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## UNIT 44 THE LATER POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

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### 44.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit we will concentrate on three chosen poems representative of Yeats's later poetic style. In Unit 2 you have already been introduced to the historical and intellectual background to his poetry. The aim here will be to indicate the main directions within the later poetry and above all to undertake a close reading of the three poems in order to recover the wide-ranging ideas and issues that are packed into them.

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### 44.1 INTRODUCTION

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The rich complexity of Yeats's later poetry is best understood through detailed textual analysis. This method is used because valuable as it may be, a general discussion of background and poetic development can hardly do justice to the mastery with which Yeats accommodates the entire modern age within the concretely experienced and irreducibly imaginative life of the text. Since a mature Yeats poem is a tightly woven texture of many threads, we need to unravel the text, to take it apart as it were.

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### 44.2 A NEW POETIC STYLE

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In *Responsibilities* (1914), Yeats chooses his new poetic persona by openly declaring that he was stripping off his coat 'Covered with embroideries/ Out of old mythologies' in order to take up the stylistically more challenging task of walking naked ('A Coat'). In contrast to the vehement political commitment of the middle classes, Yeats's ambivalence remains open to misinterpretation unless we see in it the seed of an essentially artistic detachment that allows him a vantage-point of aloofness and solitude despite immersion in his times. The satirical poems in this collection dealing with the Irish theatre and other controversies (the Dublin art gallery, for instance) relate the crowd, the 'noisy set' of 'Adam's Curse' or the violent, ignorant men of 'No Second Troy' antagonistically to the victimised poet or artist. The artist's freedom from social conventions and bourgeois values is explored in some poems through the adopted persona of the beggar and wanderer. As in the theatre of Synge, this outcast figure has affinities with the Shakespearean Fool, and in Yeats's *oeuvre* looks back to the play *The Hour-Glass* (1903) and forward to the Crazy Jane poems where the intuitive wisdom is deepened by the dimension of gender.

If Yeats cultivates the mask of aristocratic and bardic isolation, it is in search of a 'deep structure' of Irishness, of a unity of consciousness that informs the symbolic forms of a race, beyond the inflammatory urgencies of the moment. This is why he rejects the public platform in favour of solitude: 'Why should we honour those that die upon the field of battle? A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself' (Unpublished notes for a London lecture on 'Contemporary

Poetry'). As he saw it, Maud Gonne, Con Markiewicz and Eva Gore-Booth had all betrayed the aristocratic ideal of courtesy and femininity. While this aristocratic order heroically defies, as in the towering example of Lady Gregory and Coole Park, its own historical doom, Yeats found such tragic heroism equally in the self-destructive energies unleashed in the Easter Rebellion.

Perhaps this dialectic is most easily seen in the next two collections, *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), which signal Yeats's greatest period. In the former, Yeats introduces his preoccupation with ancestral houses. Poems like 'Upon a Dying Lady' and 'A Prayer for My Daughter' look forward to 'Meditations in Time of Civil War,' 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,' 'Coole Park, 1929,' 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931,' 'Lapis Lazuli,' and so on. At the same time, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* is Yeats's first attempt to see the Easter Rebellion as a whole, located in world history, within his philosophy of history. The work for *A Vision* coincides with this period, often directly influencing poems like 'The Double Vision of Michael Robartes,' 'Ego Dominus Tuus,' and 'The Phases of the Moon.'

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### 44.3 'EASTER 1916'

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The background to this poem, written in September 1916, is the Easter Rising in Dublin against British colonial rule. The Irish Republic was proclaimed on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, and the heart of the city occupied by the Republican rebels. Managing to hold out until 29 April, they were defeated and many of their leaders tried and executed. Despite remaining aloof, Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory on 1 May expressing his anguish:

The Dublin tragedy has been a great sorrow and anxiety . . . I have little doubt there have been many miscarriages of justice. . . . I am trying to write a poem on the men executed—'terrible beauty has been born again' . . . I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me—and I am very despondent about the future. At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics.

In a subsequent letter to John Quinn (23 May 1916), Yeats wrote:

This Irish business has been a great grief. We have lost the ablest and most fine-natured of our young men. A world seems to have been swept away. I keep going over the past in my mind and wondering if I could have done anything to turn these young men in some other direction.

Even in June, in a letter to Robert Bridges, Yeats's anguish has not abated: 'All my habits of thought and work are upset by this tragic Irish rebellion which has swept away friends and fellow-workers.'

The rebellion being much closer to Irish experience than the World War, it tied up with Yeats's view of history, producing the chiliastic terror of 'The Second Coming' and 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.' Yeats had thought in 'September 1913' that romantic and heroic Ireland was dead and gone with the death of O'Leary. Instead of the wild geese who spread their grey wings on every tide, Ireland was now ruled by pusillanimous and petty men. In this context the sudden release of 'heroic' energies acquired a doomed tragic dignity heightened by futility. The image stored in the Great Memory (*or Anima Mundi*) for such tragedy was of Celtic ancestry, Deirdre and Cuchulain in particular ('The Statues'). The revolutionaries organized the uprising in clear knowledge of defeat, that is, in the spirit of tragedy.

Images of personal reminiscence become figures of Irish history. The list of his friends begins with Constance Gore-Booth (1868-1927) in the second stanza; her

condition is described also in 'On a Political Prisoner' and 'In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz.' Although she took part in the Rebellion, her death-sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life; she was later released. Yeats had stayed at Lissadell with the Gore-Booth sisters in their late-Georgian grey granite house overlooking Sligo Bay. Such ancestral houses were built and furnished mainly in the eighteenth century ('grey/Eighteenth-century houses'). Next in the list ('This man') is Patrick Pearse (1879-1916), the founder of a boys' school, a member of the Irish Bar and an orator. Commandant-General and President of the provisional government in Easter week, he surrendered in the Post Office. The reference to the 'winged horse' or Pegasus is to his poetic talent. With the stroke of its hoof, Pegasus caused the fountain Hippocrates to flow on Mount Helicon, the abode of the Muses in Greek mythology. 'This other' refers to Thomas MacDonagh (1878-1916), poet, dramatist, critic, and academic whose literary sensibility and regard for Celtic tradition were crushed by mechanical logic so fashionable in Ireland at that time. Next in line is Major John MacBride (1865-1916), Maud Gonne's husband, who had fought against the British in the Boer War. The bitterness and contempt are biographical since Yeats had been his rival in love and since he had done wrong to Maud and perhaps to her daughter Iseult. In the last stanza, we meet James Connolly (1870-1916), a trade unionist, who had organized the Citizen Army and was military commander of all Republican forces in Dublin and Commandant in the Post Office during the Rising.

Like 'Adam's Curse,' 'Easter 1916' begins at a transitional hour and with a transitional action: people at close of day coming out of houses or offices although they are still confined to routine colonial drudgery. These are the people dismissed contemptuously in 'September 1913.' But the muted contrast between the vivid faces and the grey houses subtly prepares us for their revolutionary sacrifice which wrenches them out of an archaic monotony and links them to the eighteenth century but now to the heroic martyrs of the United Irishmen movement led by Edward Fitzgerald and Wolfe Tone.

As these men return from work, from counter or desk, Yeats passes them by with a perfunctory polite recognition: the repetition of 'polite meaningless words' locates the encounter in drab banality. But by the end of the poem, the word has recovered its power: 'I write it out in a verse.' The mocking tale or gibe to be shared with cronies around the fire at the club suggests a shallow sociability against which the revolutionary transformation is effected. The club may refer to the Arts Club in Dublin and therefore to the poet's attitude of amused complacency. This is an Ireland of aimless foolery and the particoloured costume of the clown ('motley') in its incongruous mixture looks forward to the description of random life in the third stanza. The change from motley to green in the last stanza indicates a new meaning to life, a rejuvenation, recalling the songs of the 1798 revolution, 'Green on my Cape' and 'The wearing of the Green.' At the same time, the one colour reminds us of the revolutionary dedication to 'one purpose alone,' that 'Can make a stone of the heart.'

The first two stanzas of the poem deal with change while the third and fourth accomplish a neat ironic reversal by interpreting that change as a stone-hearted, tragic incapacity for change. The utter change brings to birth a terrible beauty suddenly releasing atavistic heroic energies. The conscious change of the mask from clown to tragic hero revives "'an Ireland/ The poets have imagined, terrible and gay,'" not the "'dead Ireland of my youth'" ('The Municipal Gallery Revisited'). But Yeats's attitude remains somewhat divided, for doomed heroism is seen to spring from opinionated hatred and inflexible steadfastness. Instead of the casual comedy we have here willed tragedy, a conscious assumption of a second or new self, a deliberate re-ordering of Irish history.

While Pearse, MacDonagh, and Connolly are cut off in their prime, Con Markiewicz and John MacBride offer somewhat different models of transformation. Through the reference to harriers (pack of hounds and huntsmen) Con is related to an easy-going



aristocratic past torn apart by her ignorant good-will: her shrill voice suggests the disfigurement of youthful beauty and links her kind of politics to the Irish Civil War. MacBride, thought to have been a drunken, vainglorious lout, suddenly reveals the will to self-transformation: in numbering him in his song Yeats thus distances himself from a painful element in his life. The terrible beauty is not unrelated to the Yeatesian notion of a violent annunciation at the end and beginning of millennia ('The Second Coming' and 'Leda and the Swan').

The third stanza juxtaposes an incapacity for change (itself paradoxically the result of the change chosen by the revolutionaries) with the ever-changing spontaneity of random natural life. This contradiction is of course Yeats's quarrel with himself producing poetry. The central symbol is of the stone in the midst of the stream: Yeats moves freely between the actual stone and stream and their symbolical meaning. Natural life is characteristically captured (as later in 'Sailing to Byzantium') in images of movement: the changing seasons, the stream, the horse, the birds, the clouds, the moor-hens, and so on. Yeats's verse celebrates the energy of movement as the rider gallops in or the birds range from cloud to tumbling cloud. Mobility makes for inexhaustible variety, and the flux introduces a note of poignant intensity in the fugitive quality of natural beauty: the repetition of 'minute by minute' reinforces this quality.

The 'shadow of cloud on the stream' subtly introduces the concept of the higher insubstantiality of the artistic image involving a movement from the material to the immaterial. As the horsehoof slides on the brim and the horse plashes into the stream the accidental and the sudden are highlighted. Water becomes symbolic of a primal vitality, including the creatural instincts that are expressed in the diving moor-hens calling moor-cocks. The image of the stone-the unwavering commitment of the rebels-is more complex than it seems, for it is seen to trouble the living stream. This is the paradox that is at the heart of the poem: unchanging singleness of purpose has the capacity for utter transformation while the changing rhythms of life fall into a set routine. The last lines of the poem suggest another kind of transformation, the poem itself ('I write it out in a verse'), a changeless artifice that is not inimical to spontaneity (a theme already dealt with in 'Adam's Curse').

Maud Gonne's expectation that the rebels' sacrifice would ensure Home Rule for Ireland failed; moreover, the death seemed to be needless since England could revive the Home Rule Bill which had been shelved because of the War. Above all, too long a sacrifice is a denial of nature resulting in a hardening of the heart comparable to a surgical operation (see 2.9). Even as Yeats aspires to an artistic detachment, interpreting the defeat of the Rebellion as sleep that pacifies the excitable restlessness of a child and trying to nurture like a mother the infant soul of Ireland, he is assailed by misgivings. But he is able to overcome them by choosing the characteristic posture of defiance brought about by the realization of futility: death becomes metaphor as well as fact as it becomes the tragic culmination of heroic dream and excess of love. In the final stanza this capacity for dream raises the revolutionaries far above the everyday world of prudential conformity. In the supremely confident tone of bardic prophecy, Yeats makes them agents of the history of the Irish race in search for identity.

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#### 44.4 'SAILING TO BYZANTIUM'

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As Yeats moves on to *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), the pugnacious clarity and biting precision of language increasingly perform a stylistic enactment of art as the conscious re-making of blind, instinctual nature, as a mode of deliverance from the fury and mire of human veins. The theme of ancestral houses in decline broadens out to that of the cyclical rise and fall of civilisations endorsed by the symbolism of gyre and moon; to this the dialectic of art and nature, the dancing floor and the sea in 'Byzantium' serves as a counterpoint. Yeats's interest in the visual arts, a family legacy, was deepened by his visits to Italy



in 1924 and 1925 where, apart from Renaissance art, he encountered Byzantine mosaic art at Ravenna and Sicily.

The heart, the seat of sentimental effusion and wistful evasion of stark reality in Yeats's early verse, is increasingly troubled by a passionate imagination in a decaying body. As critics have recognized, the very capacity to imagine is redemptive. Man defiantly asserts his imagined self against futility, for to imagine heroically is to become a hero (as implied in the doctrine of the Mask). Born incomplete, man attains completeness in so far as he conceives of it; if the hero does this unconsciously, the poet does it consciously. Heroic defiance is thus anchored by Yeats in the infinite power of the mind or soul often symbolized by the tower. But this assertion of spiritual autonomy, this nostalgia for a world of pure ideas is ceaselessly disturbed by the undiminished vitality of the natural man. The psychomachy draws strength from Hindu notions of the cycle of reincarnation and escape from it. It is represented clearly in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul': if the sophistry of the heart and the evanescent pleasures of nature turn Yeats to the artifice of eternity, the monuments of unageing intellect, if his soul draws him up the winding stair (gyre) of his tower to escape reincarnation, his self pulls him back down the same ancestral stair into time and history (see also 'The Tower' and 'Blood and the Moon'), into the fecund ditch of folly and passion. At this stage of his poetic career Yeats's landscape changes from Sligo to the countryside south of Galway-Thoor Ballylce, Coole Park, and the stony borders of Clare.

'Sailing to Byzantium,' one of Yeats's masterpieces, is organized around the dichotomy of flesh and spirit, nature and art where the sea symbolizes the energetic vitality of the former. As Yeats advanced into old age he continued to be troubled by the passions. The voyage in the poem is thus an inner spiritual voyage towards wisdom and freedom from enslavement to nature. Quite apart from the special meaning that Byzantium has in Yeats's system, historically it was the meeting-point of the pagan and Christian civilisations. As the centre of the Hellenistic world which became the capital of eastern Christianity, the holy city, Byzantium becomes a happy symbol of the unity in opposition of flesh and spirit.

In *A Vision* Yeats describes Byzantium at about the end of the first Christian millennium, a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato:

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

The poem begins when the voyage is already under way. To suggest, as some annotators do, that 'that country' is Ireland is to cripple the meaning since the uninitiated outsider leaves behind the material world, the life of the flesh for the immaterial, spiritual world--the later poem 'Byzantium' begins with a similar purging of materiality. The vitality and movement of natural life are celebrated in the stanza even as the inevitable decay of the flesh makes them a disturbing presence in the life of the old man. The embracing young and the birds in the trees are completely absorbed in one another but the oxymoron, 'dying generations,' suggests the human subjection to nature, to its cycle of birth, growth, and death. Summer, the season of rejuvenation and fecundity, links the young and the birds to the salmon-falls and mackerel-crowded seas, both images testifying to procreative urge and fertility. At spawning time salmon swim inland from the sea, biologically propelled upstream, leaping up high in the air at weirs or small dams on the river to continue against the

current. The image could be a memory of the salmon at Galway which Yeats wanted his wife to see when she first visited Ireland; the abundant shoals of mackerel may be a similar memory. The generic vocabulary with its Biblical echo--fish, flesh, or fowl--reinforces the all-encompassing biological basis of the 'sensual music.' But time, the sequential tyranny of 'begotten, born, and dies,' is the very dimension of natural beauty and pleasure. Thus the overpowering sensual life becomes a trap, an imprisonment in the perishable body. In contrast to this are the 'monuments of unaging intellect' which in their artificiality and stasis offer a mode of triumph, that of the spirit in search of wisdom and a world of pure ideas.

One basic image knits the whole poem together: the singing bird. In the first stanza birds in the trees produce sensual music. In the second stanza they are replaced by the scarecrow ('a tattered coat upon a stick'), an image of ugliness and decay in 'Among School Children'-the mask of 'a comfortable kind of old scarecrow' or the Greek philosophers as 'Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.' The song of the old man's soul takes us to the sages or the singing-masters in the third stanza--here the submerged image of the phoenix (the bird rising out of its own ashes) merges into that of the perne which also means a small hawk. Finally there is the golden mechanical bird singing to the lords and ladies of Byzantium.

The second stanza moves in thematic sequence from youth to age. As we have seen above, physical decay makes the skin-and-bones appearance comparable to a tattered coat upon a stick, skin and flesh hanging loose. In Neoplatonic terms, widely used in the Renaissance and by Blake and Shelley, the body is a coat that the soul puts on at birth and takes off at death which thus becomes a mode of ecstatic liberation. Such readiness for the spiritual voyage is appropriately expressed in the defiant gaiety (an important Yeatsian theme) of the old man celebrating decrepitude. The flat sound pattern of the second line of the stanza is lightened in the next line, and the metrical-syntactical weight on 'unless' registers the transfer from carnal to spiritual. But the competitive opposition of body and soul is resolved in wholeness and synthesis: spiritual music is represented by the dancer's rhythmic bodily movements, a Yeatsian symbol of the unity of being. Dance, in association with the parallel between body and garment, opens up possibilities of Dionysiac emancipation. In contrast to the many anonymous young men, birds, and fish of the opening stanza, here we have old age as the accumulated experience of an individual. The comparable unity of the mechanical bird suggests that individuation is hammered out of the common raw material of our lives.

In the reference to the singing school that studies monuments of its own magnificence, along with the idea of spiritual preparation and discipline ('studying') we have that of autonomy symbolized by Byzantine mosaic art. In the history of European art, the Renaissance broke away from Byzantine norms in favour of mass, volume and movement of the human body and dramatic composition. In this sense Byzantine mosaic art is a linear art, abstracted from nature and static in quality. This non-referential art has therefore an autonomy equivalent to the human soul's study of its own magnificence: it is at the furthest point from the natural energies of the first stanza. The voyage across the sea, that is, the turbulent life of the flesh, is now over and we enter Byzantium made holy not only by Christianity but by an art purged of nature and materiality.

Consequently, the third stanza introduces us to the sages through the golden mosaic art on the wall, a memory perhaps of the Christian martyrs in the frieze at S. Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna, and an image of God's holy fire. The sages are arranged in stasis purged of all fleshly life and mobility of desire. As Yeats calls upon the sages to be the singing-masters of his soul, he links the two worlds of sage and sensual man, the rival intensities of art and life, through the interpenetrating gyres. As we have already seen above, perne means a small hawk or falcon as well as a spool or gyre. The martyred sages must perne out of their ideal stasis into the

human world with their hawk-like, concentrated wisdom while the poet may perme into that stasis.

The motif of purgatorial burning leading to self-transformation links the initiate sages to the apprentice poet-craftsman. The heart must be burnt away because from the standpoint of ascetic renunciation it is the seat of all desire, wish, and feeling which in their heightened animation tease and torment the old man in his physical infirmity. As he puts it in the next poem, 'The Tower':

What shall I do with this absurdity--  
O heart, troubled heart--this caricature,  
Descrepit age that has been tied to me  
As to a dog's tail?

Never had I more  
Excited, passionate, fantastical  
Imagination . . .

A similar image of fastening, of an uncomfortable appendage links the heart to the ageing body, the 'dying animal' (reminiscent of 'dying generations') subject to the cycle of 'begotten, born, and dies.' Desire suffers the same subjection producing the sickness of exhausted disillusionment. Unlike the soul studying the monuments of its own magnificence, the heart is the seat of illusion ('knows not what it is'). The artifice of eternity suggests the specific timelessness of art. That which is natural is in time; movement and change are the source of its beauty (stanza 1). By contrast, that which is artificial or non-natural is liberated from the sequential logic of time, of birth, growth, and death. It is in this sense that art as artifice is timeless and not in the false sense that works of art outlive time. In fact, the destruction of civilisations and their art heritages is a common Yeatsian theme.

In the final stanza the mechanical bird, a work of Grecian or Byzantine craftsmanship, is hammered out of gold, the imperishable metal that like the soul survives the fire. Apart from the paradox of the desire to escape from desire, the intensely passionate plea to cauterize the passions, there is a further paradox here. The hammering with the reiterated sound pattern of 'hammered gold and gold enamelling' relates in somewhat Keatsian terms the finished smooth surface to the anguish and suffering. Artistic form becomes a mediator between flesh and spirit, for its being is at once sensuous and ideal. Yeats's note to the *Collected Poems* reads: 'I have read somewhere that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang.' The bird sits on the golden bough, contrasted to 'birds in the trees,' and instead of inducing the drowsiness of sensuality, it awakens the drowsy Emperor to heightened consciousness. To the lords and ladies of Byzantium it sings 'Of what is past, or passing, or to come'—corresponding to 'whatever is begotten, born, and dies'—that is, of an eternity specific to art.

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#### 44.5 THE LAST POEMS

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The pursuit of wisdom prompted by the contrast between old age and young Muse, between physical infirmity and a lively imagination, gradually accommodates the elemental passions as Yeats moves on to the *Last Poems* (1936-39). Of course in the Crazy Jane poems the sexual theme had entered with a new candour and joy. The lust and rage that are celebrated in many of the last poems, the mask of the 'wild old wicked man,' energetically outstripped the autumnal serenity of the comfortable scarecrow, the sixty-year old smiling public man. But what we encounter is not the lasciviousness and irascibility of an old man's feverish fantasies, not the 'chilled delirium' of 'Gerontion,' but a passionate wisdom in which flesh and spirit, actual and ideal are fused. No wonder that there is a virtual identity between the images produced by the imagination and actual people and events (see 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited'). If the heart is symbolic of the history of man in all its joy and terror—all that 'Man's own resinous heart has fed'—the poet retains an intellectual



mastery over it. This mastery is manifest in the spare intensity of diction as also in the mask of the clown or circus performer and the tragic joy that now links the detached poet to the involved figures of history. Yeats watches in defiant artistic gaiety the rise and fall of civilisations ('The Gyres,' 'Lapis Lazuli') even as he anchors his re-vitalization in a ruined body.

'Lapis Lazuli' is constructed around the general theme of art and tragic joy. Instead of a more or less linear arrangement the five sections of the poem are organized like sculptural planes, a method singularly appropriate to the Chinese carving in lapis lazuli, a blue precious stone, presented to Yeats on his seventieth birthday by Henry Clifton to whom the poem is dedicated. Several of Yeats's life-long themes are brought together: the recurring rise and fall of civilisations, the millennial vision of the approaching end of European civilisation, the triumph of art and philosophy over ruin.

The poem begins under the shadow of the impending World War (July 1936): events like the Spanish Civil War, the German re-occupation of the Rhineland in 1936 and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 built up a climate of hysteria in which poetry seems to be nothing more than an idle trade. The hysterical women betray their masks of nurturing femininity and in rejecting art in favour of politics peddled in the thoroughfares they reject custom, ceremony and the contemplative life. Zeppelin, a rigid-framed airship for bombing was anachronistic in 1936 but Yeats probably remembered the Zeppelin bombing raids on London in the First World War. Around the time he was writing the poem, Edmund Dulac, the artist, had written to him to express his terror of a bombing raid on London. 'The bomb-balls refer to 'The Battle of the Boyne,' a ballad included in *Irish Minstrelsy* (1888), an anthology containing a poem by Yeats; there is an inscribed copy in his library. The parallel between King William of Orange (King Billy in Irish colonial memory) and Kaiser Bill or Kaiser Wilhelm II, German emperor at the time of the First World War, and the impending Second World War introduces the theme of the cyclical recurrence of history which is developed particularly in the third stanza.

The colloquial diction and speed of the first stanza in its approximation to drawing-room talk aesthetically controls the hysterical fear preparing us for the discipline of the theatrical mask in the second stanza. Here the long slow vowels capture the poet's calm, reflective response to popular rage and impatience that would drag him down like a quarry (see 'Parnell's Funeral'). We begin to encounter the familiar Yeatsian dialectic of art and life wherein the turbulence of reality is gathered with undiminished intensity into the stillness and repose of art. Art here, whether of the theatre or of the sculpture in lapis lazuli, means not only the individual work or object of art but the 're-creation of the man through that art' (*Autobiographies*).

The apocalyptic premonition is controlled by the vision of life as tragic theatre: this distancing leads logically to the panoramic view from the mountain top (stanza 5) through the rise and fall of civilisations (stanza 3). By contrast, 'The Gyres' articulates a tragic joy somewhat marred by indifferent withdrawal: 'We that look on but laugh in tragic joy.' In 'Lapis Lazuli' we are as it were inside the theatre, simultaneously involved in and detached from the performance of our lives. Ophelia and Cordelia provide alternative models of femininity implicitly opposed to the hysterical women. More important, along with Hamlet and Lear they foreground the individuality that collective passions can stifle. Hamlet's strutting and rambling suggest Yeats's characteristically defiant pose and passion for knowledge and speculation: 'For many years Hamlet was an image of heroic self-possession for the poses of youth and childhood to copy, a combatant of the battle within myself' (*Autobiographies*). Lear is a later mask appropriate to an old man's frenzy with the help of which Yeats declares in 'An Acre of Grass': 'Myself must I remake.' But Lear's rage, read in the context of 'hysteria' and in association with poems like 'A Bronze Head' or 'Parnell's Funeral' is a heroic struggle to control 'hysterica passio': 'Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow' (*King Lear*, II.iv.57). Yeats wrote to

Dorothy Wellesley that in producing a play in verse he would always remind the actors that 'the passion of the verse comes from the fact that the speakers are holding down violence or madness-"down *Hysterica passio*." All depends on the completeness of the holding down, on the stirring of the beast underneath.'

For Yeats, no tragedy is complete without arriving at a kind of joyous defiance: 'The arts are all the bridal chambers of joy. No tragedy is legitimate unless it leads some great character to his final joy.' In contrast to the wretched 'exit' of Polonius, Hamlet and the other tragic figures confront death with the energy of a defiant will (somewhat Nietzschean in origin) that is the greatest in tragedy since it struggles against an immovable object (*Explorations*). The unique tragedy of each man or woman is ignored and suppressed by the collectivized fanaticism on the eve of the War. In 'A General Introduction for my Work' Yeats finds the tragic protagonists of Shakespeare transformed by 'the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death.' Their gaiety is very different from what the fanatics mean by 'gaiety,' namely, an irresponsible expression of frivolity. The moralistic insistence of stanza 1-'For everybody knows or else should know'-is inimical to tragic ecstasy. As Yeats put it in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley (6 July 1935), 'People much occupied with morality always lose heroic ecstasy.'

The entire second stanza is built around theatre imagery reminiscent of Shakespeare and Renaissance drama. Related to the doctrine of the mask, the metaphor of the actor is one of self-making whereby man becomes an increasingly conscious agent of his own history and not the bewildered, passive victim taking refuge in '*hysterica passio*.' The moment of death thus becomes a pyrrhic victory, paradoxically the moment of self-consciousness. Lady Gregory's belief that 'Tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies' is endorsed in Yeats's letter to Dorothy Wellesley (26 July 1935): 'the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy.' This emphasis on defiant will is crucial to Yeats's view of the human condition; when the will's 'limit is reached it may become a pure, aimless joy, though the man, the shade, still mourns his lost object' (*Explorations*).

That is why 'no actress has ever sobbed when she played Cleopatra . . . There may be in this or that detail painful tragedy, but in the whole work none' (*Explorations*). Yeats's search for a cold and passionate style ('The Fisherman') is thus inseparable from the wholeness of artistic form. This purposive design masters all confusion and turbulence into stillness through metamorphosis: 'Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.' The mastery is admirably suggested in 'wrought' and 'uttermost,' words which capture the pressure of experience passing into artifice. As all earthly involvements, goals, ambitions, and calculations run on to their logical end of disillusionment and despair, Yeats represents the situation in terms of a simple theatrical device: the foot-lights black out while the auditorium lights are turned on full blaze. This in turn suggests the Neoplatonic concept of spiritual, even ascetic illumination; in his Introduction to *The Holy Mountain* Yeats quotes Henry Vaughan: 'There is in God, some say/ A deep but dazzling darkness.' We may also recall the movement towards the identity of darkness and the soul in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' or the darkening night that reveals Byzantium ('Byzantium'). The re-fashioning of human experience transforms the natural into the fully determined stasis of art so that it cannot grow or change any further.

The 'hundred thousand stages' prepare us for the extended survey in stanza 3 of history as the specific raw material of tragedy. The somewhat remote pictorial effect of the cyclical procession of history suggests an artistic disengagement that becomes triumphant later in the final stanza. In this sense Yeats's last poems are poems of age, a time of summing-up completed in death. Especially in the first three lines of the stanza the style recovers its earlier colloquial sprightliness observing with poised, sympathetic detachment the panoramic rise and fall of civilisations. The cyclical procession of history and change is made to surround the closely observed work of art, whether of Callimachus or of China. Callimachus was a late fifth-century B.C.

Greek sculptor who was the reputed inventor of the Corinthian capital (head or cornice of pillar or column). Yeats refers to his work in *A Vision*—to 'that bronze lamp, shaped like a palm'—and in *Essays and Introductions* to his 'stylistic management of the falling folds of display, after the naturalistic drapery of Phidias.' As B. Rajan has argued, the description of Callimachus' handiwork—making marble as malleable as bronze—poetically blends the sense of beauty with that of evanescence in a rhythm which both absorbs and counteracts the latent tragedy of the recognition of perishability. Far from defeating the artist, fragility inspires him to endless creativity: thus are the destructive and the creative aesthetically poised.

In the fourth stanza Yeats describes the actual sculpture in lapis lazuli. About a year before the poem was completed, Yeats had written to Dorothy Wellesley about a present from Harry Clifton:

a great piece carved by some Chinese sculptor into the semblance of a mountain with temple, trees, paths and an ascetic and pupil about to climb the mountain. Ascetic, pupil, hard stone, eternal theme of the sensual east. The heroic cry in the midst of despair. But no, I am wrong, the east has its solutions always and therefore knows nothing of tragedy. It is we, not the east, that must raise the heroic cry.

The ascetic figure of the Eastern sage blends into the Yeatsian symbol of the wise old man. By the solutions of the east Yeats probably means the doctrine of reincarnation and karma; as opposed to this, tragic vision makes the insoluble enduring and meaningful. The contraries of sensuality and asceticism are interrelated since the latter becomes the theme and destination of the former. The long-legged crane is a symbol of longevity in Chinese and Japanese art from early medieval times. The serving-man suggests a pre-democratic, aristocratic order of a by-gone era but it links the past cyclically to the future since 'our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilisation belongs to the outward gyre' and the interior gyre of the contrary age will establish prince and vizier again for two thousand years.

In the final stanza, we seem to leave behind the panoramic perspective to examine minutely the actual sculpture. Every detail—discoloration, crack or dent—on the crafted surface is closely observed and simultaneously transformed into symbol; meanwhile, as in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' we are drawn from visible art into the invisible, troubled experience behind it. In the process we move back from the minute to the cosmic, to the view from the mountain-top. As ascetic and pupil climb up towards a possible Eastern solution, 'the little half-way house' becomes the meeting-point of the east and the west, of the snows of winter and blossoms of spring. From this veritable hill of the Muses, the tragic theatre co-extensive with the scheme of things unfolds itself on the cosmic stage.

The eyes of the Chinamen stare in wonder at this distanced view which unburdens the human condition of the blind fury of passions without diluting their intensity. As the accomplished fingers begin to play the musical instrument, the link with the fiddle-bow in stanza 1 suggests the theme of cyclical recurrence. The accomplished artistry is the specific mastery that produces tragic art out of human suffering and despair. The repetition of 'eyes' foregrounds the calm and joyous consciousness, the indomitable will to create. In the wrinkled face of the old and infirm which is the mask of an ancient wisdom, the glittering eyes suggest an assertive vitality and spiritual liveliness heightened by decrepitude. At the same time, the glitter remains a faithful description of the quality of the precious stone, the carved artifice in lapis lazuli.

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## 44.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you have been introduced to the complexity of Yeats's later poetry primarily through a close reading of three representative poems. Although the major

developments in Yeats's later poetic career are charted out, the emphasis is always on the unravelling of the densely textured poem. This exercise has been undertaken in order to demonstrate how a great poet can pack in an entire world-view into a short poem.

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## 44.7 QUESTIONS

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1. Comment on Yeats's poetic use of his ambivalent attitude to the Easter Rebellion in 'Easter 1916.' (See 44.3)
2. Who are the rebels mentioned in 'Easter 1916'? Why does Yeats mention them? (See 44.3)
3. Comment on Yeats's use of the theatrical metaphor in his poetry. (See 44.5)
4. Write a note on the imagery of 'Easter 1916.' (See 44.3)
5. What are the various meanings of Byzantium in 'Sailing to Byzantium'? (See 44.4)
6. Comment on the opposition of art and life and youth and old age in 'Sailing to Byzantium.' Are the two oppositions related to one another? (See 44.4)
7. Discuss Yeats's use of history in either 'Easter 1916' or 'Lapis Lazuli.' (See 44.3 or 44.5)
8. What is the meaning of 'gaiety' in 'Lapis Lazuli'? How is it related to Yeats's tragic vision? (See 44.5)
9. Write an essay on the theme of heroic defiance in Yeats's poetry. (See especially 44.3 and 44.5)
10. How does the image of the bird provide structural unity to 'Sailing to Byzantium'? (See 44.4)

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## 44.8 SUGGESTED READING

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– *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London, 1968)
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- Unterecker, John. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (London, 1959)
- Ure, Peter. *Towards a Mythology: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London, 1946)
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– *Yeats's Iconography* (London, 1960)