenomenon of the

body of human beings which contains both, the senses and the *Soul*. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was a prominent figure in the realm of the modern Irish Literature in English, whose lyrics incorporate symbolism, imagism, mysticism, romanticism and lyricism. At the age of around 63, W.B. Yeats composed the lyric in 1928 i.e., a profound exploration of the human desire for transcendence and the quest of eternal life. Through the deep study of the poem, this article argues that Yeats presents a contradiction between the momentary pleasures of the physical world of the senses, and the permanent ecstasy of the spiritual realm of the *Soul*.

The article examines the poet's use of imagery, symbolism, spirituality, and philosophical ideas to convey the notion that true happiness and fulfillment can only be achieved by surpassing the limitations of corporeal life-span on the ground of the sacred bliss of scriptures. The present research article explores the themes of the momentary pleasure and everlasting ecstasy in Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*.

Impact of the *Bible* and the *Vedas* has given an outstanding leading path of his lyrics, those are advocating the route of enlightenment, religion, glory, spirituality, serenity and metaphysical prosperity. Superiority of *Soul* over *Senses* are one of the most relevant themes of this poem. Central speaker of the present lyric is an old man, or the poet himself. *Sailing to Byzantium*, a destination that represents the realm of eternal beauty and wisdom, peace and prosperity in search of a more profound and lasting experience of super-reality. In the rarefied realm of the modernist poetry, Yeats' poem stands as a towering witness to the human quest for divine existence and perpetual life of bliss. This conspicuous piece is a profound exploration of the human condition, a touching contradiction between the short-lived pleasures of the physical world of the senses, and the enduring ecstasy of the spiritual realm of the *Soul*. It reminds us the sacred lines from *Devi Bhagavata Purana* in which following line has occurred:

"The everlasting state of happiness attained through the realization of the self as one with the universe. ... The ultimate state of happiness and fulfillment that comes from unity with Brahman."¹

This article will pilot the intricate web of Yeats' masterpiece, examining the poet's masterful use of imagery, symbolism, sacred and philosophical emotions and notions to convey the message that true happiness and fulfillment can only be achieved by excelling the limitations of the earthly life.

Momentary Nature of the Sensual Pleasures

Experiences of the poet unfolds the secret of life that sensual pleasures are fickle and momentary. On the one hand, the youths are enjoying pleasures in the form of an outcome from the senses; while on the other hand, the same youths become old after passing of the years, and they are unable to satisfy their thirst of the desire due to lack of capability of the senses under dilemma of this bitter change of the same. References are given of "young",

“birds”, “salmon”, “mackerel”, and finally, a universal concept is projected before the readers through the example of “fish”, “flesh” and “fowl”. Symbolical interpretation may be following:

- (a) “Fish” symbolizes the young creatures of the waters those are busy in pleasure and reproduction as have no sense of realization of the eternal *Soul*.
- (b) “Flesh” is an indicative of the young inhabitants on the earth, those are completely involved in the pleasures of the senses, forgetting the star of the life, the *Soul*.
- (c) “Fowl” directs the flying birds in the sky, whose homes are the trees and buses; are enveloped into the sensual music of merry-making at the grant of their senses.

In the first stanza of the lyric, the poet asserts that all the young creatures of the water, the earth, and the sky are of the same nature in the affair of ignoring their selves at the rate of sensual pleasures of the body, which provide momentary pleasure—that begins and ends within a while. Options are open to all the creatures, whether to be into the depth of the simple pleasures, or into the ecstasy of the bliss of the permanent joy, under the influence of the star of the life, the *Soul*. Meanwhile, there is no scope of the old men, who were once young before years; as they are physically and sensually not able to enjoy. But indications are given through the narration of the contrast between the momentary pleasure and that of the eternal bliss of everlasting nature at the value of realization of the divinity of the *Soul* within every creature, those are in reality, the offsprings of the *Maker*. The poet asserts:

“That is no country for old men. The young

In one another’s arms, ...

—Those dying generations—at their song,”.²

Nature of the temporary pleasures are narrated through various steps in the lyric, which clearly explains the differences between sensual pleasures and that of the bliss of ecstasy in the world. “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies” symbolizes the temporary nature of the pleasures of the body whose base is sense of the body, where a permanent and stable joy is never possible, as senses themselves are momentary and fickle. That is why the poet explicates

“Caught in that sensual music all neglect³

Monuments of unageing intellect.”

Body is nothing but a carcass without “unageing intellect” i.e., the *Soul*, which has generally been neglected by the youths while their senses are full of energy and potential due course of time but the same becomes incompetent of enjoying sense-based pleasures in the forthcoming stage of life as an old man. A beautiful contrast has been established between the momentary and the eternal—the physical and the metaphysical, and the body and the *Soul*.

Similar feeling is there in the escapist-lyrical poem, entitled, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* in which poet’s longing for life in the lap of nature has clearly been presented. Being irritated by the hectic life-schedule of the urban life, Yeats contemplates:

“I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore

;

While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.”⁴

Mentioned lines are highly symbolical where imagery is at the top. Pictorial quality is powerful, as the poet standing in the street is able to listen the sounds of the waves of the water. So much deep is the imagery. Fulfilment of the senses is into the depth.

Quest for Eternal Ecstasy

In the next stanza of the metrical composition, the poet explores the deep philosophy of life, where an old man is described worthless without the realization of the *Maker*. Illusions of life, based on the senses, are as vast as the sea which the poet through the experiences have crossed and then in the form of the result, finds the glory of the unageing intellect. An old man is described as “a paltry thing” who is too small to be considered important in the matter of enjoying ecstasy without being in the center of the most powerful force of life, the *Soul*. An old man's body has been compared with that of a “tattered coat upon a stick”, where every tatter of the coat is undoubtedly indicates the sin of the body, and the senses of the person for which suggested repentance through the prayer of the Omnipotent.

Composed in the personal fashion, the poet using “I” for himself; announces that an old man is not capable of the enjoyment of the sensual pleasures fully. It should be the holy duty of the aged person to remember the magnificent eternal intellect of his own, whose presence is the existence of the self in the form of life within the body. That the *Soul* is the whole of the body of an individual, that is the complete source of the permanent joy, ecstasy and the bliss forever. There are a harmony and a balance in the narration of the authority of the *Soul* of human body by the poet, where he expresses that mystery of the glory of the self, as is a subject of study even today and from the ages and ages; but the depth is unattained till now. Yet the glory of the self is beyond any doubt and confusion, it is another matter that all the scholars are under the process of the finding complete glory of the magnificent, peerless, powerfully shining star of life that is the unending source of ecstasy forever for everyone, whether young, or old carelessly.

Realization of the divine power of the self is one of the most remarkable themes of the poem. The philosopher points out the importance of being close to the self who is the factual master of everything of life—ups and downs, the pleasure and the ecstasy, the body and the *Soul*, the senses and the intellect, and mores. An individual is a lord of one's mental universe. It is under control whether to fasten the self—to the senses of the body those are for a very short period, and not stable, or to the permanent bliss, who is the everlasting source of ecstasy and bliss, but the poet advocates the glory of the self and suggests the readers for being close to the self; and remembering the outstanding curing capacity and boon of the

human *Soul*, that is capable of removing every odds and establishing pure, stable and never-ending ecstasy within human; careless of the age—young , or old. Yeats pours out philosophical feelings in the following line:

“And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.”⁵

Like *Sailing to Byzantium*, Yeats’ *The Second Coming* is also full of deep imagery and symbol, where the contemplation of the poet is massive. Highly symbolical with the touch of religion, the lyric announces the second incarnation of the lord, *Christ*. Lamentation is also there on the decay and degradation of the culture and civilization. Here, “falcon” symbolizes the whole generation of the 20th century, and the “falconer” indicates the hold of then culture, civilization and religion over the generation. The poet unfolds:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart;”⁶

Symbol of Byzantium

Byzantium is a symbol of the spiritual realm of the peace and the prosperity, a place where the boundaries of time and space are surpassed. The city is described as a place of “monuments of unageing intellect”, where the creations of human imagination are conserved and celebrated. The speaker’s voyage to *Byzantium*, i.e., city of the *Soul*; is a metaphor for the final destination of an individual’s journey to the realm of the eternal beauty and the truth. Dragging back all the illusions and the deceptive appearance of reality; the philosopher has sailed the boat of life to the coast of the city of eternity, and finally, enters into the world of everlasting ecstasy which is the city of the *Soul*, *Byzantium*.

Without continuous prayer and devotion to the *Supreme Power*, life of an old man is worthless, boring and tiresome. There must be a deep sense of awareness of conviction among the old men for their sins of the previous years. Experiencing these provide a blissful life of ecstasy among them, and their lives would be far from any type of regret and depression. Emphasis has been given, “sing and louder sing” the glory of the *Supreme Power of the Universe* for a rapturous life of bliss, and blessings on the earth for all the stages of the life of the human beings. For “every tatter in its mortal dress” symbolizes each sin and misadventure done in the previous years of life before realization of the eternity of the *Soul*, and before reaching the destination, or the goal of *Byzantium*.

Terrible consequence of the fragmentation of civilization is presented in the poem, *The Second Coming*, the prophet foretells the second birth of *Christ*. Twentieth century chaos disturbed the poet as a great thinker, who reverberates the upcoming of God again for ordering the disordered. Reference of *Bethlehem* makes the poem religious, where the birth place of Christ is intimated. The poet expresses:

“That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"⁷

Paradox between the Senses and the Soul

Yeats presents a dichotomy between the body and the soul, the senses and the unageing intellect, the temporary and the permanent, the momentary and the everlasting, the life of pleasure and the life of bliss—the former being associated with the transitory pleasures of the physical world, and the latter with the enduring ecstasy of the mystical monarchy. The poet suggests that the body is only a container for the *Soul*, and that true gladness and contentment can only be attained by excelling the boundaries of the corporeal-ecosphere.

The poet's use of imagery, symbolism, and philosophical ideas creates a rich and complex exploration of the human conditions. Yeats draws upon his fascination with the mystical and the spiritual, incorporating elements of the *Bible* and the *Eastern Sacred* philosophy of the mysticism into the poem. The result is a work of profound depth and complexity, a poem that continues to resonate with readers today. Differences between the life of the body and that of the *Soul* is the prominent theme of the poem. Similar is the view in the *Eastern* philosophy of *Hinduism*, which explains:

"Body and soul signify the distinction between the physical body as a temporary vessel and the eternal soul as the true essence. This concept highlights the duality of physical existence and spiritual essence."⁸

In the third development of the thoughts and emotions of the lyric, the preacher announces the glory of the *Maker*, Who is present in everyone's body in the form of the *Soul*. Human *Soul* is described as "God's holy fire", and the senses of the body as "sages". The poet invites all the sensual powers of the body to join the holy city, *Byzantium*, which is the metaphorical city of the *Soul*. As is the cycle of "perne"; must be the route of the senses of the physical body of an individual, while the metaphysical existence of the body will remain forever the golden city of *Byzantium*, where the *Soul* exists permanently with its bliss and ecstasy.

Momentary Pleasure and Everlasting Ecstasy

Uncontrolled human desires are presented as diseases which make weak, helpless and life without zeal and heal but of anxiety and disappointment. Throughout the lines and the stanzas of the poem, the saint would like to express running away from the sickness of life, as desires of senses have made the prophet sick; which only the power of the *Soul* can replace through everlasting bliss, and permanent ecstasy on the earth in the world.

Currents of the unlimited human desires are fruitless, which create anger, frustration, regret, anxiety, fever, negativity, and all those dark-sides of life, when the desires are either unfulfilled, or satisfied but give birth to more other everlasting desires. Human desires break an individual into pieces, and the fragmentation of the human personality is one of the mottos of the senses, if not under control of the unageing intellect, the *Soul*, while a permanent

solution is provided by the *Soul* which makes its presence through the eternity and the permanent ecstasy that is based on never-ending and its fruits are the same; while bodily pleasures are momentary, that's why transitory, and not stable but fickle. Thus, Yeats reiterates:

“Consume my heart away; sick with desire And fastened to a dying animal ...
... and gather me Into the artifice of eternity.”⁹

Earnest prayer is done before the *Lord* to keep the poet far from the evils of the senses. The poet is irritated by the disturbance of the senses, which are so much unstable and temporary— finally, leading fever, anxiety, hopelessness and melancholy.

Superiority of Eternal Ecstasy over Momentary Pleasure

Concluding stanza of the piece discloses the promise of the speaker to himself in which he declares to make drowsy “Emperor awake” if once be “out of nature”. Philosophical strain is at the top in the lines of the last stanza of the lyric, where the senses of human beings are presented as “lords and ladies” of the city of the *Soul*, *Byzantium*. The writer unfolds:

“Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing.”¹⁰

Determination and the iron-will of the poet for being stable after coming out from the sensual prison has been claimed. Examples of “Grecian goldsmith”, “hammered gold” and “gold enameling” are straightforwardly indicative of the massive will-power of the poet where he promises to keep stable and static the ecstasy. Gold is pure, and shining, symbolizes eternity; and the poet's intention is the same that once being out of the mud of the complexities and mire, he is not going to return to the same, and will be forever far-distant from these sensual desires; consequently, will remain in the aura of the *Soul*, that is the city, *Byzantium*.

Yeats, a mysticist, was a poet who believed in the practices of the mysticism, seeking direct, intuitive union, or communion with the divine, ultimate reality, or *God*. Often through realization, prayer, and meditation, rather than just doctrine, or reason, he has been aiming for spiritual-enlightenment. The poet's experience was profound, sometimes inexpressible, states of consciousness, where the self seems to unite with the universal. Philosophy of the *Gita* is clearly seen in the last line of the piece in which the poet would like to sing the past, present and the future without any complain accepting all as the will of *God*. He reverberates

“... to sing To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.”¹¹

Above stanza bears the drops of nectar from the *Gita*. What has already been happened, what is going on, and what will be—everything will be correct and justified as per the *Gita*, and the same philosophy, we have there in the mentioned line. The *Gita* explicates:

“Whatever happened, happened for the good; whatever is happening, is happening for the good; whatever will happen, will also happen for the good only.”¹²

Conclusion

To conclude, satisfying the senses youths enjoy while wrinkled skins, old men are worthless for all these satisfactions. An old man does not connect successfully with the sensual pleasures wholly, because of the time-bound phenomenon of the senses. Impact of multiple scriptures has given an outstanding leading path of *Sailing to Byzantium*, advocating the route of enlightenment, religion, glory, spirituality, serenity and metaphysical prosperity. Deliberating the superiority of the *Soul* over the senses, the present research article explores the themes of momentary pleasure and everlasting ecstasy. Dealing with a profound exploration of the human desire and the quest for eternal life, the article examines the poet's use of imagery, symbolism, spirituality, and philosophical ideas to convey the notion that true happiness and fulfillment can only be achieved by surpassing the limitations of corporeal life-span—establishing harmony with the everlasting star of life, the *Soul* from the city of *Byzantium*.

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