

# An essay on the symbolism of w.b. yeats' poetry

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W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) was very influenced by the French symbolist movement and he is often regarded as the most important symbolist poet of the twentieth century. Yeats felt ' metaphors are not profound enough to be moving,' so his poems heavily incorporate symbols as a means of expressing abstract and mystical ideas. However, through the use of symbolism Yeats's poems are much more dispersed and fragmented than the work of earlier poets, and therefore may at first appear to be more difficult to understand because there is no direct (one to one) correspondence. Instead symbols become reverberating images that provide a contemplation and rearrangement of material things, where one must complete the meaning by filling in the gaps with different interpretations. ' The symbolists aimed for a poetry of suggestion rather than direct statement, evoking subjective moods through the use of private symbols, while avoiding the description of external reality or the expression of opinion.' Focusing on the two poems ' Sailing to Byzantium' from *The Tower* (1928) and ' Byzantium' from *The Winding Stair* (1933) we can examine the symbols that Yeats uses to express himself and his ideas. Firstly, the images that appear in the titles of these collections are two very important recurring symbols. The Tower, which is often regarded as Yeats' masterpiece, became a crucial symbol within his work; as he himself states ' I declare this tower is my symbol' (*Selected Criticism*, 14). In one sense it is a private symbol as it relates directly to him – towards the end of his life he finally withdrew from family, wife and the outside world, retreating into a tower where he spent the remainder of his life existing in a hermit-like fashion. Thus, due to this biographical element, he turns this building and the collection of poems into something that

represents an allusive assessment of his life so far. The tower literally becomes an embodiment of his house of fiction, the place in which he works and finds inspiration. It is also a place of peace not only for him but also for others. The symbol of the tower becomes more universal in part five 'The Road at my Door', of the poem 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' where two men on opposing sides arrive at the narrator's door on different occasions. The men, one a member of the IRA, an 'Irregular,' and the other 'A Brown Lieutenant' (6) – an officer in the National Army, are symbols of the long and bitter struggle of Irish politics that stretches behind them. However, standing here beside the tower they are just mere men – they become human again and emerge from the uniform into humanity. The tower therefore becomes a still point at the centre of destruction, where dialogue about the ordinary and real (such as 'cracking jokes' (3) and talking 'of the foul weather' (9) has the possibility to be heard. The image of the winding stair is also very important and appears repeatedly throughout his work. Yeats emphasised its importance when he stated 'I declare / This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair' (Selected Criticism, 14). This relates to his Irish ancestry, time and his cyclical theory of history. Yeats had his own philosophical theories which he expanded in 'The Vision'. He saw history diagrammatically and believed that the world is done and undone in two thousand years where each era is overthrown by some catastrophic change. Thus: He symbolised this in the gyres, alternating series of historical change, a gyre being a conical spiral movement, which begins at a point in history (an annunciation, the birth of Christ etc.) and expands to its fullest circle, whereupon in the middle of this circle occurs a point, the next annunciation,

and with it the birth of a new age which will be the reverse of all that has gone before. The winding stair reminds Yeats of a gyre and he believes that his era will come to some catastrophic end due to all the war he has seen. The stairs could also be seen to wind up from the earth to the sky, and symbolise the eternal vacillation of human thought towards permanence and intellectual beauty. This is often a key concern within most of Yeats's work, his search for immortality and the need to transcend. The tension within most of his poems is the desire to float out of the material world to an infinite and purer space away from the material world. This can be particularly seen within the 'Byzantium' poems. Here, in the title of the collection, the winding stairs symbolises a journey away from earth and towards the spiritual, thus highlighting the issue of body and soul (especially in relation to symbolism). This was a topic of great interest for Yeats, as can be seen in his essay 'The Symbolism of Poetry' where he describes that 'the soul moves among symbols and unfolds in symbols' (Selected Criticism, 51). Therefore, symbolism for Yeats holds a special mysticism and spirituality. In 'Sailing to Byzantium' Yeats again presents the reader with a symbolic (although imaginary) journey, where the speaker sails away from a place of decay - the natural world of 'Fish, flesh of fowl' (5) to one with the promise of immortality where neither time nor nature can intrude. Byzantium becomes a symbol for this world. However, as no one symbol has one fixed meaning, but instead, can have a variety of associations, 'Byzantium, then, has a multiple symbolic value.' The city Byzantium (modern Istanbul) 'was a highly sophisticated city, celebrated for beauty in the visual arts and the drama and mystery of its elaborate religious ritual' until its capture by the

Turks in 1453. Therefore it stands for all aspects of life, especially a place of culture where one can be immortalised. It could also represent a meeting point, where different cultures and different people can stand in the same place without their differences interfering; this is similar to the tower's significance in 'The Road at my Door'. 'The mummy cloth' (11) in 'Byzantium' perhaps represents 'the Egyptian element in Byzantine art' (Henn, 229). It could also suggest that Byzantium is a symbol of memory as it links it to Egypt's ancient and glorious civilisation and tradition, where the people were extremely concerned with the afterlife and being remembered here on earth after they died. It has also been suggested that 'Byzantium might well symbolise a new Ireland breaking away from its masters so that it might develop, or rather return to, its own philosophical, religious and artistic destiny' (Henn, 222). This is evident from the fact that he is talking about a civilisation long gone - but one that should be renewed. Birds are also important symbols in both poems. In 'Sailing to Byzantium' the 'birds in the trees' (2) symbolise the natural whilst the mechanical bird 'of hammered gold' (28) symbolises artifice. Usually artifice is criticised and the natural is praised, but Yeats turns this upside down as the persona views the golden mechanical bird as perfect, and therefore it becomes a monument of 'unageing intellect' (8), which is what Yeats wanted to establish himself as. (This mechanical bird could be a literary reference to Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'). This element of the poem becomes problematic as it praises art at the expense of life. Song is also important and symbolises the importance of music to the symbolists. 'They wanted to bring poetry closer to music, believing that sound had mysterious affinities with other senses'

(Baldick, 253). In 'Sailing to Byzantium' the birds, the young and the 'dying generations' (3) are all 'at their song' (3) and therefore united. Yeats believed that 'Pattern and rhythm are the road to poem symbolism,' (Selected Criticism, 34) as he stated in 'A Symbolic Artist', so by making poetry more musical it was able to speak to more people. However, the song that is being sung does not necessarily have to be actual music, but in the case of the young, on a symbolic level it could be the passion expressed in their love, as in the 'sensual music' (7) that is connected with youth, creativity and productivity. The persona, however, is anxious about those caught up in sensuous music, because they belong to the natural world where immortality is neglected. Additionally, the bird's song when he is 'set upon a golden bough to sing' (30) could have an alternative meaning: as the song occurs towards the end of the poem, it could be representative of the swan's last dying song (which links to another one of Yeats's most significant symbols, the swan). Animals feature a great deal throughout the two poems, but each represents something different. The 'mackerel-crowed seas' (4) could be seen to symbolise vitality and youth, thus suggesting the vigour and plenty of nature. Also, the Salmon in particular was a 'symbol of strength in Celtic literature' (Henn, 224). This is juxtaposed with the 'dying animal' (22) that stands for the human body and the way in which it decays - again highlighting Yeats's concern, frustration (and maybe even bitterness) with growing old. When Yeats talks about the 'Monuments of unageing intellect' (8) he is not just talking about buildings which are often associated with the cold and the formal but also 'the rational quality of intellect' (W. B. Yeats Selected Poems, 77) perhaps suggesting that the monuments might be

verse, pictures or any other artistic creation. The buildings may be weatherworn and can change over time but here he suggests that those created out of intellect are beyond time, thus suggesting that these monuments are more magnificent than the works of nature. The 'Marbles of the dancing floor' (36) in 'Byzantium' could also be viewed similarly, although they could stand for coldness; they also stand for durability and art. The 'gold mosaic' (18) of 'Sailing to Byzantium' is a symbol of eternity, where a moment in history is frozen and preserved through art and 'into the artifice of eternity' (24), (this again reminds us of Keats as its meaning is similar to that of 'Ode to a Grecian Urn'). This symbol aims to remind the reader of the transience of nature and the durability of art. These monuments and works of art that Yeats discusses serve to provide an imagined defence against time. Henn also suggests that the mosaics 'depict the spiritual experience, stabilized by the knowledge and technique of the artist;' (Henn, 229) Yeats considers his search for immortality as a spiritual journey. The fire in the poems also relates to the spiritual nature of them. 'God's holy fire' (17) in 'Sailing to Byzantium' and the 'Flames that no faggot feeds' (26) of 'Byzantium' could represent the flame of eternal life, the fire of Pentecost, inspiration and new life. The imagery of fire suggests that the 'blood-begotten spirits' (28) in 'Byzantium' must be purged of their sin and must be burnt away by the divine flame in order to be fit for eternal life. This ritual is referred to in many religious traditions - but again this ritual is not a literal but a symbolic one. Through death new life grows 'death-in-life and life-in-death' (16). However, it could also be read differently as the 'flames' (26) could be spirits who have already been purged. Through Yeats's use of

symbolism he also invokes mythology. For example, 'Hades' bobbin' (11) in 'Byzantium' suggests the image of the labyrinth and the Minotaur or the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The bobbin could be a spirit who leads the dead down 'the winding path' (12) towards the underworld (this reminds us of the winding stairs and could be symbolic of the unwinding of lived years). 'On a symbolic level, it could mean that our earthly lives should be thought of as wound up as a thread is on a spool and that the purging of the self after death is an unwinding' (W. B. Yeats Selected Poems, 87). Once again this image could allude to the gyre with its spiralling movement. Some critics have said that Yeats uses obscure private codes of meaning which are too private and therefore cannot be fully interpreted, but this is unlikely as his symbols are open to a myriad of interpretations. Subsequently the reader is able to gain a deeper understanding of what is being expressed because of his poetry's multi-layers. Symbolism in Yeats's poetry provides new meaning with every reading, it is soul-searching, profound, thought-provoking and emotional; as he himself states, 'poetry moves us because of its symbolism' (Selected Criticism, 51). So much more is expressed in what is not said than what is.

**Bibliography**  
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