

William Butler Yeats.

- Unity to disunity then to unity through “ doctrine of the mask
- Humanitarian

'Sailing to Byzantium'

Analysis

I

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 (5)  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect.

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless (10)  
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 (15)  
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

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. (20)  
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.

#### IV

Once out of nature I shall never take (25)  
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 (30)  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Thanks to this ad, StudySmarter remains free: advertisement

Remove Ads? Sign up for free

The context of the poem

When poet William Butler Yeats wrote 'Sailing to Byzantium' he was 62 and had been married less than a decade to Georgie Hyde-Lees, a much younger woman. William Butler Yeats and Georgie Hyde-Lees were both deeply spiritual. Hyde-Lees was a youthful, intellectual and spiritual counterpart to an ageing Yeats who hadn't yet had children at age 52. Yeats married Hyde-Lees in part as a result of her youth (she was 25 when they were wed). Yeats as a poet is concerned with a kind of existential dread about ageing and continuing legacy in much of his work. Yeats' preoccupation with his age began nearly a decade earlier as his lifelong lover Maude Gonne, as well as her daughter, consistently rejected Yeats' proposals and he moved onward to Hyde-Lees, looking

for a companion in his old age that would keep him feeling young and intellectually engaged.

'Sailing to Byzantium' calls back to Yeats' Protestant Ascendancy background and references some other spiritual beliefs such as the soul being separate from the body, and an afterlife. Byzantium (later renamed Constantinople and then later Istanbul) was a place that was a strong seat for Christianity and Christian belief systems early on in the religion.

### Stanza I

William Butler Yeats opens the first stanza of the poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' with a world in which there is no place for the elderly. The speaker is one such elderly individual.

We see images of young people in one another's arms and birds in the trees, and see other animals (fish, flesh, or fowl) going through the summer blissfully and joyfully unaware of their mortality.

Sailing to Byzantium, Birds in a tree, StudySmarter

Do you want to see this and many more great infographics?