Sailing to Byzantium

SUMMARY

The speaker introduces readers to a world that has no room in it for the elderly. It's a world in which young lovers embrace under trees full of singing birds (who seem unaware of their own mortality), the waters swarm with fish, and every living thing—whether human, fish, or bird—is born and then dies. Everything in that country is so caught up in the moment that it can pay no attention to the things that might outlive the flesh.

An old man in this world is nothing but a skinny, ratty old scarecrow, unless he can keep his soul alive, vital, and singing within his failing, worn out body. No one can teach the soul to do this: the person who wants to keep their soul alive has to figure it out through their own study. For this reason, the speaker has taken a voyage across the ocean to the ancient holy city of Byzantium.

The speaker addresses Byzantium's long-dead wise men and saints, who are now caught up in the glorious fire of God, which is like the beautiful golden tiling that decorates Byzantine churches. He asks them to emerge from this fire, whirling in spirals like the bobbin of a spinning-wheel, and to teach his soul to sing. He wants them to burn up his mortal, fleshly heart, which is tethered to his failing body and can't fathom or accept its own mortality, and to take him up into their everlasting world of art.

When he's left his body behind, the speaker says, he won't take up a mortal physical form again. Instead, he'll be a beautiful piece of golden art, something that metal workers in ancient Greece might have made to hang in an emperor's bedroom. Or he'll be a golden bird placed in a golden tree, where he, like the sages, can teach people his eternal and otherworldly wisdom—his transcendent understanding of the past, present, and future.

THEMES

OLD AGE AND MORTALITY

The poem is, at least in part, about the difficulties of old age. To the speaker, the inevitable failure of the aging body presents a choice: the elderly can either fade into husks of their former selves, or learn to escape the physical limitations of old age by beautifying their *souls*—and, eventually, upon dying, becoming something that isn't tied to the human body at all. The poem thus implies a separation between the body and soul, and presents old age as both a burden *and* an opportunity for a kind of spiritual transcendence—a chance to leave the earthly world, and all its limitations, behind.

In the first stanza, the speaker vividly evokes the beautiful world of the young. The world is described through images of natural fertility and bounty: young people embracing, singing birds, vast schools of fish. This world is intensely focused on material pleasures and the creation of even more new life.

But, as the speaker hints when he calls the singing birds "those dying generations" and observes that the happy young "neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect," this world is also limited by its inability to accept the realities of aging. That is, the young are so self-absorbed, so wrapped up in these physical, bodily delights, that they can't yet appreciate their own mortality, and certainly can't achieve the kind of spiritual transcendence the speaker longs for.

Indeed, an old man with a failing body can't even pretend to fit in there. The poem's very first line, "That is no country for old men," lets readers know that the speaker is totally at odds with this world. Even the word "that" separates the speaker from the country: it's something over there, something he doesn't belong to.

The speaker then focuses on the failures of his aging body, which he describes as "a tattered coat": not the substance of his real self, but just a garment he's wearing. The only way to salvage such a garment, in turn, is for the soul to "clap its hands and sing." The soul itself thus seems to have a body—but a different kind of body, one that can't fade and weaken over time.

Because there is no "singing school," however, no one to teach the speaker's soul how to achieve such vibrancy, the speaker makes an imagined spiritual journey to the long-lost holy city of Byzantium. He's making this journey with his *mind*, not his body; he envisions leaving the body behind forever, in fact, and the power of his imagination helps him to move beyond his physical frailty. This again emphasizes the separation between the speaker's mortal body and his transcendent soul.

Byzantium ceased to exist long ago (it is now modern-day Istanbul), and the "sages," or wise men, the speaker reaches out to are actually mosaics—real, famous artworks crafted from many tiny, often gilded (gold-covered) tiles. As such, the speaker is basically imagining traveling to a long-dead holy city and talking to mosaic icons on a wall. But that's the point: these sages have transcended old age and mortality through becoming the materials of imagination and of art. They have left their frail, physical bodies behind.

The speaker intends to one day join them—and when he does, he'll leave behind his body forever, and "never take / My bodily form from any natural thing." In teaching his soul to imagine beyond the limits of his body, and eventually to leave it, he'll learn to overcome mortality and old age.

Part of this transcendence will come through the art he makes. Indeed, this poem *itself* is both a kind of song and a kind of mosaic: it's musical, and it's made of many little pieces (words, that is) put together. The art that the speaker leaves behind is another way of surviving past the limits of his mortal body, and, like the golden bird he imagines becoming, will still "sing" to later generations and teach them the wisdom he himself has learned.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 25-32

THE POWER OF ART

Closely related to the poem's ideas about aging, mortality, and the soul is its treatment of art. In the second half of the poem, the speaker reaches out to the world of art—to Byzantine mosaics—for answers to the struggles of old age and death. Art, here, is presented as a pathway to immortality. Art, the poem argues, can represent and preserve bodies that never change, and point to a bigger, transcendent reality: not just the reality of lives now vanished, but the reality of some different world beyond our own.

The elderly speaker, having left behind the world of the young which no longer has room for him in his frailty, goes to seek spiritual rebirth in the ancient city of Byzantium—an ancient holy city that is now long-dead. He begins his third stanza by invoking "sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall." Byzantium was famous for its beautiful mosaic art, and the sages reach the immortality of "God's holy fire" by being a part of these mosaics. That is, they are forever preserved via art, ageless and undying. Thus, the "artifice of eternity" suggests that art both has the power to give humans a *glimpse* of eternity, and is itself a way to *reach* that eternity for themselves.

The speaker wants to join them, in his own way, and his final vision of immortality is one that sums up the power of art—its ability to preserve the past, exist in the present, and endure into the future. Art, the speaker insists, also can still "sing," speaking to future generations even after the artist is long gone.

As such, when he has learned from the sages and left behind his body, the speaker says, he will never "take / My bodily form from any natural thing," and describes instead taking the form of some piece of golden art. In this he might resemble one of the mosaics in which he sees the sages. But he may also take the form of a golden bird, though he doesn't say so directly: in his other vision of his immortality, he sits on a bough and sings, just as the living birds in the first stanza do.

The *mortal* body is left behind in the transition into immortality, but the *artistic* body remains: the speaker wishes to become art himself, to "sing to lords and ladies of Byzantium"—in short, to become a piece of art that might help *other* mortals to become a piece of art. In this role, he would "sing" of "what is past, or passing, or to come"—recording what was past, existing in the present, and enduring into the future.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 10-16
- Lines 17-21
- Lines 23-24
- Lines 25-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

That is no ... for old men.

The first line of the poem creates an immediate sense of the speaker's separation from the place he's about to describe. This alienation is evident from the very first word, in fact: a powerful, dismissive "That." The word "That" gives readers a sense that the speaker is already standing at a remove from whatever he's describing. While his body might be in the country he's about to describe, he feels far away from it.

The sounds of this line are similarly telling. The sharp /t/ sound of "That" start readers off with a bang, but then the vowel sounds begin to slide and lengthen. Four variations of the /o/ vowel sounds appear in succession:

no country for old men

This combination of likeness and unlikeness (the sounds are similar, yet not quite the same) foreshadows the speaker's relationship to the country he feels himself to be so separate from. He will be able to see the world of the young from a position unlike that of its happy, lively inhabitants, but he also has a deep familiarity with their situation: he was, of course, once young, but is not anymore.

The sentence is strong and declarative: no commas or other interruptions soften it. It also sits uneasily next to the rest of the line it belongs to. After the strong caesura of the period following "men," the reader encounters the beginning of a new sentence: "The young."

Enjambment then separates "The young" from whatever it is that the speaker is going to say about them, so that those young people sit in isolation next to the first sentence's evocation of age:

That is no country for old men. The young

The reader immediately gets the sense that, whatever the reasons are that the country we're encountering is no good for old men, the young have something to do with it.

LINES 1-4

The young ...
... the mackerel-crowded seas,

In these lines, the speaker begins to build a picture of the rich, fertile, and thoughtless country of the young.

He describes the residents of this country in ways that move from the general to the highly specific. "The young / In one another's arms" and the "birds in the trees" are presented en masse, yet readers know exactly what kind of fish this country is rich with: "The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas." The detail of these later lines helps to create a sense of a whole rich and fertile world—and perhaps a specifically Irish world. Both salmon and mackerel are characteristically Irish, and the rivers and seas also suggest the landscape of the poet Yeats's native country.

But the generality of the earlier lines and the idea of the seas as "crowded" helps to make this country seem mythic, too. There's a sense here of a country that's almost like the Garden of Eden, where all any living creature does is sing, make babies, or lie around kissing. Everything here is abundant and peaceful.

But the speaker breaks in on this rich picture with an uncompromising aside:

> ... The young
> In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
> —Those dying generations—at their song

This sobering intrusion, set off by emphatic dashes, lets readers know that this place is only like Paradise on the surface. Even in the middle of all this thoughtless youth, death waits. The speaker, whom the first line has already presented as at a bit of a remove from this country, here shows that he has a perspective that all the happy living creatures here aren't willing to consider: an old man can see death in the land of the young.

LINES 5-8

Fish, flesh, or ...
... of unageing intellect.

Continuing the previous lines' sense of abundance with a sting in the tail, the speaker uses the emphatic punch of alliteration and consonance to sum up all the creatures of the country of the young in one fell swoop:

> Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
> Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

These bold lines cover the whole world. All the living creatures of this country, the speaker says, spend the warm and easy months of summer congratulating themselves: life loves life. No wonder this is "no country for old men": old men are only going to remind you that summer doesn't last forever, and that what is begotten and born will inevitably die.

Readers get an even stronger sense of this world's hostility towards the old in the last lines of the stanza:

> Caught in that sensual music all neglect
> Monuments of unageing intellect.

What the country of the young lacks, the speaker suggests, is the capacity to appreciate that which doesn't speak immediately to the body and the senses—those "Monuments of unageing," or timeless, "intellect."

Here, a complex pattern of sound helps to support these ideas. Assonance of the /aw/ sound draws a link between "begotten" and "caught"—if you've been begotten, you're going to be caught in the illusions of the body, at least for a while. The sibilance of "sensual music" is itself sensually musical, seductively pretty. But there's a harsher reality to follow: the sharp /t/ and /k/ sounds of "neglect" and "intellect" stand in opposition to that sensual music.

The speaker's reference to "monuments of unageing intellect" bears a closer examination. "Monuments" will reappear in line 14 of the second stanza, again as things there to be studied or learned from. But what are these monuments? In the first stanza, one could read the monuments as the neglected and unwanted "old men" themselves (a reading that gives the speaker, clearly an old man himself, an edge of bitterness). But if the monument is of "unageing intellect," it's not the old man, for he has certainly aged. It's something immortal—and, as will become clearer later in the poem, is perhaps is a reference to art.

LINES 9-12

An aged man ...
... its mortal dress,

The speaker goes on to muse on the nature of old age, and how it might be transcended or overcome. In lines 9-10, the speaker describes the fate of the old man who doesn't take his soul in hand. Notice how consonance on the /t/ and /k/ sounds helps to evoke frail, brittle old age:

> An aged man is but a paltry thing,
> A tattered coat upon a stick

The sharp repeated sounds, pointy as a flesh-less elbow, helps to create the image of an old man as bony and weathered as a scarecrow.

But as in line 1, a striking enjambment produces a feeling of contrast at the end of these lines:

A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,

Here, the break in the thought leaves "unless" on its own next to the image of the scrawny old man. Like a light bulb going on over his head, the word heralds a transition into a whole new kind of thinking.

This stanza begins to introduce readers to the speaker's big idea: that looking into one's soul, and educating that soul, can help one to transcend the inevitable bodily decay of old age. If the soul can "clap its hands and sing," it can somehow transform the "aged man" into something more than just a "tattered coat." Notice that the imagery here suggests that the body is nothing more than a garment for the soul: the "mortal dress" is the flesh itself.

The form of lines 10-12 also seems to folds over on itself:

A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress

Notice how the repetition of "tatter" frames the repetition (diacope) of "sing." Here, the speaker suggests, to sing is a response to being tattered, and singing in turn *transforms* one's tatters.

LINES 13-14

Nor is there ...
... its own magnificence;

So how should the soul go about seeking this musical transcendence? What does it mean for a soul to sing?

That, the speaker goes on, is the problem. No one in the country of the young is going to teach his soul to sing. Notice how the alliteration and sibilance of these two lines helps to emphasize the distinction between the two ideas they propose:

Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence

Rather than being directly taught to sing, the soul must look inward and study something of its own. And what is that something? A monument.

The reader will remember that the word "monuments" appeared once before, in line 8, specifically as things that the body-oriented young "neglect" ("monuments of unageing intellect"). A "monument" at first seems like a curiously solid thing to link to the intellect or the soul—but then, readers are clearly in the world of the imagination now, and if the immaterial soul can have hands to clap and a throat to sing with, it can also have monuments.

Consider the connotations of the word "monument." A monument isn't just any old edifice: it's specifically a structure that's built to commemorate or memorialize some past event. To learn to sing, then, the soul must take a little internal field trip, to discover something that marks a prior time, but that itself is still present now.

That said, it's also possible to read these lines quite differently. The speaker might be referring again to that land of the young here. In that land, there is no "singing school," and instead the young focus only on testaments to their own youth and beauty—"Monuments of its own significance." In this reading, such narrow-minded egotism, such preoccupation with the present and pleasures of the flesh, impedes the development of the soul. As such, the speaker will find no transcendence, no way to overcome the travails of age, in that land.

LINES 15-16

And therefore I ...
... city of Byzantium.

How is the soul to study "monuments of its own magnificence"? The speaker doesn't seem daunted by this prospect: he knows just what he's going to do, and introduces his plan with the logical word "therefore":

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

Right away, the reader gets the sense that this sailing of the seas may not be a literal voyage. Why not? First of all, Byzantium stopped being Byzantium in 330 AD, when the ancient Emperor Constantine made it the capital of the Roman Empire (deeming it Constantinople). Second of all, note the compression of these lines. The speaker seems to move from the physical world he's been standing in (or at least next to) to Byzantium in a voyage of only one line—in other words, at the speed of the imagination.

As a city at once real and imaginary, dead in some ways and living in others (today we call the city that stands on the same ground Istanbul), Byzantium seems like just the place to discover those "monuments" that are equally real and imaginary, current and linked to the past.

It's also important that Byzantium is a "holy city." Notice the assonance between the words "holy" and "soul": if the speaker is going to teach something as immaterial and infinitely important as his soul to sing, he's going to need to go somewhere holy to do it.

The simple word "come" is also significant here. It's the only word in the poem that ever rhymes with "Byzantium," and if the reader thinks for a moment, they'll notice that it has multiple meanings. "Come" can be a thing one is about to do: "Come here!" But it can also be (as it is in this line) a thing that one has already done: "I have come." The past and the future seem to

meet in this word; already, the speaker is developing a new relationship with time.

LINES 17-20

O sages standing ...
... of my soul.

The speaker's adventure in his inner Byzantium begins with a bang. Suddenly, he is standing before ancient sages, addressing them in a direct apostrophe:

> O sages standing in God's holy fire
> As in the gold mosaic of a wall

This rich and complex image creates two overlapping realities, which dance in and out of each other.

If the reader is familiar with Byzantine art (see the "Resources" section for some images if not), they'll know that the churches of Byzantium were full of gorgeous mosaics. Brightly colored and often gilded, these mosaics would have been particularly awe-inspiring in a time before artificial light, glittering high above worshipers. And unlike other forms of visual art, mosaics don't fade: what you see now is very much what a viewer would have seen thousands of years ago.

When the speaker imagines that the holy fire the sages stand in is like the gold mosaic of a wall, a picture of these famous and glorious artworks rises to the reader's mind. The speaker is at once addressing these deathless works of art and something *beyond* them, something that they're only able to hint at. In the imaginary Byzantium, art and the world beyond seem linked to each other at a deep and mystical level. This is one way of thinking about those "monuments": the art memorializing the sages has outlasted the sages themselves yet seems to also *be* the sages, all at the same time.

Addressing these ancient holy men, the speaker asks them to:

> Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre
> And be the singing-masters of my soul

The speaker here uses one of Yeats's very favorite words: "gyre." A gyre is a spiraling whirl-windy motion, or a whirlwind itself. "Perne" is an invented word meaning "to spin like a pern"—a bobbin on a spinning wheel. The sages are thus asked not only to emerge from where they stand in this place beyond time, but to spin round and round. This is an image that might be familiar to readers of Dante's *Paradiso*, a poem that influenced Yeats (and many other poets); in that poem, souls in heaven dance by spinning and whirling, their circling imitating the perfect circles in which the planets spin. But the word "perne" is homely as well as transcendent: there's something both transcendent and down-to-earth about the image of a sage spinning like a bobbin.

When the speaker asks these spinning sages to be "the singing-masters of my soul," he might seem to contradict his own earlier statement that there is no singing-school. But the rules of Byzantium seem to work differently: once a traveler has reached this imagined world, when he studies the monuments, they become his singing teachers.

LINES 21-24

Consume my heart ...
... artifice of eternity.

When the sages teach one to sing, they don't fool around. This kind of singing seems to be more than just learning to carry a tune; rather, it involves giving up your whole soul to the work:

> Consume my heart away; sick with desire
> And fastened to a dying animal
> It knows not what it is; ...

To "consume" is an especially vivid word here: it means to eat, but is often used metaphorically to describe fires. The speaker is asking the sages (who, after all, are standing in "holy fire") to burn up his heart like a religious offering.

The speaker says that his heart is "fastened to a dying animal," i.e., to the speaker's mortal body. But, of course, his physical heart is also a *part* of that dying animal—the part of it that *keeps* it from dying, in fact. The heart is a common metaphor for the soul, perhaps for this reason: when it isn't beating anymore, a person has died, their soul has departed their body. But the heart is also often used to describe one's feelings.

So the speaker's "heart," here, has elements of his physical, emotional, and spiritual life all wrapped up in it. Within his body, his soul feels stuck, and can't perceive its own deeper and more enduring reality. And it's that reality that the speaker is reaching out to the sages for. Notice the work this stanza's concluding rhyming couplet does here:

> ... gather **me**
> Into the artifice of **eternity**.

"Me," that thing that it might be tempting to think of as just a sad soul left in a "tattered coat," in fact rhymes with "eternity" itself. But what kind of eternity is this?

The reader has already seen that the immortality of the sages seems to be both *in* art and *beyond* art. Apparently, immortality itself has a quality of "artifice" in it. This is a word that might make a modern reader a little uneasy: contemporary language associates "artifice" with deceit or "artificiality." But "artifice," here, means "artistry." Eternity seems to have a lot in common with both singing and mosaics: it's a kind of eternity that is crafted and perfected, not organic and growing willy-nilly like the country of the young.

Consider how the speaker's invocation of both music and mosaic might make the very poem he's writing an instance of this "artifice of eternity." Poetry is musical, like a song; it's made of many little pieces (words, that is) put together to form a big picture, like a mosaic. The very act of writing a poem might be one way to reach out toward a bigger reality than the one your body is stuck in. (Indeed, the reader might want to consider that we're reading this poem long after its author's death!)

LINES 25-29

Once out of ...
... drowsy Emperor awake;

The speaker can't quite reach the immortality of the sages—at least, not yet, trapped as he is in his mortal body. In the poem's final stanza, he falls back from his direct invocation to the burning, spinning wise men and considers what he will do when he can at last join them fully. He says he'll never inhabit a mortal body again, and instead will become a work of art created from gold.

Notice how the woven patterns of alliteration (marked in bold), assonance (marked in italics), and word repetition here make this future life as an artwork sound harmoniously delicious—and take a look at the diacope of the word "gold":

> O*n*ce **o**ut **o**f n*a*ture I shall never t*a*ke
> My bodily f*o*rm f**r**om any n*a*tural thing
> But such a f*o*rm as **G**recian **g**oldsmiths m*a*ke
> Of h*a*mmered **g**old and **g**old en*a*melling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor aw*a*ke

Especially notable here is the sound balance of the line "hammered gold and gold enamelling": the similar sounds of "hammered" and "enamelling" hold hands across an expanse of gold.

All that gold reminds the reader of the gold mosaic that is like "God's holy fire" in line 17. Here, the speaker imagines not just traveling to a world of eternal, untarnished gold (see the "Symbols" section for more on why gold might be an especially good image for eternity), but being *made of* that gold. Being a part of eternity means being made of the materials of eternity.

This spiritual gold is presented as distinct from "any natural thing"—but the next lines will complicate this separation of the eternal from the natural.

LINES 30-32

Or set upon ...
... or to come.

While the speaker began his final stanza by asserting that "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing," he seems at first to contradict himself in the poem's last few lines.

> Or set upon a golden bough to sing

A golden form set upon a golden bough to sing sounds an awful lot like a golden version of the mortal birds ("those dying generations") from the poem's first and second lines. And in a poem where the act of schooling one's soul in transcendence is presented as singing, the reader might be thinking of birds here for more reasons than one.

How might the form of a golden bird be different from "any natural thing"? What is the difference between an eternal bird and a mortal bird? It's the same as the difference between the "sages" and the mosaic / holy fire where they stand. The sages' bodies are long gone, but they're still there in art and in eternity. Similarly, the golden bird the speaker imagines becoming is *like* a body without *being* a body.

It also has a specific job. Having finished his time in "singing school," the speaker imagines that his eternal form will

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

The shape of the sentence "past, or passing, or to come" also draws the reader back to the first stanza, where "begotten, born, and dies" mirrors it. When he is a soul that has become a piece of eternity and an immortal singer, the speaker imagines, he will teach the "lords and ladies of Byzantium" of the mystery of time—in the same way that the "sages" taught him to transcend time. "What is past, or passing, or to come": what else does eternity contain but that?

Notice, too, that "Byzantium" again rhymes with "come" here: that word that can sit comfortably in the past, present, and future. When this rhyme appears in line 15, it refers to the present ("I have sailed the seas and come"); here it refers to the future. Eternity, in this poem, mystically mirrors earthly experience and utterly transcends it at the same time.

SYMBOLS

GOLD

Gold is an ancient symbol not just for value and status, but for spiritual treasure. Because of its brilliance and the fact that it doesn't tarnish, it's often used to represent things of true deep worth—especially the riches of the soul.

It serves all these roles here, and more. Gold, in "Sailing to Byzantium," is always associated with transcendent, eternal art. "God's holy fire" itself is likened to gold mosaic. In the final stanza, when the speaker is imagining what it will be like when his soul has truly moved beyond the confines of his body, he'll

take on a form that is altogether golden—that is, immortal, beautiful, and perfected. Gold, in this poem, isn't just raw wealth, but an immortal beauty that has been painstakingly shaped.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "gold mosaic"
- **Line 27:** "Grecian goldsmiths"
- **Line 28:** "gold and gold"
- **Line 30:** "golden bough"

ART

Two kinds of artistry play powerful symbolic roles in "Sailing to Byzantium": music-making and visual art.

These different art forms have a complicated relationship to each other here. Music and song are used as a metaphor for what the soul needs to do to attain immortality (as when the speaker asks the "sages" to be "the singing-masters of my soul"). Music is in some ways both an ephemeral and an eternal art: while songs can be passed down, they also disappear as soon as they're sung. Visual art-making, on the other hand, is a kind of preservation that outwits time in a different way. The speaker sees the "sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall": here, the mosaic and eternal transcendence look just each other.

The point here is that art doesn't just outlive humans, but somehow resembles eternity itself. This is "the artifice of eternity": art represents what is immortal through what is mortal, and in doing so helps humans to imagine something past their bodily lives.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "sing, and louder sing"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Nor is there singing school but studying / Monuments of its own magnificence;"
- **Lines 17-18:** "O sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall,"
- **Line 20:** "And be the singing-masters of my soul."
- **Line 24:** "the artifice of eternity."
- **Lines 27-28:** "But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling"

BIRDS AND BIRDSONG

Birds appear at two points in the poem: in the thoughtless world of the young, and in the transcendent world of Byzantium. They thus play a complicated role, serving at once as symbols of mortality *and* immortality.

In the first stanza, the birds are called "those dying generations." These birds sing beautifully, yet (as animals) they're unaware of their own mortality. Their song here thus represents fleeting, ephemeral beauty.

By the end of the poem, however, the speaker himself imagines taking on the form of a golden bird once he's out of his mortal body. In this role, he'll be able to communicate the wisdom of eternity to the living—to "sing," metaphorically, for all those "lords and ladies of Byzantium" who pass him by. Birdsong thus becomes something different here—instead of something beautiful yet fleeting, it becomes everlasting. A golden bird, of course, can't *literally* sing. Instead, as an undying work of art, this bird would bear witness to history—it could watch the world go by, and remind those who look upon it of the past, perhaps pushing them to reflect on all that this bird must have figuratively seen through the years.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "birds"
- **Line 5:** "fowl"
- **Line 30:** "set upon a golden bough to sing"

BYZANTIUM

Byzantium was an ancient Greek city that has an aura of legend around it (in spite of the fact it really existed). It was renamed Constantinople after the Emperor Constantine, who made it the capitol of the Roman Empire, and it later became modern-day Istanbul; its time as Byzantium was already in the distant past when Yeats wrote this poem.

Byzantium is associated with ancient religion (including being an important seat of early Christianity), and it's famous for its beautiful icons and mosaic art.

In "Sailing to Byzantium," both the fact that the city is long-lost and that its gorgeous art remains to this day make it a powerful symbol for spiritual immortality after death. While the civilizations that first built it have past, their art remains, and still connects with the speaker as an image of that which survives past the mortal body.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "And therefore I have sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium."
- **Lines 17-18:** "O sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall,"
- **Lines 30-32:** "Or set upon a golden bough to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium / Of what is past, or passing, or to come."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is especially prominent in this poem because of the speaker's fondness for not only repeated *sounds*, but for repetition, period. For instance, in the second stanza, "sing" meets "sing" and "singing," and also matches up with "soul," "school," "studying," "sailed," and "seas." (See the Poetic Devices entry on "sibilance" for more on /s/ sounds specifically.)

Similarly, /g/ sounds appear repeatedly, but across only a few words: "God" and "Grecian" both appear once, and there are five instances of "gold" or a word that starts with "gold" ("goldsmiths" in line 27 and "golden" in line 30). On a broad level, this alliteration (and repetition) makes the poem feel musical and lyrical—that is, like a work of art. This, in turn, reflects the poem's thematic idea that immortality can be achieved through art; the speaker is creating a work of art with this very poem, and in doing so a part of him lives on.

Other times the alliteration serves to draw readers' attention to certain words and phrases. In line 5, for instance, the alliteration of the /f/ sound in "Fish, flesh, or fowl" connects these three words, placing them on the same level and underscoring that they are *all* subject to the *same* fate. As the speaker says in the next line, again heightening the phrase with alliteration, "Whatever is begotten, born, and dies." That is, all living things—be they fish, human beings, or birds—must die.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "song"
- **Line 4:** "salmon-falls," "seas"
- **Line 5:** "Fish, flesh, or fowl," "summer"
- **Line 6:** "begotten, born"
- **Line 7:** "sensual"
- **Line 11:** "Soul," "sing," "sing"
- **Line 13:** "singing school," "studying"
- **Line 14:** "Monuments," "magnificence"
- **Line 15:** "sailed the seas"
- **Line 16:** "city"
- **Line 17:** "sages standing," "God's"
- **Line 18:** "gold"
- **Line 20:** "singing-masters," "my ," "soul."
- **Line 21:** "desire"
- **Line 22:** "dying"
- **Line 25:** "nature," "never"
- **Line 26:** "form from," "natural"
- **Line 27:** "form," "Grecian goldsmiths"
- **Line 28:** "gold," "gold," "enamelling"
- **Line 29:** "Emperor"
- **Line 30:** "golden," "bough"
- **Line 31:** "lords," "ladies," "Byzantium"
- **Line 32:** "past," "passing"

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe makes a powerful appearance at one of the poem's most important turning points. The speaker, having made his imagined voyage to Byzantium, directly addresses the "sages" in the third stanza:

> O sages standing in God's holy fire
> As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
> Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
> And be the singing-masters of my soul.

This direct address appears at the exact midpoint of the poem, and marks the speaker's real imaginative leap between being a tired old man and a spiritual seeker. In addressing the sages directly, the speaker is reaching out beyond the confines of his body already, for the sages are "in God's holy fire," and/or in a mosaic; he's attempting a kind of communication of the *spirit*, not the *body*.

This apostrophe to the sages also suggests that the speaker hopes to one day be among their number, in "the artifice of eternity." Apostrophe here has something in common with the "invocation to the Muses" that appeared at the beginnings of Greek poems (and in the poems of many of their followers). When the speaker addresses the sages, he's hoping not only to be taken up into their world, but to infuse his present work with some of that "artifice of eternity": after all, we're reading a work of "artifice."

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-24:** "O sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall, / Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre, / And be the singing-masters of my soul. / Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is; and gather me / Into the artifice of eternity."

ASSONANCE

"Sailing to Byzantium" makes copious use of assonance. A common device in poetry, assonance here helps to create the rich and hypnotic imagery of the poem. Through a pattern of linked vowel sounds through and across stanzas, the speaker weaves the poem together into a coherent fabric, into a work of art like the golden mosaics the poem describes.

The assonant consistency within stanzas also helps to emphasize each stanza's mood. For instance, note the assonant /uh/ sounds of lines 1 and 2:

> That is no country for old men. The young
> In one another's arms ...

This sound unites the "country" with the "young" who are

wrapped up in "one another's arms": there's a solid wall of assonance keeping the speaker out of this world. Indeed, the speaker's identifier—he is an "old" man—chimes with "no," emphasizing his inability to be a part of this youthful world.

Later in the stanza, the repeated /aw/ sound underscores the way that all these elements of this youthful land are, nevertheless, subject to the passage of time; "all" that is "begotten" will die, no matter how "caught" up it is in the pleasures of life. In the next stanza, many short /i/ sounds evoke the "singing" of the soul. Each short /i/ is like a repeated musical note peppered throughout the stanza.

Overall, then, assonance adds to the poem's lyricism and musicality, while also emphasizing some of its thematic ideas.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "no," "country," "old," "young"
- **Line 2:** "one another's"
- **Line 4:** "falls"
- **Line 5:** "all," "long"
- **Line 6:** "begotten"
- **Line 7:** "Caught," "all"
- **Line 9:** "An," "man," "is," "thing"
- **Line 10:** "stick"
- **Line 11:** "its," "sing," "sing"
- **Line 12:** "in its"
- **Line 13:** "is," "singing," "studying"
- **Line 14:** "its," "magnificence"
- **Line 17:** "O," "holy," "fire"
- **Line 18:** "gold mosaic"
- **Line 19:** "fire," "gyre"
- **Line 21:** "desire"
- **Line 22:** "dying"
- **Line 25:** "nature," "take"
- **Line 27:** "goldsmiths," "make"
- **Line 28:** "hammered," "gold," "gold," "enamelling"
- **Line 29:** "drowsy," "awake"
- **Line 30:** "bough"
- **Line 32:** "past," "passing"

CAESURA

"Sailing to Byzantium" is filled with caesurae—especially in its first stanza. The effects these frequent pauses create in this poem are sometimes contradictory: caesura can help to create a delicious, lazy, lilting quality, or to break up a spell of that kind of sweet languor. It can also create a feeling of urgency, of one thought hurrying into the next.

In the first stanza, the speaker uses a lot of caesurae in his evocation of the world of the young. In lines 4-6, his use of mid-line commas creates a sense of abundance as he lists creature upon creature:

> The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
> Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
> Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

But at the very beginning of the poem, in lines 1-3, caesura abruptly breaks into this festive reckoning of happy living creatures:

> ... The young
> In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
> —Those dying generations—at their song,

That pungent "Those dying generations," with its use of emphatic dashes rather than subtler commas, makes it clear that the raptures of the young are (unbeknownst to them) illusory.

Later in the poem, caesurae help to throw emphasis on turning points. For instance, consider the break in line 10:

> A tattered coat upon a stick, unless

Here, that "unless" heralds a big change: where the speaker has been bemoaning how the world of the young and vital has no room for him, here he's finding a new way of understanding his life and his old age.

In the third stanza, frequent caesura helps to shape the speaker's address to the sages. In lines 19, 21, and 23, the speaker uses caesura either to describe an action ("perne in a gyre"), or to add greater detail to his exploration of the state of his heart:

> Consume my heart away; sick with desire
> And fastened to a dying animal
> It knows not what it is; and gather me

In this example, the *description* of the heart is fastened into the *lines* as the *heart* itself is described as being "fastened to a dying animal." The shape of the caesura mimics the shape of the idea.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "for old men. The young"
- **Line 2:** "arms, birds"
- **Line 3:** "Those dying generations—at their song"
- **Line 4:** "salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded "
- **Line 5:** "Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend"
- **Line 6:** "begotten, born, and dies."
- **Line 10:** "upon a stick, unless"
- **Line 11:** "sing, and louder sing"
- **Line 19:** "holy fire, perne in a gyre,"
- **Line 21:** "heart away; sick with desire"
- **Line 23:** "what it is; and gather me"

- **Line 32:** "past, or passing, or to come."

DIACOPE

Diacope is a flavorful and punchy poetic effect, and the speaker of "Sailing to Byzantium" uses it repeatedly for this reason. Diacope is often used to strengthen or emphasize an idea. Where diacope appears, it draws readers attention to the importance of a single important word; in this poem, those words are "sing" and "gold."

Consider lines 7-8:

> ... unless
> Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing

Here, the repetition of "sing" is even further driven home with the word "louder": diacope makes the speaker's sense of urgency and necessity around this kind of soul-singing clear. The word then appears again in line 13 as "singing," making this technically an example of polyptoton. The overall effect of this repetition is the same, however; it underscores the importance of the soul learning to "sing," to break free of the body.

A similar effect comes up in lines 27-28:

> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling

These repeated "golds" create a sense impression of overwhelming richness: that's an awful lot of gold, you know? (The world "golden" also returns later in the stanza, creating another instance of polyptoton.) The repeated punch of the monosyllabic, hard sound of the word "gold"—with its ringing /g/ and thumping /d/—also does some sensory work alongside the adjective "hammered," helping readers to *hear* the creation of the hammered, golden ornament the speaker describes.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "sing, and louder sing"
- **Lines 27-28:** "as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling"

ENJAMBMENT

Each stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium" contains only a few sentences across its eight lines—and in fact, the second stanza is just one long sentence. The poem thus winds up using a whole lot of enjambment.

Enjambment can sometimes create a choppy effect, but this poem's strong and persistent meter combines with the line breaks to produce a feeling of continuity. The enjambed lines help to maintain an ongoing flow of thought, which might echo the speaker's imaginary voyage: a continuous path across a rhythmic sea.

But enjambment also serves to complicate the lines' meaning. For instance, consider the enjambment of the first two lines:

> That is no country for old men. The young
> In one another's arms ...

Here, enjambment leaves "the young" stranded on the same line as "old men"—strengthening the juxtaposition and contrast between these two kinds of people.

The enjambment of lines 17-18 helps to drive a vivid image home:

> O sages standing in God's holy fire
> As in the gold mosaic of a wall

By keeping the image of the "holy fire" a little apart from the "gold mosaic," the poem gives the reader a chance to take in these images first one and then the other: but here, the juxtaposition of the two visions of the sages helps to unite them. Generally speaking, then, enjambment in this poem helps to build complex imagery and to produce surprising layers of meaning.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "young / In"
- **Lines 5-6:** "long / Whatever"
- **Lines 7-8:** "neglect / Monuments"
- **Lines 10-11:** "unless / Soul"
- **Lines 11-12:** "sing / For"
- **Lines 13-14:** "studying / Monuments"
- **Lines 15-16:** "come / To"
- **Lines 17-18:** "fire / As"
- **Lines 21-22:** "desire / And"
- **Lines 22-23:** "animal / It"
- **Lines 23-24:** "me / Into"
- **Lines 25-26:** "take / My"
- **Lines 27-28:** "make / Of"
- **Lines 28-29:** "enamelling / To"
- **Lines 30-31:** "sing / To"
- **Lines 31-32:** "Byzantium / Of"

PARADOX

The paradox of this poem lies in the way the speaker thinks about his fading body and the immortal soul. While the speaker longs to escape his failing old flesh and become immortal (like a work of art), all of his language for his soul is bodily. The soul has "hands" in line 11 and is represented as a "heart" in line 21. And when the speaker imagines his eventual immortality, in which he will "never take / my bodily form from any natural thing," the bodily form he imagines taking is nevertheless a *copy* of a natural thing: while his imagined future body will be made

of gold, it will still be in the form of a bird, an animal.

This paradox—the speaker wants to escape the body, yet can only conceive of that escape in bodily terms—helps to point the reader to a mystical transcendence at the root of this poem. The speaker's desire to leave his body behind isn't a desire to become *immaterial*, but a desire to have a different *kind* of body, one that is at once *like* a living thing and totally *beyond* a living thing.

The paradox in this poem helps to create a richer and more mysterious vision of what it might mean to become an immortal, or a work of art, or something that is both of those things at once.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress,"
- **Lines 17-23:** "O sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall, / Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre, / And be the singing-masters of my soul. / Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is;"
- **Lines 25-30:** "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing, / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling / To keep a drowsy Emperor awake; / Or set upon a golden bough to sing"

PARATAXIS

The speaker's use of parataxis helps to create a sense of grandeur, especially in the poem's first stanza. After a blunt assertion that "That is no country for old men," the first six lines make a dramatic inventory of the denizens of the country of the young:

> ... The young
> In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
> —Those dying generations—at their song,
> The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
> Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
> Whatever is begotten, born, or dies.

This list creates a sense of the overwhelming fertile abundance of this world. You could rearrange many of these clauses without changing the meaning of the stanza at large. This grand, sweeping inventory makes the world of the young seem all-encompassing. The speaker's sense that this is "no country" for him is made all the more poignant by the parataxis here as well: he definitely falls into the categories of the fish, flesh, or fowl, and is of course also one of those who are begotten, born, and die. Yet he is still *not* a part of this world; parataxis underscores how much this world contains, making it all the more striking that it does *not* contain the speaker. The poem's use of parataxis creates a feeling that, truly, the only way for the speaker to get away will be through the power of his imagination, art, or death. (Or maybe all three.)

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "The young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees, / —Those dying generations—at their song, / The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas, / Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long / Whatever is begotten, born, and dies."
- **Lines 9-10:** "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick,"

SIBILANCE

The sibilance in "Sailing to Byzantium" helps to create a hushed feeling throughout. The subject matter of this poem is on a rather bold and brassy scale: immortality, gold, singing, holy fires. Sibilance helps to temper the poem's volume. Inherently quiet—you can't yell an /s/ sound—sibilance evokes whispers and softness. (Observe that even the words "whispers" and "softness" are sibilant!) Because of its quieting effects, sibilance may also create a sense of secrecy or privacy.

The frequent sibilance in this poem help to give it a hushed quality that mirrors the quiet and introspective nature of the speaker's journey. While the matters he's dealing with are grand and dramatic, the drama isn't necessarily perceptible from outside the speaker's mind.

That sibilance here also often comes alongside big and impressive gestures. For instance, take line 11: "Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing." The speaker is telling his soul to sing loudly, yet the line itself sibilant. This fits right in with some of the poem's broader paradoxical qualities. The process the speaker is going through is at once cosmic and intensely personal, public and private, communicable and past speech. The quiet of sibilance alongside the poem's brilliant and gilded imagery keeps the poem in a state of rich tension between its extremes.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "song"
- **Line 4:** "salmon," "seas"
- **Line 5:** "summer"
- **Line 7:** "sensual"
- **Line 10:** "stick," "unless"
- **Line 11:** "Soul," "sing," "sing"
- **Line 12:** "dress"
- **Line 13:** "singing," "school," "studying"
- **Line 14:** "magnificence"
- **Line 15:** "sailed," "seas"

- **Line 17:** “sages,” “standing”
- **Line 20:** “singing,” “soul”
- **Line 21:** “Consume,” “sick”
- **Line 22:** “fastened”
- **Line 24:** “artifice”
- **Line 25:** “Once,” “shall”
- **Line 27:** “such,” “goldsmiths”
- **Line 30:** “set,” “sing”
- **Line 32:** “past,” “passing”

VOCABULARY

Salmon-falls (Line 4) - Little waterfalls in a river, where one might see salmon leaping.

Mackerel (Line 4) - A common kind of oily, ocean-dwelling fish.

Fowl (Line 5) - Bird life.

Begotten (Line 6) - Made through reproduction—parents beget children, plants beget little plants, etc.

Sensual (Line 7) - Appealing to or gratifying the senses.

Paltry (Line 9) - Meager or pathetic.

Tattered (Line 10) - Ragged or shredded.

Byzantium (Line 16, Line 31) - An ancient Greek holy city, which stood where Istanbul is today. A seat of early Christianity.

Sages (Line 17) - Wise men, particularly holy or ancient wise men.

Mosaic (Line 18) - Art made out of many small tiles of pottery or glass.

Perne (Line 19) - To spin like a "pern," a spool on a spinning-wheel; Yeats coined this word himself.

Gyre (Line 19) - A whirl or a spiraling form. (Yeats loved this word!)

Artifice (Line 24) - Clever artistry, with a connotation of trickery; think about "artificial" to get a sense of the doubleness of this word.

Enamelling (Line 28) - A form of brilliantly colored glassy decoration often applied to metal.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sailing to Byzantium" is made up of four stanzas, each with eight lines (making them octaves). The poem also follows the ancient pattern of *ottava rima* (see "Meter" and "Rhyme Scheme" for more details on how this works), but it doesn't use a particular poetic form beyond that. However, it's still a poem with a powerful and regular shape.

For one thing, these stanzas are further separated by Roman numerals, marking each as I, II, III, and IV. This creates the sensation of a poem created of vignettes, of short, self-contained scenes within a broader shared world. Indeed, the first stanza describes the world of the young; the second focuses on why the speaker must go to Byzantium; the third focuses on what the speaker then finds there, what he asks of the "sages"; and the fourth and final stanza envisions what the speaker will become after his death.

What's more, Yeats, who was deeply interested in the occult and the magical, like would have known that the number four was traditionally associated with the body and the physical world. The four regular stanzas of this poem thus reflect its subject. Here, the "singing" soul—the poetry itself—is bound by the solid walls of the stanzas. While the speaker longs to transcend his physical body, he has to start from *within* it.

METER

"Sailing to Byzantium" primarily uses iambic pentameter — that is, a line of five iambs, or poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern. Take line 9:

> An aged man is but a paltry thing

But, as is often the case with poems that use iambic pentameter as their base, this rhythm isn't totally consistent throughout. Even the very first line does something irregular:

> That is no country for old men. The young

This line has six stresses instead of the typical five. The front-loaded beginning, with heavy stresses on "That," "no country," and "old men," helps to create the sense that the speaker is at odds with the lyrical and delightful world of the young that he goes on to describe in a much more regular iambic rhythm. Indeed, the next line is much more regular, except for a trochee (stressed-unstressed) right after the caesura:

> In one another's arms, birds in the trees,

Throughout the poem, the reader will find that the speaker also breaks his iambic rhythm in moments of special emphasis, change, or stress, as he does in line 19:

> Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre

He falls back into relatively regular iambs in moments of establishing detail, and in moments of peace or mystery. Take lines 25-26, where he describes what form he wants his soul to take after his death:

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing

The rhythm isn't perfect here, but in general there are five pulsing beats in each line. This keeps up a steady heartbeat under the passionate and disruptive energy of the speaker's desires. The meter here has both constancy and wildness in it.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sailing to Byzantium" uses *ottava rima*, an ancient rhyme scheme that runs like this:

ABABABCC

Ottava rima has a long history. It was first used, as far as we know, by the medieval Italian poet Boccacio. Because of its flexibility, it was often used for longer narrative poems. The speaker's use of it here thus lends the poem an epic quality.

The rhyme scheme of "Sailing to Byzantium" is, however, not totally regular. The speaker often uses slant rhyme, as when he rhymes "unless" and "dress" with "magnificence," or "wall," soul," and "animal." These slant rhymes are partly pragmatic (there just aren't as many rhyme-words in English as there are in Italian, the language where *ottava rima* originated), but they're also meaningful. In these slightly mismatched rhymes, readers often see the speaker confronting the mismatch between the transcendent beauty of the soul and the limitations of the physical world: consider that wall/soul/animal rhyme, for instance.

The C couplets that end each stanza, however, all rhyme perfectly. Note that those end rhymes are the only places where the word "Byzantium" appears within the poem—and that in both instances, "Byzantium" is rhymed with "come." The speaker's longing for the transcendence he represents with the ancient city is spelled out in rhyme.

SPEAKER

The speaker, readers can safely say, is an old man. His whole perspective on the world and the action of the poem are founded on his reaction to his own age. In the first and second stanzas, he reveals his sadness at the indignities of old age: old men can't participate in the world of the young, and if they're not careful, they become shells of themselves.

But the speaker is not resigned to such a decline, nor to irrelevance. Rather, he is passionately devoted to an ideal: he will keep his soul alive, and teach it to sing even as his physical body dies.

The speaker's voyage to Byzantium is an internal, spiritual journey. Only by going deep into himself and offering his soul up to eternity can he transcend his failing outer self. The man who can make such a journey—and who knows that he has to make it—is something of a visionary.

SETTING

"Sailing to Byzantium" might be said to have three locations: in the world of the young, in Byzantium, and in the speaker's mind, which contains both of these places!

The place that is "no country for old men" has a hint of paradise in it: it's a place of fertility, sensuality, and abundant life. This is the world as it looks to someone who feels old and irrelevant: even if "those dying generations" are mortal, they're also full of unthinking and vibrant life—for now.

Byzantium, on the contrary, is a place of intangible things. The speaker can reach it only through a voyage of the imagination, as it has long vanished, transformed into a different place (the city became Constantinople under the Romans in 330 CE, and is now Istanbul). It's also a world of art and artistry. Where the country of the young is full of things that spontaneously *grow*, Byzantium is the land of things that are *made*.

While the growing world may have more of a solid reality than the imagined Byzantium, both are products of the speaker's mind: his perspective on the world around him turns it into the land of the young, and Byzantium can be visited only in his visions.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Butler Yeats was an influential Irish poet, most active around the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who were experimenting with free verse, Yeats loved old verse forms; his use of *ottava rima* in "Sailing to Byzantium" is just one example of his command of traditional poetic styles. He was awarded a Nobel Prize for his works.

Yeats was most deeply influenced by the poets of a generation or two before him—for instance, the visionary poetry of the Romantic poet William Blake and the works of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. His taste for magic and the occult (both enjoying a renaissance during his lifetime) shows up in the mysticism of his verse. He can also be classed as a Symbolist: an artist reacting against a predominating Victorian naturalism in favor of work influenced by dreams, imagination, and visions.

Yeats wrote "Sailing to Byzantium" in 1926, when he was in his 60s, and said of it: "I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts about that subject I have put into a poem called 'Sailing to Byzantium.'"

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Sailing to Byzantium" was written during a chaotic period of Irish history. In the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising, when Irish Republican forces rebelled against British occupation, a

small group of Northern counties formed what was known as the Irish Free State. Yeats, who was a long-time Irish Republican, served as a senator for this state. In this position, he wrote an important polemic against Catholic anti-divorce sentiment. "Sailing to Byzantium" was written during his time as a senator.

Yeats was also fascinated by the rise of Fascist governments on the European continent, and had some Fascist sympathies. While Yeats's belief in the value of the individual soul in "Sailing to Byzantium" might seem inflected by a democratic spirit, politically he was not a fan of rule by citizens.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — The Irish actor Dermot Crowley reads "Sailing to Byzantium" and discusses what it means to him. (https://youtu.be/345ttNxIvog)
- Yeats's Biography — A short biography of Yeats with links to more of his poems (https://poets.org/poet/w-b-yeats)
- Yeats in Ireland — Some background on Yeats's strong connections to his native Ireland. (https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/arts/design/the-tower-that-enchanted-yeats.html)
- LitChart for "No Country for Old Men" — A guide to a book that takes its title from this poem. Why do you think McCarthy might have chosen this line? (https://www.litcharts.com/lit/no-country-for-old-men)
- Byzantine Mosaics — A Wikipedia article (with many lovely pictures) on Byzantine mosaic art. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_mosaics)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- When You Are Old

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