



[Sailing to Byzantium](#), by William Butler Yeats

In A Nutshell

William Butler Yeats was an odd duck. In a world full of Modernism, he stuck closely to traditional forms. While contemporary poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were busy breaking down the entire history of poetic form, writing poems that jammed all sorts of forms together into a poem that started to work like a great big set of Tinker Toys, Yeats stuck to the classics. He returned again and again to age-old traditional forms (like ballads or Irish folk tales or even, in this case, ottava rima). Heck, if it ain't broke, why fix it?

Yeats wasn't just an old curmudgeon, though. He truly believed in the ability of old forms to modify themselves for the new challenges and possibilities of his modern world. After you read "Sailing to Byzantium," you'll see that this was a pretty huge theme in his poetry, as well. Where Eliot and Pound broke down poetic form completely, Yeats tried to breathe new life into an aging shell.

Folks in his day seemed to respect the man for his attention to poetic tradition, too. He wrote most of his famous work (including this poem) *after* he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923. In fact, he was just a young 'un when the top literary prize committee in the world decided that he was their man. He continued to write poetry for almost two decades after winning the Nobel. "Sailing to Byzantium" is one of the very popular poems from his later collections. It came out in *The Tower*, a book published in 1928.

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By the way, 20th century authors *love* snagging lines from Yeats's poetry for the titles of their books. We can think of at least two books that steal their titles from this Yeats poem *alone*. The American novelist Cormac McCarthy wrote a novel called *No Country for Old Men* (since turned into a Coen Brothers movie). Another famous American novelist, Philip Roth, titled one of his books *The Dying Animal*.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Does Byzantium sound like a place where you 'd want to spend any time?
- 2 Is Byzantium an actual place in the poem, or is it a mental state? What reasons do you have for your opinion?
- 3 What does our speaker think of nature? Is it a good thing? A bad and scary thing? Why?

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