

Sailing to Byzantium by 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.

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.

William Butler Yeats

Yeats, a proud Irishman, is one of the most popular poets in history, known for such works as *When You Are Old* and *The Second Coming*. Yeats was strongly influenced by his native country, and much of his poetry is a reflection of that influence. Yeats died in 1939, but his legacy lives on even today. Many of his poems are continually referenced in popular culture, including this particular poem, whose first line, “That is no country for old men...” was used for the title of Cormac McCarthy’s popular novel, *No Country for Old Men*, which was later successfully adapted for the big screen.

Summary of *Sailing to Byzantium*

Sailing to Byzantium tells the story of a man who is travelling to a new country. Byzantium was an ancient Greek colony later named Constantinople, which is situated where Istanbul, Turkey, now stands. While the speaker does take an actual journey to Byzantium, the reader can interpret this journey as a metaphorical one, perhaps representing the journey of the artist. In the poem, the speaker feels the country in which he resides is no place for the old—it is only welcoming to the young and promising. The speaker thus decides to travel to Byzantium, and later, to eternity, where age is not an issue, and he will be able to transcend his physical life.

Sailing to Byzantium Analysis

The poem is broken into four stanzas, each containing eight lines. There is a set rhyme scheme throughout the poem of abababcc. Yeats wrote the poem in iambic pentameter, and there is a rhyming couplet at the end of each stanza. The poem begins with a declarative sentence in the first line:

That is no country for old men.

Straightaway, the reader senses the importance of Yeats’s diction, for instead of using “this” to mean the country the speaker is currently in, the speaker instead says “that,” which gives the reader the sense that the speaker is looking at his former country from a distance. Perhaps he has already started his journey to Byzantium as the poem opens.

The rest of the first stanza is the speaker’s explanation as to why his former country is not a welcoming place for those who are older. Yeats writes:

The young/In one another’s arms, birds in the trees...

The speaker's former home sounds idyllic: the young lovers are wrapped in each other's arms, and the birds are singing in the trees.

This natural imagery continues as the speaker details all of the beautiful creatures that are in his former home. Yeats writes:

—Those dying generations—at their song,

The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,

Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long...

Here, the speaker bitterly tells that all of these creatures will one day grow old, as well. Yeats continues:

Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

Caught in that sensual music all neglect

Monuments of unageing intellect.

Here, the speaker seems to be commenting on the people who inhabit his former land. Instead of concentrating on the things that will last forever, they instead only enjoy what is right in front of them at any given moment.

The second stanza is more of the same. Yeats writes:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,

A tattered coat upon a stick, unless

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

The reader cannot dismiss the bitter tone that is present in this stanza; Yeats's diction is particularly telling, comparing an old man to an insignificant, small thing. He infers that there is nothing left to an old man: he is simply a stick wearing a worn and torn jacket. Yeats seems to be commenting here, however, that just because one is old, it does not mean he has an old soul, for the soul of the old man is clapping and singing loudly.

Further into the second stanza, Yeats writes:

For every tatter in mortal dress,

Nor is there singing school but studying

Monuments of its own magnificence...

The speaker informs the reader that the more tattered in dress one is, the louder he should sing, because certainly the aged have earned their song.

The couplet in the second stanza clearly announces that the speaker has left his home to visit the “holy city of Byzantium.” Throughout its history, Byzantium, later Constantinople and then Istanbul, has been known as a center for the arts and intellectualism. Clearly, the speaker feels he will be much more appreciated in such an area.

The third stanza represents a shift to the most ethereal and metaphysical. Once the speaker arrives in Byzantium, he addresses the sages, or wise people, he finds there. Yeats writes:

O sages standing in God’s holy fire

As in the gold mosaic wall,

Come from the holy fire, perne in the gyre,

And be the singing-masters of my soul.

The speaker seems to almost be conjuring these people to him in an attempt to become the “singing-masters” of his soul. Yeats’s use of assonance with the long “I” sounds in “fire” and “gyre” lend an almost sing-song, mystical quality to the speaker’s conjuring. One can almost picture the speaker calling forth the spirits in Byzantium, pleading with them to inspire and awaken his soul.

The last half of the third stanza continues this thought. Yeats writes:

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.

The speaker admits here that he feels lost and “sick with desire.” The ostracizing he experienced in his former home has sickened his heart, and he is begging the wise sages to cleanse him. He begs for immortality, longing to live and be appreciated forever.

In stanza four, the speaker makes his pronouncement: he wants to forego his body and live forever, immortalized the way the Greeks would have intended: through their art. Yeats writes:

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 enameling
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.

The speaker announces that he would like to take his form in Grecian urns or enameling, handcrafted by goldsmiths, so that an emperor could spend his nights admiring him in the artwork. The past, present, and future, will all be one because the speaker will live for eternity.

Historical Significance of *Sailing to Byzantium*

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.