

William Butler Yeats
"Sailing to Byzantium"
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Situation:

The speaker is the poet himself when he was an old man. He feels that his city is not suitable for old men; it is only suitable for the young and that is why he decides to sail to Byzantium.

The Poem:

Byzantium was a Greek city built on the eastern side of Constantinople in Turkey. Byzantium became the capital of the eastern Empire till 1453. The church of Santa Sophia embodies the surviving monuments. In this poem, Byzantium is a holy city because it is the capital of eastern Christendom and because it is Yeats's holy city and heaven of imagination. It has inherited the perfection of craftsmanship (art).

The speaker, in stanza I, feels that his city (Dublin, the capital of Ireland) is not suitable for him as an old man. It is only suitable for the young who are indulged in physical pleasures and physical love. They are like the birds in the trees and like any other mortal thing. They neglect the spiritual things and the great monuments of immortal art because they think only of physical pleasures. However, physical pleasures are transient because they are related to mortal (dying) animals.

The poet compares the aged man (the old man) to a scarecrow. He is like an outworn coat upon a stick unless he has a strong soul. An old man can have a strong soul if he can teach his soul singing. By "singing" the poet means happiness or joy.

There are no school which can teach the souls singing but this can be learnt by studying monuments (great works of art) and this is the reason which makes the poet sail the seas to the city of Byzantium.

In the third stanza the poet is in the city of Byzantium watching a wall mosaic (a work of immortal art) in which there are saints standing in a holy fire. He addresses these saints and pleads to them to come out of the holy fire, to perne (dance) in a gyre (in a circular motion), to teach his soul singing and to consume (burn out) his heart which – as he says—is sick with animal desires because it is fastened to a mortal animal (his human

body) . In this sense he pleads to the saints to purify his heart of sins and desires in the holy fire in order to make it pure and immortal.

If the poet were able to get rid of his mortal nature or of his fleshly body he will never take his bodily form from any natural or animal thing. He will take the form of a golden bird on a golden tree to sing to the lords and ladies of Byzantium of the past, the present and the future. The image of the singing bird – as the critic Wilson says—is taken from the clock sent by Harun Al-Rasheed to Charleman as a gift. However , this bird symbolizes the immortality of art.

Themes:

1. The main theme in the poem is the immortality of art. The poet sails to Byzantium because he can enjoy and study the monuments of great art there and his soul can learn singing (learn how to be happy and immortal) by studying these works of art.

2. The second theme is the mystical experience. The speaker decides to make a journey to Byzantium because his soul can be purified there in order to be immortal or to be godlike.

Language:

The poem is written in a simple but symbolic language. The voyage itself is a symbol of the mystical journey or a journey towards the city of God .Fish, flesh and fowl stand for sea animals, animals that live on earth and birds which means all mortal creatures. Singing itself is a symbol of happiness or of the spiritual joy or pleasure one feels after being purified of the sins of the body. However, in the last stanza one can easily feel the influence of Buddhism on Yeats in the idea of the migration of souls when he says the after leaving his body his soul will take the form of a golden bird on a golden tree.