

Symbolism and the Poetry of W. B. Yeats

Sailing to Byzantium

The poem is one of Yeats's finest, and is worth the effort to analyse and unpick his difficult imagery and symbolism. One of the great meditations on ageing and wisdom, 'Sailing to Byzantium' is elusive and even mystical, but all the better for it. This poem fits in nicely with the literary movement in which it was written, Modernism. Modernists often rebelled against tradition and celebrated self-discovery, which this poem absolutely does. It is also interesting to consider when Yeats wrote this poem: he wrote it fewer than ten years before his death, which means he was an old man. This is important since the speaker in this poem feels he is not appreciated in his homeland due to his advanced age. Perhaps Yeats was feeling alienated from his society for the same reasons.

"Byzantium" is a loaded word for William Butler Yeats, a word rich with meaning. "Byzantium" refers to an earlier Yeats poem by that title and to the ancient name for Istanbul, capital of the Byzantine empire of the fifth and sixth centuries. In his prose work *A Vision* (1925), Yeats wrote that Byzantium represents for him a world of artistic energy and timelessness, a place of highly developed intellectual and artistic cultures. It represents a perfect union of aesthetic and spiritual energies; Yeats wrote, "I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic, and practical life were one." To historians of art, Byzantium is famous for its multicolored mosaics inlaid with marble and gold. Often the mosaics depict Christ or other religious figures in symmetrical arrangements with two-dimensional, impersonal facial expression

Growing older, feeling out of touch with the new generation superseding you, feeling surplus to requirements, waiting for death. These are, perhaps, inevitable thoughts once we reach a certain age: they certainly came to Yeats in his later years, and he frequently wrote about growing old. This is what 'Sailing to Byzantium' is about, though it's not all it's about. To discover what else this – one of W. B. Yeats's finest poems – has to say, we will have to look more closely at it. Below is the poem, followed by a brief summary of it, with some notes towards an analysis of its form, language, and imagery.

Yeats wrote 'Sailing to Byzantium' in 1927, when he was in his early sixties, and published a year later in *The Tower*. In summary, the first stanza sees Yeats's speaker announcing that the country he's left behind is 'no country for old men'. The speaker, referring to the country that he has left, says that it is "no country for old men": it is full of youth and life, with the young lying in one another's arms, birds singing in the trees, and fish swimming in the waters. There, "all summer long" the world rings with the "sensual music" that makes the young neglect the old, whom the speaker describes as "Monuments of unageing intellect." The first stanza describes a country of "sensual music," presumably Ireland, but representing any place dominated by living for today. As an old man, the poet at once celebrates the fertility and joyful images of teeming fish, birds, and people but despairs of their temporal ignorance.

Being old, the speaker felt out of place there. Young love, birds singing, and other signs of joy and youth are not the province of the old. 'Sailing to Byzantium', as this opening stanza

establishes, is about something that is still very much hotly debated and highlighted: how the elderly are neglected by the rest of society.

An old man, the speaker says, is a “paltry thing,” merely a tattered coat upon a stick, unless his soul can clap its hands and sing; and the only way for the soul to learn how to sing is to study “monuments of its own magnificence.” Therefore, the speaker has “sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium.” The speaker addresses the sages “standing in God’s holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall,” and asks them to be his soul’s “singing-masters.” He hopes they will consume his heart away, for his heart “knows not what it is”—it is “sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal,” and the speaker wishes to be gathered “Into the artifice of eternity.”

In the third stanza, then, the speaker commands the wise old men, or ‘sages’, of Byzantium to ‘be the singing-masters of my soul’ – to teach him how to delight in his old age and be happy in his soul again. This is why the speaker of Yeats’s poem wants the elders to ‘Consume my heart away’: literally, to eat his heart out. He needs to be stripped of a young man’s desire and make peace with his advancing years. For he is, after all, a ‘dying animal’.

In the final stanza, Yeats’s speaker says that once he has been removed ‘out of nature’ and is shorn of his desire and ‘heart’, he will never seek to return to his bodily form, but will instead be like a gold bird made by Grecian goldsmiths, or a bird placed on the ‘golden bough’ to sing to the people of Byzantium. In other words, Yeats’s speaker yearns to leave his body behind and enter some altogether more spiritual, and everlasting, plane.

Why Byzantium? Yeats made its significance clear in a script he wrote for a BBC radio broadcast in 1931:

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’. When Irishmen were illuminating the Book of Kells, and making the jeweled croziers in the National Museum, Byzantium was the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city.

The poem is about renouncing the hold of the world upon us, and attaining something higher than the physical or sensual. Yeats’s images require further analysis, though: for instance, the final stanza with its image of the gold singing bird is baffling when we first encounter it. However, Yeats himself recalled that he had ‘read somewhere that in the Emperor’s palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang’. (The book Yeats is struggling to recall here may have been Sir Walter Scott’s *Count Robert of Paris*.) But ‘golden bough’ is also a loaded phrase, since to Yeats’s original readers it would have suggested the colossal work of comparative religion, *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), by James Frazer. Since ‘Byzantium’ (the Turkish city that later became known as Constantinople, and, later still, Istanbul) was variously ruled by Greeks, Romans, and Christians (in the later years of the Roman empire), and is now largely populated by Muslims, the city acts as a sort of meeting-point for various ethnicities, cultures, religions, and traditions, its significance in Yeats’s poem can be interpreted in light of this idea of shared ideas across different religious systems.

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