

Poems of W.B. Yeats: The Tower Summary and Analysis of Sailing to Byzantium

The country that the speaker is in does not suit the old. It is full of bounty, with fish in the water and birds in the trees. The young and reproductive are caught in the earthly cycle of life and death. They do not heed ageless intelligence. An old man can be mere pathos. To escape this fate and to get away from his too-vital country, the aged speaker has sailed to Byzantium. Once arrived, he calls out to the elders who are part of God's retinue. He asks them to move in a gyre and take him away to death. He has a living heart fastened to a dead body, and as such cannot live.

Once the speaker has died, his body will no longer be organic, but fashioned of metal, like the statues that preserve dying emperor, or perhaps instead molded into a mechanical bird, which will sing to the lords and ladies of Byzantium.

Analysis

This is Yeats' most famous poem about aging--a theme that preoccupies him throughout *The Tower*. The poem traces the speaker's movement from youth to age, and the corresponding geographical move from Ireland, a country just being born as Yeats wrote, to Byzantium. Yeats felt that he no longer belonged in Ireland, as the young or the young in brutality, were caught up in what he calls "sensual music." This is the allure of murder in the name of republicanism, which disgusted Yeats.

Byzantium was an ancient Greek city, which Yeats draws on for its decadent associations. The Byzantine Empire was centered on Constantinople, later renamed Istanbul. The speaker thinks that by escaping to Byzantium, he can escape the conflict between burning desire and a wasted body. Once there, he pleads to God's "sages" to take away his life, meaning his body. This stanza is suggestive of Yeats' religious beliefs, as he wrote this collection after a turn to theosophy. The idea of elders waiting upon God is not familiar from any Western religion, but would be acceptable under theosophy, which holds that all spiritualities hold some measure of truth. Yeats imagines this process as being consumed by a healing fire that will allow his body to take on any form he wishes when it is finished. His first wish, to become a statue, seems too static. His second, to become a mechanical bird, alludes to the Byzantine Emperor [Theophilus](#). Theophilus, according to legend, had just such mechanical birds. It is thus the poet's wish to be granted a body immune to death and to sing forever.