

W.B. Yeats

## Sailing to Byzantium

- W. B. Yeats wrote 'Sailing to Byzantium' in 1927, when he was in his early sixties, and published a year later in *The Tower*.
- 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.

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- The poem is one of Yeats's finest, and is worth the effort to analyse and unpick his difficult imagery and symbolism. '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.
- 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;



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- 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."

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- 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.



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- 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.
- The poem is about renouncing the hold of the world upon us, and attaining something higher than the physical or sensual.

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- 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'.
- Yeats constructs his poem around one major opposition: the mortal world of the flesh versus the golden world of eternal art.
- One of Yeats's major themes in poetry is that no one can make a choice of absolute certainty between precise opposites. The two realms depend on each other for what they mean, as in the case of Ireland with its teeming animal life and the medieval imperial city of Byzantium.