



Sailing to Byzantium

William Butler Yeats
The Tower
(1928)

This is one of Yeats's greatest poems, composed in 1926 when he was over sixty. It springs from the worries connected with old age and illness, and the disillusionment with the Irish Civil War of 1922. The poet looks at Byzantium, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, later Constantinople, as the mythical place representing the timelessness and perfection of the world of art.

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 seas¹,
5 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend² all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing³ intellect.

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
10 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands⁴ and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but⁵ studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
15 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
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 gyre⁶,
20 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 me⁷
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 goldsmiths⁸ make
Of hammered⁹ gold and gold enamelling¹⁰
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
30 Or set upon a golden bough to sing¹¹
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

- 1 The salmon-falls ... seas. Le cascate ricche di salmoni, i mari gremiti di sgombri.
- 2 commend. Lodano, esaltano.
- 3 unageing. Che non invecchia.
- 4 clap its hands. Batta le mani.
- 5 but. Se non.
- 6 perne in a gyre. Discendete in una spirale.
- 7 gather me. Accoglietemi.
- 8 goldsmiths. Orafi.
- 9 hammered. Battuto.
- 10 enamelling. Decorazione a smalto.
- 11 set ... to sing. Posato su un ramo dorato a cantare.



LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the poem and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| 1 | pay no or little attention | 5 | attached firmly |
| 2 | wise men | 6 | generated |
| 3 | worthless | 7 | ragged |
| 4 | birds | 8 | sleepy |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the poem again and write a heading for each stanza (an example has been provided). Then analyse its content.

- **Stanza I:** *A description of a country the poet finds unwelcoming to old people.*

What kind of world would the poet like to leave? What does the birds' song celebrate? What effect does this song have?

- **Stanza II:**

Complete the following sentences.

- The poet introduces himself as
- His soul contrasts with his because the former
- The only proper singing school is
- This is why the poet

- **Stanza III:**

List and paraphrase the poet's invocations to the sages.

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- **Stanza IV:**

Say if the following statements are true or false. Correct the false ones.

- Once dead the poet will incarnate in any other physical form.
- He would like to become an immortal work of art.
- His aim will be to sing to mankind about life in ancient Byzantium.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

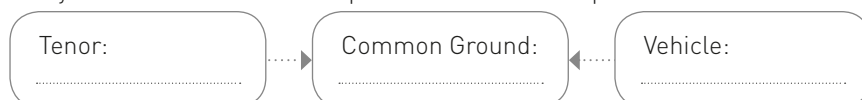
3 WRITE down the terms that are opposed in the first stanza and describe the atmosphere.

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4 FOCUS on the figure of the poet in the second stanza.

- Find the metaphor Yeats uses to refer to himself as an old man.
- Analyse the terms of this metaphor and answer the question below.



How does it relate to the birds mentioned in the previous stanza?



5 ANALYSE the image of the holy city of Byzantium. What kind of town does it represent? What does the act of 'sailing' towards it symbolise?

6 FIND where the image of the bird appears and say what it is associated with in each case.

7 EXPLAIN what different songs are present in the poem.

8 FIND the words and phrases referring to the theme of art and its role.

- 1 What kind of art was that of the mosaicist or the Grecian goldsmith?
- 2 What is the role of art as stated in the last lines of the poem?

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

9 COMPARE this poem, which belongs to Yeats's later poetry, with earlier poems by Yeats as regards the following:

- imagery;
- theme;
- style;
- poet's attitude.

➤ **COMPETENCE: CONTRASTING AUTHORS**

10 DISCUSS the evolution of the symbol of the bird from Romantic to modern poetry. Provide examples from the authors you have read.

11 COMPARE Yeats's poem with *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by the Romantic poet John Keats (→ 4.15 and T54) as regards the theme of art and the role of the artist.