

Sailing to Byzantium Key Facts

Writer: William Butler Yeats | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Key Facts

- **Full Title:** Sailing to Byzantium
- **Author:** William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)
- **Title of the Author:** The Last Romantic Poet & Irish National Poet
- **Prize:** Nobel Prize in Literature (1923)
- **Source:** Inspired by Yeats's reflections on aging, art, and the quest for eternal life and spiritual fulfillment
- **Written Time:** 1927
- **First Published:** First published in the collection "October Blast" (1927), in the poetry collection "The Tower" (1928).
- **Publisher:** Macmillan
- **Genre:** Modernist Poem, Metaphysical Poem
- **Form:** Four stanzas of 8-line lengths (total 32 lines)
- **Rhyme Scheme:** ABABABCC
- **Tone:** Reflective and spiritual,
- **Point of View:** First-Person (Yeats's personal meditation on aging and transcendence)
- **Climax:** The speaker's desire to leave the natural world of decay and enter an eternal, artistic, and spiritual realm in Byzantium
- **Setting:**
- **Time Setting:** Timeless, reflective of the speaker's life journey and spiritual quest
- **Place Setting:** Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul) — symbolic of a place of spiritual and artistic eternity, distant from the mortal world of decay and death

Key Notes

- **Byzantium:** Byzantium was an ancient religious and cultural city, now called Istanbul. For Yeats, it is a symbol—a place of eternal knowledge, art, and spirituality. There is no death here, only peace and immortality of the soul.
- **Grecian Goldsmiths:** The Grecian goldsmiths created immortal art, like the singing bird that never decays. Yeats wishes his soul to become a golden bird made by their hands, which will sing forever and forget the sorrows of the mortal world.
- **God's Holy Fire:** This is a symbol of the soul's purification. Yeats wants his soul to be purified by this holy fire after death, freeing it from the illusions of human life.
- **The Salmon:** The salmon fish is a symbol of knowledge. It returns repeatedly to its birthplace—representing cycles and wisdom through experience. Yeats uses this fish as a symbol of spiritual knowledge.
- B. Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium" was written in 1926, during the later part of Yeats's life when he was elderly and physically weak. At this time, Yeats felt that human life is temporary, and the pleasures of youth belong only to the body. He realized that as age grows, the body decays, but the soul seeks something eternal and beautiful. From this understanding, Yeats wrote "Sailing to Byzantium", imagining a spiritual journey leaving behind the world of the body to seek the freedom of the soul.

Byzantium, the main symbol of the poem, is an ancient city—today's Istanbul. For Yeats, it was not just a historical place but a symbol of eternal art, religious thought, and spirituality. Yeats believed that true art and spiritual realization exist in Byzantium, where, though the body dies, the soul lives on in the form of art. The poem was written as a protest against modern reality. Yeats felt that modern people are only absorbed in bodily pleasures and do not value the depth of life, knowledge, or spiritual growth. So the poet leaves this worldly life behind and sails toward Byzantium in search of the eternal. The poem is a kind of self-reflective journey, where, after death, the soul wishes to return in a new form, like a golden bird that sings and lives forever.