



SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

W. B. YEATS

“Sailing to Byzantium”

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“Sailing to Byzantium” explores the dichotomies between age and youth, as well as sensuality and spirituality.

The speaker is “an aged man” who comes to the realization that youth and the sensual life are no longer an option for him, and he commences on a spiritual journey to the ideal world of Byzantium.

Yeats felt that the civilization of Byzantium represented a zenith in art, spirituality, and philosophy.

In Byzantium, the speaker is able to discard the natural element of his body in favor of the immortal, spiritual element of his soul.

Stanza 1

- Yeats introduces a world of youth and sensuality. The conflict of the poem is addressed when the speaker distances himself from this world by stating “That is no country for old men.” The speaker feels alien in this natural, youthful landscape. The birds are described as “dying generations.” Their songs are not immortal and thus they are aligned with the natural world.
- Youth, caught in the “sensual music” of the natural world, overlooks the immortal aspects of art and intellect.

Stanza 2

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- An elderly man is described as a pathetic scarecrow.
- In lines 13-16, the speaker concludes that only in an ideal environment like Byzantium can he learn the songs of the soul. The speaker elevates Byzantium to a “holy city,” thus deeming it appropriate to be the center of the spiritual world.

Stanza 3

- In Byzantium, the speaker addresses the “sages” of Byzantium whose images are enclosed inside a holy fire, represented in a gold mosaic.
- In lines 19-20, the speaker asks the sages to make him immortal like the glorious works of art in Byzantium. For this to occur, his body must be destroyed.
- The speaker’s heart, the home of his once youthful passions, is consumed by a cleansing fire along with his body which is described as a “dying animal.”

Stanza 4

- In lines 25-29, the speaker renounces the natural world and chooses to recreate himself in the form of an immortal golden bird.
- Unlike the natural birds in stanza 1, the golden bird which exemplifies the art and beauty of Byzantium is immortal.
- Placed in a golden tree, the speaker has now transformed himself into a work of art, unable to decay.
- In stanza 1, the birds of the natural world sing of “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.” In the ideal world, the speaker sings of “what is past, or passing, or to come,” thereby indicating his immortality.

Comment

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“Sailing to Byzantium” is considered one of Yeats’s greatest poems.

It examines the conflict between youth and age through the archetype of the journey for spiritual knowledge.

Yeats’s solution to this conflict is the creation of an object which seems to embody both the natural and spiritual worlds.

Image of the Bird

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- Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819): "immortal Bird"
- Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" (1900): "an aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small"
- Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (1928): artificial golden bird

Source

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A Study Guide for William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," Gale, 2017. (Slides 2-7)