

Living in Sin

She had thought the studio would keep itself;
 no dust upon the furniture of love.
 Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,
 the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,
 a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat [5]
 stalking the picturesque amusing mouse
 had risen at his urging.
 Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
 under the milkman's tramp; that morning light
 so coldly would delineate the scraps [10]
 of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;
 that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers
 a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own –
 envoy from some village in the moldings ...
 Meanwhile, he, with a yawn, [15]
 sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,
 declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,
 rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;
 while she, jeered by the minor demons,
 pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found [20]
 a towel to dust the table-top,
 and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.
 By evening she was back in love again,
 though not so wholly but throughout the night
 she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming [25]
 like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

Annotations

Living in Sin: a pejorative or negative term that was used to describe a man and woman living together as a couple without being married

[1] **studio:** a small apartment, an artist's workroom, or both

[3] **heresy:** a belief that is misguided, immoral or inappropriate

[6] **picturesque:** visually attractive, especially in a manner that's quaint, cute or charming

[8] **writhe:** to twist or contort

[10] **delineate:** indicate the exact position of something, show the outline of something

[11] **sepulchral:** resembling a tomb

[14] **moldings:** decorative fittings made of plaster or wood

Tease It Out

1. Consider the term 'studio' in the opening line. Is the poet referring to a studio apartment or an artist's workroom? Could it be a combination of both?
2. According to lines 1 and 2, what expectation did the young woman have about life in the studio? Was this a realistic assumption in your opinion? Did this expectation come to pass?
3. In lines 3 and 4, the young woman identifies two problems with the studio accommodation. Describe these two issues in your own words.
4. Can you identify an element of personification in line 3? Such negative thoughts about life in the studio make the young woman feel guilty or uncomfortable. Which phrase suggests this?
5. Describe in your own words the painting created by the young woman's partner.
6. Class Discussion: 'had risen at his urging'. What does this phrase suggest about the artistic process?
7. What does the young woman hear at five each morning?
8. The young woman feels that morning light flows 'so coldly' into the studio. Is this a feature of the studio's windows? Or does the light's cold appearance stem from the young woman's state of mind?
9. What is a sepulchre? What feature of a sepulchre might the empty wine bottles resemble? What does this comparison suggest about the young woman's attitude to life in the studio?
10. What does the young woman see on the kitchen shelf? Pick two adjectives that in your opinion might describe her reaction to this sight.
11. In what sense might this creature be described as an 'envoy'? Where according to the poet is it an envoy from?
12. The young woman's partner is an artist of some kind. What suggests that he dabbles in various art-forms rather than focusing on one medium in particular?
13. Read lines 15 to 18. Does the young woman's partner strike you as committed and hard-working? Give a reason for your answer.
14. What tasks does the young woman perform while her partner is 'out for cigarettes'? What suggests that he is gone a long time?
15. Class Discussion: Why does the coffee 'boil over' on the stove? Could there be more than one reason for this occurrence?
16. 'By evening she was back in love again'. Is the young woman 'back in love' with a) her partner or b) her life in the studio or c) both? Support your choice with reference to the poem.
17. Does the young woman sleep well in the studio? Give a reason for your answer.
18. Which phrase indicates that, slowly but surely, the young woman is becoming more and more disenchanted with life in the studio?
19. The young woman seems to be most unhappy in the morning and least unhappy in the evening. Identify every phrase that supports this point of view.

Theme Talk

1. What did the young woman imagine life in the studio would be like before she actually moved in? Write a diary entry she might have written on the night before she took up residence.
2. Class Discussion: Would you agree that the young woman and her partner have an unequal relationship? Write a paragraph in response; support your answer with reference to the poem.
3. Would you characterise the lifestyle of the young woman and her partner as conservative and conventional, on the one hand, or as rebellious and unconventional, on the other? Give a reason for your answer.

Language Lab

1. Consider the phrases 'writhe', 'less vocal' and 'envoy'. In what sense might each one be described as an example of personification?
2. Describe in your own words the poem's closing simile. Is it an effective comparison in your opinion? Give a reason for your answer.
3. Consider the phrase 'jeered by the minor demons'. Take five minutes to jot down your responses to the questions below. Then discuss your findings with the person next to you and come up with the answer you both feel best fits the evidence:
 - In what sense might the young woman feel she's failed, that she deserves to be 'jeered at'?
 - Which emotion or emotions are suggested by this metaphor?

A narrow Fellow in the Grass

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides –
You may have met Him? Did you not
His notice sudden is –

The Grass divides as with a Comb,
A spotted Shaft is seen –
And then it closes at your Feet
And opens further on –

[5]

He likes a Boggy Acre –
A Floor too cool for Corn –
But when a Boy and Barefoot –
I more than once at Noon

[10]

Have passed I thought a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled And was gone –

[15]

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me
I feel for them a transport
Of Cordiality

[20]

But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone.

Annotations

[5] **as with a Comb:** as if it had been brushed with a comb

[6] **Shaft:** long, narrow pole-shaped object or part of an object

[10] **Floor:** ground, surface of the earth

[13] **Whip lash:** a whip, used in farming, especially to control livestock

[14] **Unbraiding:** unraveling, uncurling

[15] **stooping:** bending

[15] **secure:** claim, pick up

[17] **Several of Nature's People:** different creatures or animals

[19] **transport:** an overwhelmingly strong emotion

[20] **Cordiality:** affection, kindness, friendship

[22] **Attended or alone:** in the company of others or by myself

Tease It Out

- 1. Get in Gear:** Can you think of any famous snakes in literature, pop culture or religion? What function do these snakes serve in their respective narratives? What do they represent?
- 2. Class Discussion:** 'But when a Boy, and Barefoot'. This poem, unusually for Dickinson, features a male speaker. It's easy to imagine that the speaker is based on one of the farm-hands who worked in her home at Amherst. Why do you think Dickinson might have chosen to take on a male persona in this poem?
- 3.** Consider the term 'Fellow'. Would you consider it a respectful or disrespectful form of address? What does it suggest about the farm-hand's attitude to the snake?
- 4.** 'You may have met Him'. Who do you imagine the farm-boy is speaking to in this line? Is he addressing the reader directly? Or are we eavesdropping on a conversation between the farm-boy and some other local person?
- 5.** What does the verb 'ride' suggest about the snake's movement through the grass? Consider the following statements and rank them in order of plausibility:
 - To travel in a horse-drawn carriage like a gentleman
 - To exhibit the speed and grace of a jockey on a thoroughbred horse
 - To cover a large area in a short period of time
 - To journey on the surface of the grasses, supported by the blades of grass themselves
- 6.** The snake is excellent at concealing itself and can appear very suddenly. Which phrase conveys this?
- 7.** What is the 'Shaft' referred to in line 6? Is the farm-boy able to study this shaft when it appears, or is it visible for only an instant?
- 8.** 'The Grass divides as with a Comb'. Describe in your own words how the snake effects the grass it crawls through.
- 9.** Describe in your own words the snake's preferred environment.
- 10.** The farm-boy recalls how in his younger days he came across an object lying in a field. What did he think this object was?
- 11.** What effect, did he imagine, was the sun having on this object?
- 12.** What happened when he bent to pick up this object?
- 13.** What was the object in reality?
- 14.** The farm-hand refers to 'Nature's People'. Who or what is he referring to? What poetic technique is being used here?
- 15.** Which phrase suggests that the farm-hand spends a great deal of time outdoors and is familiar with animals and their ways?
- 16.** 'The farm-hand feels only a mild affection for the natural world'. Is this statement true or false? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
- 17.** What physical reaction does the speaker experience whenever he glimpses a snake gliding through the grass?
- 18.** Which phrase suggests that the speaker experiences a chill on such occasions?

Theme Talk

- 1.** Which phrases suggest that the farm-hand respects the snake? Which phrases suggest that he fears and mistrusts this creature? Are there any phrases subject to both these interpretations?
- 2.** How does the speaker feel about the snake in comparison to other creatures? Do you think the speaker considers the snake to be one of 'Nature's People'? Give a reason for your answer.
- 3.** 'The farm-hand regards the snake not only as dangerous and threatening, but also as noble and even beautiful in its colouring and movement'. Write a brief paragraph in response to this statement.
- 4.** Write a paragraph describing the farm-hand's lifestyle as depicted in this poem. Do you think Dickinson would have pitied such a farm-hand for the tough working conditions or envied him for his freedom?

Language Lab

- 1.** Why do you think Dickinson uses so many 's' sounds throughout the poem? Do you find this appropriate to the subject of the poem? What sort of atmosphere does it create?
- 2.** The poet uses male pronouns to describe the snake throughout the poem, but refers to the snake as 'it' in stanzas 2 and 3. What, in your opinion, might be the reason behind this shift? Does it affect how we view the snake?
- 3.** List all the various nouns the poet uses to describe the snake. Why, in your opinion, is the word 'snake' never used?
- 4.** Discuss the phrase 'Zero at the Bone', highlighting in particular all the possible meanings of the word 'Zero'. Do you find this to be an effective or memorable phrase? Explain your answer.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow, [5]
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day [10]
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Innisfree: a tiny uninhabited island on Lough Gill, Co. Sligo

[2] **Clay and wattles:** an ancient construction technique known as 'wattle and daub', whereby clay is smeared over a frame of interwoven branches

[7] **a purple glow:** Innisfree comes from the Irish Inis Fraoich, which means 'island of heather'. Here Yeats imagines the purple heather glowing in the noon sunlight

[8] **linnet's wings:** a linnet is a type of finch, typically brown and red-breasted

Tease It Out

1. Where is Innisfree located? Do a Google image search for Innisfree and write a short paragraph describing your impressions. Do you think it's a wild or calm place, a harsh or pleasant environment? Give reasons for your answer.
2. The poet declares his intention to go and live on Innisfree. Is this a spontaneous decision or something he's been thinking about for a long time? Give a reason for your answer.
3. What ancient building process will the poet use to construct his cabin on Innisfree? Describe it in your own words.
4. The poet imagines living a self-sufficient life on the island. What different foodstuffs does he imagine growing in order to feed himself?
5. What metaphor does the poet use to describe the mist that drifts across the island each morning? Is it an effective one in your opinion?
6. What word or phrase describes the effect of starlight as it's reflected in the waters around the island?
7. What sound fills the island as evening comes?
8. What are the Irish origins of the name Innisfree? What does this suggest about the purple glow that fills the island each noon?
9. What sound does the poet claim to hear 'night and day'?
10. Consider his description of this sound. Do you think he finds it a pleasant one? Do you think it bothers him that he 'always' hears this sound, seemingly everywhere he goes?
11. Is he really hearing this sound or does he experience it only in his own imagination?
12. What aspect of the mind or self is suggested by the phrase 'deep heart's core'?
13. In what sort of environment is the poet at this moment? How does he feel about this place?
14. **Class Discussion:** The poet states three times that he will 'go' and live on Innisfree. Do you think it's likely that he will actually move to the island and live there? Do you think the poet is serious about changing his life in this way? Or is he merely trying to convince himself that he's actually capable of such a radical move?
15. Do you think the poet is prepared for the challenges of living a solitary, self-sufficient lifestyle? Or is he being naïve about nature, and idealistic about what it means to live in such a remote place? Give reasons for your answer.

Theme Talk

1. In this poem, the poet fantasises about leaving behind the 'rat race', the stresses and strains of everyday living. Like hippies and new age travellers, he dreams of living 'off the grid', of being completely self-sufficient and detached from modern technology'. Write two paragraphs in response to this statement.
2. 'And I shall have some peace there'. Identify three words or phrases that emphasise the island's extreme tranquillity. Is the impression he creates of the island a realistic one, in your opinion?
3. 'Innisfree is a real place, but it's also an idea, a state of mind that the speaker can access any time'. Do you agree with this statement? Write a few paragraphs in response.
4. In 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' and 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', Yeats describes two very different kinds of escape from the everyday world. Compare and contrast how the two poems deal with the themes of escape and solitude.

Language Lab

1. 'In stanza 2, peace is depicted almost as a physical substance, 'dropping' like dew from veils of mist onto the grasses'. Do you agree with this interpretation? Write a few sentences in response.
2. 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' uses repetition to great effect. In particular, the phrase 'I will arise and go now' has great power when repeated in the final stanza. Suggest how the meaning and tone of this line changes between stanza 1 and stanza 3.
3. This poem makes extensive use of assonance and alliteration to create a beguiling verbal music, such as in line 3: 'Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee'. Can you identify another example of assonance and another example of alliteration in the poem?
4. This poem is alive with the sounds of nature. List all the sounds the poet describes. In your opinion, which is the most effective description? Give a reason for your answer.

Politics

'In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms.'

Thomas Mann

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?
Yet here's a travelled man that knows [5]
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms, [10]
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms.

Thomas Mann: (1875-1955) a great German novelist and writer

[3-4] On Roman ... Spanish politics: the poem was written in 1938, a period of great political unrest in Europe. The Spanish, Russian and Italian (Roman) political systems all witnessed upheaval at this time

[10] war and war's alarms: in 1938 Hitler invaded Austria and Czechoslovakia, causing great alarm internationally and bringing a threat of war

Tease It Out

1. Watch Video 32, which contains newsreel footage from 1938, the year in which the poem was written. What significant political events were happening in Europe? How would you characterise the mood and atmosphere of the time, based on watching this footage?
2. The poet describes ‘a travelled man’ and a ‘politician’. Do you imagine that the poet is conversing with these men or is he listening to them speak at some conference or over the radio?
3. Why do you think the ‘travelled man’ might be well-informed about events in Europe and the prospects of greater war across the continent?
4. In what way does the politician’s understanding of events differ? How has this man arrived at his understandings and conclusions about political happenings in Europe?
5. Is the poet listening attentively to what the ‘travelled man’ and the ‘politician’ are saying? What is distracting the poet?
6. Where do you imagine the girl is in relation to the poet? Do you imagine that she is conscious of the poet’s presence? Give a reason for your answer.
7. Do you think that the poet takes seriously what the ‘travelled man’ and the ‘politician’ are saying? Do you think that he feels he is not giving the subject matter due thought and attention? Give a reason for your answer.
8. What do you imagine the poet’s relationship with the girl to be? Do you think they know one another or do you think that this is the first time that he has seen her?
8. What is it that the poet wishes for in the last two lines of the poem? Why do you think that the poet longs to be young?

Language Lab

1. Although the poem is titled ‘Politics’, what do you consider to be its central themes?
2. What does the poem suggest the appropriate subject-matter of art ought to be? Should it be the poet’s duty to deal with important political events or should he deal with the affairs of the heart? Is it possible to deal with both, or does one interfere with or overshadow the other? Explain your answer.
3. How would you characterise the poet’s response to the grave threat of war that hangs over Europe? Is there any evidence of dread in the poem?
4. In ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ the poet described how his heart was ‘sick with desire’ and how he longed to be rid of it. How does Yeats’ treatment of old age and physical desire in ‘Politics’ compare with ‘Sailing to Byzantium’?
5. Compare and contrast the manner in which ‘The Second Coming’ and ‘Politics’ deal with the prospect of terrible global events?

Theme Talk

1. Why do you think that the poet uses the term ‘Roman’ instead of Italian?
2. Consider the syntax of the sentence that forms the first four lines of the poem. Why do you think the poet chose to structure it in this manner? How does Yeats’ syntax enhance what is being described in the opening lines?

Sailing to Byzantium

The Suleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul

LINE BY LINE

The cycle of birth and death

This poem's opening stanza is all about the cycle of birth and death. This cycle applies to everything in nature. It encompasses mammals, or creatures of the 'flesh'. It encompasses birds, or 'fowl'. It encompasses the 'fish' that fill the seas. Every one of these creatures is 'begotten' or conceived through sexual activity. Then it is 'born'. Then, eventually, it 'dies'.

It is summer, a time when the 'begetting' phase of this cycle seems especially prominent. Every where the poet looks, he sees creatures of various types engaging in sexual activity:

- The 'birds in the trees' sing out their mating calls, their sweet tunes of flirtation and seduction.
- The seas are 'crowded' with throngs of mackerel that have gathered in their mating grounds at various points off the Irish coast.
- Salmon, too, are engaged in their mating season. They will then swim up river, leaping over falls and currents along the way, before spawning the next generation of their species.
- Summer, the poet suggests, is also the mating season for human beings. Everywhere he looks he sees young people in 'one another's arms', as they kiss, flirt or simply hold

hands. Here the poet refers to the ancient (though perhaps unscientific) idea that human beings are more sexually active in the summer time.

All of nature, it seems to the poet, has been sexually active 'all summer long'. He has witnessed a festival of begetting, in which entire new generations of 'fish, flesh [and] fowl' have been conceived. Every creature, it seems to the poet, engages joyfully and willingly in sexual activity. And by doing so, they 'commend' or celebrate the cycle of birth and death, of which sexual activity is a crucial part.

The poet's attitude to this cycle

The poet himself, however, cannot 'commend' or celebrate this cycle of birth and death. There are several reasons for this.

- The poet is keenly aware that the cycle ends in the extinction of every creature. Each new generation is a 'dying generation'. No sooner is each creature conceived than the countdown to its death begins.
- Because the poet is an elderly man, moving gradually towards the end of his own life, this awareness of death is amplified.

- Because the poet is an elderly man, he is no longer sexually desirable. He could not, even if he wanted to, participate in the summer-long festival of begetting. The business of sexual reproduction, he suggests, must be left to the young: 'That is no country for old men'.

The poet, at this stage of his life, wants to focus on art rather than on sexuality. He especially wants to focus on the great artworks of the past, which he refers to as 'Monuments of unageing intellect'. This phrase suggests that great artworks, like monuments, are publicly available. Many artworks, after all, can be viewed by anyone who cares to do so. It suggests that great artworks, like monuments, are commemorative because when we engage with a great artwork, we remember its creator.

The frenzy of procreation described in the opening stanza is compared to a symphony or chorus. Each procreating creature is like one of the performers in this symphony. These creatures, Yeats suggests, are 'caught' or lost in the music they create; they are so absorbed in the pleasure and pursuit of sexuality that they forget about everything else.

It also suggests that great artworks, like monuments, are large and noticeable. Many great artworks exhibit a psychological vastness rather than a physical vastness. We might think of a play by Shakespeare or a miniature painting by Rembrandt, which doesn't take up much physical space, but reveals entire psychological worlds.

These artworks – whether they are films or poems, statues or songs – are described as 'unageing' because their ability to inspire us never grows old. Each individual artwork, Yeats suggests, possesses an 'intellect' of its own, a unique personality or intelligence. When we study a particular artwork then we engage with its 'intellect'. We develop our own conversation or relationship with the artwork in question. We need only think here of the intense bonds that people tend to form with their favourite songs, books or movies.

The poet's tattered body

Each human being, the poet believes, is composed of two distinct parts: a physical body and a non-physical soul. The body is doomed to waste away and die. The soul, on the other hand, is immortal. Our souls, according to tradition, are housed within our bodies. Each soul, Yeats suggests, wears its body like a 'mortal dress', a temporary garment it will cast off at the moment of death.

The poet laments how the ageing process has affected his own body, his own 'mortal dress'. Old age, he declares, has robbed his body of both its physical vigour and its good looks. The poet, in a striking turn of phrase, compares himself to a scarecrow: 'a tattered coat upon a stick'. This is a most revealing comparison:

- His body is 'tattered', its flesh, bones and sinews damaged by the ageing process.

- His body is withered to the point where it is stick-thin.
- His body, he feels, has come to resemble a scarecrow; it is both grotesque and ridiculous-looking.

The poet, therefore, is faced with the 'paltriness' of old age. He is faced with being physically 'paltry', with being pitiful or pathetic. He is faced with being socially 'paltry', with being negligible and insignificant. He is faced with being a 'thing', rather than a proper human being. For who, in a world dominated by youth and beauty, really cares about or even notices the old?

Focusing on the soul

Old age, then, is only bearable if we focus on the soul rather than the body.

- The soul, Yeats declares, must 'clap its hands and sing'. For Yeats, no doubt, this singing of the soul involves artistic expression: the creation of poems, plays and other texts.
- Our souls, Yeats says, must sing 'louder' as we approach death. This reflects Yeats' determination to keep improving his artistic practice. He wants to become better and better at writing as death approaches. He wants to create texts that explore the human condition with ever greater clarity and profundity, texts that will truly stand the test of time.
- The soul, Yeats insists, must attend 'singing school'; it must study and practice so it can sing with greater clarity and volume. This reflects Yeats' belief that artistic improvement can only be achieved by studying great artworks of the past. The word 'but', as used in line 7, means 'apart from', leading us to read the lines as follows: 'there is no singing school [apart from] studying [the great artworks of the past]'.

The poet, therefore, decides to make the long sea voyage to the ancient city of Byzantium. Given its imperial past, Byzantium is absolutely filled with extraordinary artworks, each one a monument to the 'magnificence' of the human soul that created it.

Byzantium is an old name for Istanbul, the capital of Turkey. In medieval times, Byzantium was a great military power and the centre of a Christian empire that lasted for nearly a thousand years. It was also an extraordinary centre of learning, one that inherited the wisdom of both Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. It was especially famed for the skill of its artists and craftsmen, who created everything from enormous cathedrals to tiny but ingeniously crafted ornaments.

The mosaic

The poet has finally reached Byzantium and stands before one of the city's many extraordinary mosaics (a 'mosaic' is an image made from assembling small pieces of coloured glass and stone). This particular mosaic decorates a 'wall' somewhere in the city, perhaps in one of Byzantium's many palaces and cathedrals. It is hundreds of years old. Yeats describes how it shimmers with a 'gold' effect, suggesting the brightly coloured materials that were used in its construction.

The mosaic depicts 'sages' or men of great wisdom. God's presence surrounds the sages, taking the form of golden flames: they are 'standing in God's holy fire'. This miraculous blaze, however, doesn't harm the sages in any way. Instead, it fills them with vigour and intensity as if they were somehow sharing in the energy of God himself (it's been suggested that Yeats was inspired by a Byzantine mosaic depicting Moses and Elijah, two great sages or prophets from the Bible).

Yeats, as we noted above, believed that every great artwork had its own 'intellect' or personality. And the poet, it seems, is captivated by the intellect of this particular mosaic. He develops an extraordinary connection with this golden image. We can imagine him spending hours before the mosaic, returning to visit it again and again during his visit to Byzantium.

Yeats' connection with the mosaic is so powerful that the sages seem almost alive to him. He imagines that the sages could come to life and step out of the mosaic: 'Come from the holy fire'. He imagines that the sages could act as his mentors or instructors: 'be the singing-masters of my soul'. Under their guidance, Yeats' soul will learn to 'sing' better than it ever has done before. They would help him to create extraordinary texts that capture profound truths about time, reality and human existence.

Yeats had a number of occult beliefs, which he detailed in his prose book *A Vision*. He believed that time is a stream that spirals in a 'gyre' or clockwise direction. He imagines the sages 'perning' or moving in a counter-clockwise direction, as if they were swimming against time's current. Eventually, the sages will make it all the way to the twentieth century and stand before the poet as alive as they ever were.

Yeats, of course, doesn't believe that such time travel is possible, nor does he expect the sages will literally step from the mosaic. But this metaphor powerfully captures the intensity of the poet's relationship with the mosaic. It highlights how real the sages seem to him as he spends hours contemplating their golden forms.

Body and soul

Yeats calls on the sages to burn away his body using their 'holy fire'.

- He memorably refers to his body as a 'dying animal', suggesting that it is subhuman, disgusting and beneath contempt. He longs for this wretched, scarecrow-like body to be utterly burned up, utterly consumed away by the sages' miraculous flames.
- In particular, he wants the sages to eliminate his 'heart'. This refers not only to the organ itself, but to all bodily systems associated with love and sexuality. Yeats' heart is filled with sexual longing. But these are desires that he as an old man can't satisfy or act on. This preponderance of unsatisfied desire has left the heart 'sick' or dysfunctional. Yeats is, therefore, happy for it, along with the rest of his body, to be consumed away.

- Yeats' soul, then, would be liberated from the failing body in which it is currently confined.
- Yeats calls on the sages to 'gather' or carry his newly liberated soul and transport it into the 'artifice of eternity'.

Let's take a moment to unpack this phrase. The word 'artifice' refers to expert workmanship. It also refers to something that has been cunningly or skilfully designed. Yeats, then, has in mind here great artworks like the *Mona Lisa* and Michelangelo's *David*, which exhibit such extraordinary workmanship and design. These works are eternal in that they speak to people century after century.

The poet, then, longs for his soul to be gathered into one of these eternal artworks. It would reside forever within in some exquisite and unageing piece of craftsmanship.

The bird

The poet would like his soul to inhabit one such object in particular, a mechanical bird he has seen during his visit to Byzantium.

- The bird is hundreds of years old and was constructed during the heyday of the Byzantine Empire.
- The bird is made of gold that has been 'hammered' into shape by the gifted goldsmiths that constructed it. The goldsmiths are described as 'Grecian' because Byzantium was a Greek-speaking civilisation.
- The bird has been further decorated with gold varnish or 'enamelling'.
- The bird's body contains a carefully concealed set of pipes. Whenever the breeze passed through these pipes, it produced a sound like that of birdsong.

Yeats clearly takes great delight in this ingeniously constructed object that was created so long ago. He imagines a courtier placing it on an artificial golden branch, an extraordinary ornament that must have brought great joy and wonder to the 'lords and ladies' of the Byzantine court.

Or perhaps the bird was a gift for the emperor himself. Yeats imagines this precious object taking a place of honour beside the emperor's throne. It would serve as an amusement and a distraction from the cares of state. Its mechanical singing would serve to rouse the emperor if he started to doze off on a hot Byzantine afternoon.

NATURE

The poem views the natural world as a kind of system that passes through phases of birth, death and renewal. Every living thing, be it fish, flesh or fowl, is part of this system. Every living thing is 'begotten' or conceived, born, reproduces and eventually dies. The bustling sexual activity of summer conducted by birds, fish and youthful human beings seems to 'commend' or celebrate this cycle. The poet has come to view this process of birth and death in a very negative way, for his own personal cycle is nearing its end.

The poet draws a sharp contrast between art and nature. Birds, animals and human beings are subject to the cycles of nature described above. They are temporary; they change and they die. Great works of art on the other hand are subject to no such cycle. These 'unageing' objects never change or decline. These great songs, paintings, poems and films – collectively referred to as the 'artifice of eternity' – last forever, speaking to generation after generation.

YOUTH AND AGE

This poem, then, draws a powerful contrast between youth and age, specifically between the elderly poet and the young people he observes at the height of the Irish summer.

- These young people are presented as sexually attractive. The aged poet, on the other hand, feels like he has lost his good looks. He thinks of himself as a wizened and grotesque scarecrow.
- The young people are in their physical prime. The poet's body, on the other hand, has been left tattered by the ageing process.
- The young people enjoy lives of sexual opportunity, wandering the streets 'in one another's arms'. The aged poet too experiences sexual desire. But for him, alas, such opportunities are a thing of the past. His heart is 'sick with desire' that he cannot satisfy.
- The lives of the young seem relaxed and carefree. Their only concern is love, romance and flirtation. The elderly poet on the other hand seems preoccupied with thoughts of mortality, ageing and decay.
- The ageing poet finds himself focusing more and more on 'monuments of unageing intellect', on the great artworks of the past. The young people, preoccupied with the 'sensual music' of procreation, care little about great works by past masters such as Shakespeare, Blake and Michelangelo.

The poem, then, provides a moving portrayal of the ageing process. It highlights how the elderly often consider themselves 'paltry', as in feeble and insignificant, how in a world obsessed with youth and beauty, they all too often feel unsightly and unwanted, ridiculous or even invisible.

The poet feels disgusted and constrained by his own body. In a shocking memorable phrase, he describes his body as a 'dying animal' to which he has been 'shackled'.

ART AND THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

This is another poem in which Yeats presents art as a continuous practice, a craft or trade that must be perfected throughout the artist's life. Despite his old age, the poet is determined to keep growing as an artist. If anything, the nearness of death makes him all the more eager to reach his full artistic potential. The poem stresses that such improvement can be made only by studying the great artists of the past. Yeats, then, despite being an accomplished, Nobel prize-winning poet, recognises that he must still attend 'singing-school' in order that his soul can express itself with ever-greater clarity and purpose.

'Sailing to Byzantium' is also Yeats' most profound statement on the idea of attaining immortality through art. The poet, then, considers two different concepts of immortality. One is a form of reincarnation such as that envisaged by Buddhism and other Eastern religions. The soul would leave behind the body and the earthly plane of existence. It would be temporarily 'out of nature'. It would then rejoin the natural world, housing itself within some new person, bird or animal.

Yeats, however, rejects this form of immortality. The poet will not be re-born as any 'natural thing'. He is determined that his soul, 'once out of nature', will never rejoin the natural world. He will never again be subject to the cycles of birth and death that govern the natural world. His soul will never again be attached to such a 'dying animal'.

The poet instead is focused on the type of artistic immortality enjoyed by Michelangelo and Shakespeare. He uses an extraordinary set of metaphors to describe the process by which such immortality might be attained.

- The artist of today can only achieve greatness by studying the masterpieces of the past. This is represented by the sages stepping out of the mosaic to act as Yeats' mentors or 'singing-masters'.
- The artist must focus on the soul rather than the body. This is represented by the sages consuming the poet's body with their holy flame.
- The distractions of sex and sexuality in particular must be overcome. This is represented by the sages consuming away the poet's heart.
- The poet will live on through the poems, plays and texts he has created over the course of his life. This is represented by the poet's soul inhabiting the magnificent golden bird created by the Grecian goldsmiths all those centuries ago.

The poet would have little interest, we sense, in prolonging the life of his body through some revolutionary scientific method. Nor does he show any interest in the type of immortality associated with the Christian concept of heaven. Furthermore, as we've seen, he is not taken with reincarnation. Instead, he goes all-in on achieving the 'artifice of eternity'. And maybe he has succeeded. After all, we are still reading his works today.

Politics



LINE BY LINE

Yeats is in conversation with two wise, well-informed people:

- The first is a man who has travelled extensively throughout the world and, therefore, has a good understanding of the political and social affairs in different countries. Yeats says that this man speaks from experience, that he 'knows/ What he talks about'.
- The second is an experienced politician. Yeats says that the politician is 'learned', suggesting that he not only knows much about political affairs, but that he is a well-educated man who likely has a broad understanding of the world.

The conversation focuses on the political situation in Italy, Russia and Spain. In 1938, when Yeats wrote the poem, the situation in each of these countries was very grave as Europe was sliding towards World War Two. Russia was under the brutal rule of Stalin, who in 1938 was attempting to purge the country of all those he deemed a threat to his rule. Italy was ruled by fascist dictator Mussolini, while Spain was gradually

being taken over by far-right forces led by General Franco. While all this was happening, Hitler, having just annexed Austria, was now pushing to take control of Czechoslovakia.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the conversation between the poet, his well-travelled friend and the 'learned' politician centres around events in these countries and the growing possibility of war in Europe.

The poet knows that the men with whom he converses are knowledgeable and that their opinions are to be respected. He accepts that their predictions of approaching war are probably accurate: 'And maybe what they say is true/ Of war and war's alarms'.

Yet the poet cannot focus or 'fix his attention' on these urgent matters. All the while that they are talking, the poet is distracted by a beautiful young girl who is standing close by. He wishes he was young once again, so that he could be her lover: 'But O that I were young again/ And held her in my arms!'

YOUTH AND AGE

Like many of Yeats' poems, 'Politics' laments the tragedy of old age. The poet is entranced by a beautiful woman, but knows he's now too old to ever win her affections. 'Politics', then, like 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'An Acre of Grass', movingly depicts the restrictions and frustrations that come with growing older.

There is real emotion in the poem's final lines, when he wishes that he could somehow be young again and hold the beautiful woman he so desires in his arms. The tragic reality, of course, is that there is no turning back the clock. The poet's desire for youth, and for this beautiful girl, must remain forever thwarted. This nostalgic lament for a vanished youth echoes both 'The Wild Swans at Coole' and 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz'. All three poems find the poet yearning nostalgically for an earlier stage of his existence.

WAR, VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL UPHEAVAL

Yeats wrote this poem in 1938, a very dark time in the history of Europe. The Second World War was poised to break out over the continent like a terrible storm. As Yeats puts it, 'war's alarms' were ringing throughout the world. There is, then, a certain sense of dread in this poem. The 'travelled man' and the politician seem deeply concerned about the coming catastrophe. The poet, however, finds himself distracted by the presence of a beautiful young woman. For a moment romantic longing overtakes his fear of the coming storm. In this regard, 'Politics' is not unlike 'The Second Coming' and 'The Stare's Nest by My Window'. All three poems register a dread of the great violence, war and upheaval that marred the world during the last years of Yeats' life.

FOCUS ON STYLE

Form

The poem consists of twelve lines with no stanza breaks. It follows an ABCB DEFE GHIH rhyme scheme.

Tone, Mood and Atmosphere

Unusually for Yeats, the tone of 'Politics' is quite humorous, self-deprecating and tongue-in-cheek. Despite the fact that the poem references much of the political unrest in Europe at the time, Yeats insists he can't possibly focus on such serious issues when there is a beautiful girl standing in front of him: 'How can I, that girl standing there,/ My attention fix/ On ... politics'.

There is also a wistful note to this poem. Whereas in 'The Stare's Nest by My Window' he praises the ability of the older man to focus on the serious issues in life, here he wants nothing more than to return to his youth: 'But O that I were young again/ And held her in my arms.'

ART THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

'Politics' is another poem that explores the public or political role of the poet in society. 'Politics' was inspired by an article by the writer Archibald MacLeish that criticised Yeats for failing to comment on political issues in his work. The poem contrasts a public catastrophe with private suffering. The public catastrophe is that of the impending war. The private suffering is that of the poet, as he endures the anguish of old age and the frustration of thwarted desire.

The poem suggests that this private tragedy is of more significance to Yeats as an artist than the public tragedy of war. He is unable to shift his attention from the beauty of the girl to important political matters. The poem seems to answer MacLeish by suggesting that poets are not obliged to write about 'public' matters of national importance. Instead, they should be free to deal with 'private' matters that will eventually affect us all, such as the delight and torture of romance and the decay and indignity of old age.

Therefore, although 'Politics' is a relatively simple poem, it raises a number of important questions. Is it self-centred of Yeats as a writer to assign more significance to his private anguish than to the looming disaster of war? Is it wrong for the poet or artist to focus on his or her personal relationships and problems when there is so much evil and suffering in the world? On the other hand, however, it is possible to regard Yeats' involvement with themes of the heart as arising not from self-obsession but from a desire to write about universal human experiences.

