

William Butler Yeats 1865-1939

-Sailing to Byzantium

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 unaging 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.

“Sailing to Byzantium,” by the Irish poet W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), reflects on the difficulty of keeping one’s soul alive in a fragile, failing human body. The speaker, an old man, leaves behind the country of the young for a visionary quest to Byzantium, the ancient city that was a major seat of early Christianity. There, he hopes to learn how to move past his mortality and become something more like an immortal work of art. “Sailing to Byzantium,” by the Irish poet W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), reflects on the difficulty of keeping one’s soul alive in a fragile, failing human body. The speaker, an old man,

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- This poem is, at least in part, about the difficulties of old age. To the speaker, the inevitable failure of the aging body presents a choice: the elderly can either fade into husks of their former selves, or learn to escape the physical limitations of old age by beautifying their *souls*—and, eventually, upon dying, becoming something that isn't tied to the human body at all. The poem thus implies a separation between the body and soul, and presents old age as both a burden *and* an opportunity for a kind of spiritual transcendence—a chance to leave the earthly world, and all its limitations, behind.

In the first stanza, the speaker vividly evokes the beautiful world of the young. The world is described through images of natural fertility and bounty: young people embracing, singing birds, vast schools of fish. This world is intensely focused on material pleasures and the creation of even more new life.

But, as the speaker hints when he calls the singing birds “those dying generations” and observes that the happy young “neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect,” this world is also limited by its inability to accept the realities of aging. That is, the young are so self-absorbed, so wrapped up in these physical, bodily delights, that they can't yet appreciate their own mortality, and certainly can't achieve the kind of spiritual transcendence the speaker longs for.

Indeed, an old man with a failing body can't even pretend to fit in there. The poem's very first line, “That is no country for old men,” lets readers know that the speaker is totally at odds with this world. Even the word “that” separates the speaker from the country: it's something over there, something he doesn't belong to.

The speaker then focuses on the failures of his aging body, which he describes as “a tattered coat”: not the substance of his real self, but just a

garment he's wearing. The only way to salvage such a garment, in turn, is for the soul to "clap its hands and sing." The soul itself thus seems to have a body—but a different kind of body, one that can't fade and weaken over time.

Because there is no "singing school," however, no one to teach the speaker's soul how to achieve such vibrancy, the speaker makes an imagined spiritual journey to the long-lost holy city of Byzantium. He's making this journey with his *mind*, not his body; he envisions leaving the body behind forever, in fact, and the power of his imagination helps him to move beyond his physical frailty. This again emphasizes the separation between the speaker's mortal body and his transcendent soul.

Byzantium ceased to exist long ago (it is now modern-day Istanbul), and the "sages," or wise men, the speaker reaches out to are actually mosaics—real, famous artworks crafted from many tiny, often gilded (gold-covered) tiles. As such, the speaker is basically imagining traveling to a long-dead holy city and talking to mosaic icons on a wall. But that's the point: these sages have transcended old age and mortality through becoming the materials of imagination and of art. They have left their frail, physical bodies behind.

The speaker intends to one day join them—and when he does, he'll leave behind his body forever, and "never take / My bodily form from any natural thing." In teaching his soul to imagine beyond the limits of his body, and eventually to leave it, he'll learn to overcome mortality and old age.

Part of this transcendence will come through the art he makes. Indeed, this poem *itself* is both a kind of song and a kind of mosaic: it's musical, and it's made of many little pieces (words, that is) put together. The art that the speaker leaves behind is another way of surviving past the limits of his mortal body, and, like the golden bird he imagines becoming, will still "sing" to later generations and teach them the wisdom he himself has learned.

The Power of Art

Closely related to the poem's ideas about aging, mortality, and the soul is its treatment of art. In the second half of the poem, the speaker reaches out to the world of art—to Byzantine mosaics—for answers to the struggles of old age and death. Art, here, is presented as a pathway to immortality. Art, the poem argues, can represent and preserve bodies that never change, and point to a bigger, transcendent reality: not just the reality of lives now vanished, but the reality of some different world beyond our own.

The elderly speaker, having left behind the world of the young which no longer has room for him in his frailty, goes to seek spiritual rebirth in the ancient city of Byzantium—an ancient holy city that is now long-dead. He begins his third stanza by invoking “sages standing in God’s holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall.” Byzantium was famous for its beautiful mosaic art, and the sages reach the immortality of “God’s holy fire” by being a part of these mosaics. That is, they are forever preserved via art, ageless and undying. Thus, the “artifice of eternity” suggests that art both has the power to give humans a *glimpse* of eternity, and is itself a way to *reach* that eternity for themselves.

The speaker wants to join them, in his own way, and his final vision of immortality is one that sums up the power of art—its ability to preserve the past, exist in the present, and endure into the future. Art, the speaker insists, also can still “sing,” speaking to future generations even after the artist is long gone.

As such, when he has learned from the sages and left behind his body, the speaker says, he will never “take / My bodily form from any natural thing,” and describes instead taking the form of some piece of golden art. In this he might resemble one of the mosaics in which he sees the sages. But he may also take the form of a golden bird, though he doesn’t say so directly: in his other vision of his immortality, he sits on a bough and sings, just as the living birds in the first stanza do.

The *mortal* body is left behind in the transition into immortality, but the *artistic* body remains: the speaker wishes to become art himself, to “sing to lords and ladies of Byzantium”—in short, to become a piece of art that might help *other* mortals to become a piece of art. In this role, he would “sing” of “what is past, or passing, or to come”—recording what was past, existing in the present, and enduring into the future.

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