

## SAILING TO BYZANTIUM William Butler Yeats

That is no country for old men. 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.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect.

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,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium...

The first stanza consists of the author describing his former country (perhaps Ireland): a romantic picture of the natural world. Before, in the opening line of the poem, the poet proclaims that place is not oriented toward the aged (**That is no country for old men**): it is full of youth and life, with the young in one another's arms, birds singing in the trees, and fish swimming in the waters "**The salmon-falls...seas**" (le cascate ricche di salmoni, i mari gremiti di sgombri). Lines two through six repeat a similar combination of the natural world and the natural cycle of life and death; all life recognizing and accepting that all that which is born must die. He suggests that despite their apparent happiness, each is condemned to death, their mortality is inescapable -: "**Whatever is begotten born and dies.**" This contrasts the sensual world with the world of art, best represented by the magnificence of Byzantium. With the closing couplet, the poet calls the world nothing but "sensual music" that distracts people from the eternal things in life (Yeats uses the word "**caught**" to describe the trap-like nature of the natural world). This world of circulating life and death blinds the enraptured mortals from the immortal realm of the artistic and spiritual ("**monuments of unageing** - che non invecchia - **intellect**"). He perceives a growing dichotomy between his ageing body and his still youthful mind or intellect.

**TRADUZIONE:** Questo non è un paese per vecchi. I giovani /l'uno nelle braccia dell'altro, gli uccelli sugli alberi /- quelle generazioni mortali - intenti al loro canto, /le cascate ricche di salmoni, i mari gremiti di sgombri, /pesce, carne, o volatili, per tutta l'estate non fanno che lodare / tutto ciò che è generato, che nasce e che muore. / Presi da quella musica sensuale, tutti trascurano /i monumenti dell'intelletto che non invecchia.

The second stanza describes elderly humans as thin and frail. An old man (**aged man**), the poet says, is a "**paltry** (misera/spregevole) **thing**" (elaborating on the "old men" mentioned in the first stanza, the "aged man" is described as "paltry" fading into insignificance), merely a **tattered** (a brandelli) **coat upon a stick** (Yeats uses the analogy with a scarecrow to represent the lifelessness of someone old; the pitiful scarecrow represents aging). This for Yeats is the inevitability of old age. Unless one concentrates on the intellect of soul and by doing so seek to escape from the constraints of the human body: **soul clap its hands** (batta le mani) **and sing** (in order to leave the scarecrow's body, the soul must clap its hands and sing - Yeats instills the auditory sensation of singing using strong sibilance found from lines ten through thirteen. With words like "unless," "soul," "hands," "sing," "dress," "singing school," and "studying", frequent use of "s" sounds form a whispering quality that represent the ascension song desired by the poet), and the only way for the soul to learn how to sing is to study "monuments of its own magnificence." (the monument of line eight now found again in line fourteen. Yeats considers the relics of the intellect - the arts - magnificent and beyond time. The poet plans to become just as timeless as these monuments). The soul must sing louder than any fiber in its "**mortal dress**" (abito mortale). The song is not learned through any school **but** (se non) studying the aforementioned monuments. The author, identifying himself as the aged man, comes to Byzantium to learn how to sing and separate his soul from his scarecrow of a body "**sailed the seas and come / To the holy** (sacra) **city of Byzantium**" consequently he has resolved to attempt such a journey, a metaphorical voyage to Byzantium, which is for him the symbol of artistic magnificence and permanence.

**TRADUZIONE:** Un uomo anziano non è che una cosa misera / una giacca a brandelli su un bastone, a meno che / l'anima non batta le sue mani e canti, e canti più forte / per ogni strappo nel suo abito mortale, / nè v'è altra scuola di canto se non lo studio / dei monumenti della sua magnificenza; / e per questo io ho veleggiato sui mari e

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.

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

sono giunto / alla sacra città di Bisanzio.

Yeats begins by referring to a particular painting he saw in a Ravenna church, the painting depicted martyrs being burned for their faith. Yeats interpretation suggests that these martyrs were sages and that the flames represent the Holy Spirit, in other words that the moment of their deaths, was equivalent to moving from the mortal life to the immortal life and achieving a permanence through both the life of the soul and the Byzantine painting.

Having arrived at Byzantium, the poet addresses the sages within the city and asks them to step from their "holy fire" (Twice attributed to the sages, the "holy fire" links the third stanza with the "holy city" of stanza two) and **perne in a gyre** (discendete in una spirale - Yeats is referring to the movement of thread through bobbin and spool, a movement that is so fast that it is imperceptible to the naked eye - is an allusion to Yeats's cyclical theory of history and transcendence: Yeats used the concept of the spiraling gyre to suggest that opposite concepts—such as youth and age, body and soul, nature and art, transient and eternal—are in fact mutually dependent upon each other. The mutually interpenetrating opposites—thesis and antithesis—resolve in such a way as to produce a synthesis that contains a larger truth) to be his soul's "singing-masters" and the metaphor continues with the poet praying for they will consume his heart away. He asks them to be his guides on his voyage to Byzantium, to help him break free from his decreped body which he now sees as a "dying animal" (**fastened to a dying animal**: legato a un animale mortale). To consume his worldly body, his soul bound to the earth and incapable of understanding its true potential; the poet hopes to be cleverly assimilated (**gather me**: accoglietemi) by the continuum of eternity (to be gathered "Into the artifice of eternity").

The poet wants to be subsumed into the world of Byzantine art, to be like the figures in the gold mosaic. Yeats sees gold as representing an untarnished brilliance and permanence that best reflects his opinion of art.

**TRADUZIONE:** O saggi che state nel fuoco sacro di Dio / come in un mosaico dorato di una parete, / scendete dal sacro fuoco, discendete in una spirale, / e siate i maestri di canto della mia anima. / Consumate del tutto il mio cuore; malato di desiderio / e legato a un animale mortale, / egli non sa quello che è; e accoglietemi / nell'artificio dell'eternità.

In the final stanza continues the poet's prayer. He says that once he has been taken out of the natural world, he will no longer take his "bodily form" from any "natural thing" (susceptible to the ravages of time, decay and death). Instead he would take the form of a golden bird, a singing bird made of **hammered** (battuto) gold and **enamelling** (decorato a smalto), such as Grecian **goldsmiths** (orafi) make (it alludes to the Byzantine Emperor Theophilus who had made for himself mechanical golden birds that sang upon the branches of a golden tree. The poet's intellect is limited by his human condition, Yeats has finally broken with the sensual mortal world in favour of an intellectual permanence produced by a work of art). In the last stanza, the poet imagines himself transformed into a work of art that transcends the passing of time, a Byzantine work of art, a golden bird that is animate in that it sings to the Emperor (**To keep...awake**: per tenere desto un imperatore assonnato; **set...to sing**: posato su un ramo dorato a cantare), but inanimate as a work of art that will survive generations.

The final line of the poem -: "Of what is past, or passing, or to come." reflects the line from the opening stanza-: "Whatever is begotten, born and dies."

The art of the goldsmiths (stanza IV), the mosaic (Stanza III), and the monuments (Stanza I-II) all have an eternal quality. Either by art or by spiritual ascension, the poet would defy the death mandated by the natural world.

**TRADUZIONE:** Una volta che io sia fuori dalla natura, non assumerò mai più / la mia forma corporea da una qualsiasi cosa naturale, / ma una forma quale creano gli orafi greci / di oro battuto e decorato a smalto d'oro, / per tener desto un imperatore assonnato; / oppure posato su un ramo dorato, a cantare / ai signori e alle dame di Bisanzio / di ciò che è passato, o che è, o che sarà.

**Thème:** "Sailing to Byzantium" is a poem by William Butler Yeats. Is one of Yeats's most inspired works, and one of the greatest poems of the twentieth century. First published in the 1927 as part of a collection called *The Tower*, contains only four stanzas and yet is considered to be one of the most effective expressions of Yeats's arcane poetic "system" exploring tensions between art and ordinary life. In "Sailing to Byzantium," the artist/poet transforms himself into a work of art, and, in so doing, obscures the distinction between form and content and the artist and his work. It depicts a portion of an old man's journey to the city that is now Istanbul. Through this journey, Yeats explores his thoughts and musings on how immortality, art, and the human spirit may converge. Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" describes the metaphorical journey of a man pursuing his own vision of eternal life.

A fascination with the artificial as superior to the natural is one of Yeats's most prevalent themes. The artificial (the golden bird) is seen as perfect and unchanging, while the natural (the poet's body) is prone to ugliness and decay.

The use of symbolism is very important throughout the poem:

- The title of the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" contains 2 important symbols:
  - (a) Sailing which depicts a metaphorical journey and gives substance and a physical aspect to what Yeats is trying to achieve.
  - (b) Byzantium is the ancient city of the Byzantium empire (renamed Constantinople in the fourth century A.D., and now called Istanbul), which in the fifth and sixth centuries when was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire was the center of art and architecture. It symbolizes a world of artistic magnificence. In 1931, Yeats wrote that he chose to "symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city" because "Byzantium was the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy."
- The images of birds, fish and young lovers used by Yeats in the first stanza symbolises transience and mortality.
- Yeats' mentioning of the salmon falls and the mackerel seas is interesting because while both are images of fertility, the act of salmon swimming upstream may be interpreted as an act against nature, defying the natural flow of water. The salmon are a metaphor of the poet who desires to resist the forces of the natural world.
- The symbol of a scarecrow to represent the decrepitude of old age. The scarecrow is a repulsive lifeless image symbolising everything that Yeats wants to reject in his mortal existence.
- The symbol of music and song runs through the poem providing a unified motif between the worlds of intellect and sensual worlds. The song of the birds in the trees (in the opening stanza), is a sensual though transient song. This concept is again repeated in stanzas two and three ("a singing school" and singing-masters). In the final stanza the song of the golden bird represents the intellectual joy to be experienced by Yeats. The golden bird of the final stanza is a chosen image of the permanent form Yeats wishes to take, in essence it represents durability which one associates with the untarnishing quality of gold.

**Form:** "Sailing to Byzantium," is a lyric poem, it comprises four stanzas. The four eight-line stanzas take a very old verse form: they are metered in iambic pentameter, and rhymed ABABABCC, two trios of alternating rhyme followed by a couplet.