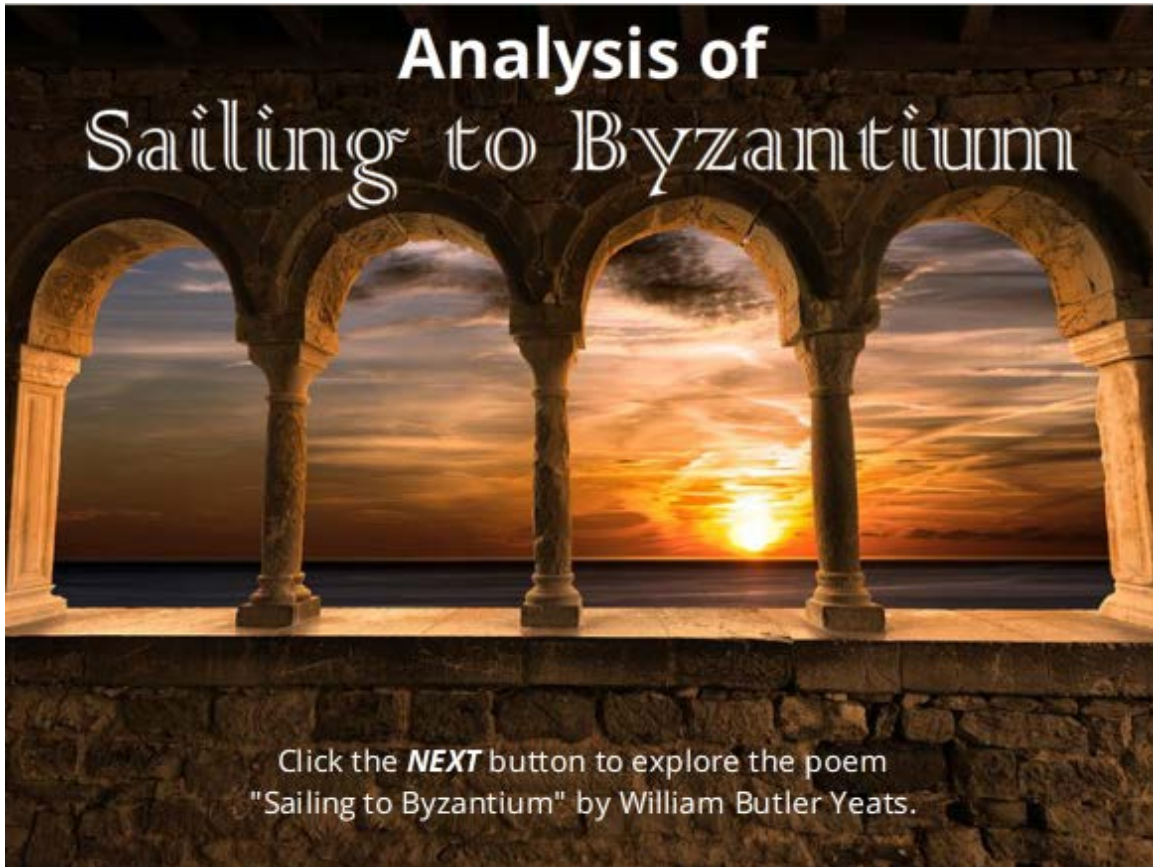


**Module 8: Change and Its Impact**  
**Topic 2 Content: Analysis of "Sailing to Byzantium"**

**Introduction**



Click the *NEXT* button to explore the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" by William Butler Yeats.

## Module 8: Change and Its Impact

### Topic 2 Content: Analysis of "Sailing to Byzantium"

#### First Stanza

Take a moment to think about the first sentence of the poem: "That is no country for old men." What does this statement mean? You know the poem is about Byzantium, once the center of European civilization, but the title implies that the speaker is not there yet. What does an opening line like this tell you about the speaker? Type your responses in the box below, and then click **SUBMIT** to compare your responses.

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 unageing intellect.

The speaker declares that his country is not suitable for elderly men such as himself. The younger generations live in the moment and are only focused on the natural cycle of life. The speaker finds this problematic because everything natural will eventually die. Young people favor transient pleasure (symbolized by music) at the cost of intellectual art (symbolized by sturdy monuments).

type your text here

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### Topic 2 Content: Analysis of "Sailing to Byzantium"

#### Second Stanza

In the second stanza, the speaker turns away from the younger generation of his country and describes the older generation. How does he describe the "aged man," and what do the "tatters" symbolize? Type your responses in the box below, and then click **SUBMIT** to compare your responses.

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.

An aged man is little more than a worn-out coat, hanging from a "stick" of a body. The only thing substantial in this mortal body is the soul, which should sing louder "for every tatter in its mortal dress." The more suffering, or "tatters," that the aging body experiences, the more the soul should sing and live. But instead of learning to sing, his countrymen are self-absorbed, studying only their own "magnificence."

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## Module 8: Change and Its Impact

### Topic 2 Content: Analysis of "Sailing to Byzantium"

#### Second Stanza

Now that the speaker has explained all the reasons for leaving his country, he reveals that he has arrived in Byzantium. Remember that Byzantium did not exist in name when Yeats wrote the poem. Back then, the city was called Constantinople. Why would Yeats use an ancient name instead of the modern name? Type your response in the box below, and then click **SUBMIT** to compare your response.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
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To the holy city of Byzantium.**

Since Byzantium was the name used by the ancient Greeks, the speaker uses this allusion to return to an era that was more impressive and desirable than his current time period. The ancient Greeks had a sophisticated culture that celebrated the arts, and the Byzantium of long ago was the center of Greek culture.

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### Topic 2 Content: Analysis of "Sailing to Byzantium"

#### Third Stanza

The mysticism starts at the very beginning of the third stanza: "O sages standing in God's holy fire. . ." What does the speaker request of the sages? What is meant by "the artifice of eternity"? Type your responses in the box below, and then click **SUBMIT** to compare your responses.

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.

The speaker wants the sages to consume his "sick" heart, which is attached to his body ("fastened to a dying animal"). In order to escape from mortality into eternity, the speaker's soul must renounce its physical body. The word *artifice* refers to a clever device or stratagem, but it originates from the Latin word for "art" or "craftsmanship." Thus, the speaker knows that people can live on for all eternity through their art.

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#### Fourth Stanza

In the final stanza, the speaker imagines his new existence once he has left the natural world and achieved immortality in Byzantium. How does the speaker describe what his next life will be like? Type your response in the box below, and then click **SUBMIT** to compare your response.

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.

The speaker explains that his next form will not be of the natural world, since all natural things eventually die. Instead, he imagines himself as a work of art, perhaps hammered by a Grecian goldsmith. Or maybe he will sing—as if a bird or even a musical instrument—to an audience of admirers. Either way, the poem ends on an optimistic note in contrast to the bleakness of the first two stanzas.

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