

# The Symbolist Movement in Twentieth Century English Poetry

## The Symbolist Movement

### Introduction to the Symbolist Movement

The Symbolist Movement emerged in the late 19th century as a reaction against the naturalism and realism that dominated the literary landscape. It sought to express the inexpressible and to evoke emotions through symbolic language and imagery. Symbolist poets believed that the essence of human experience could not be captured through direct representation but rather through the use of symbols that resonate on a deeper emotional level.

### Key Characteristics of Symbolist Poetry

1. Imagery and Symbols: Symbolist poets employed rich imagery and symbols to convey deeper meanings and emotions. They believed that symbols could express the ineffable aspects of human experience, allowing readers to engage with the text on a personal level.
2. Musicality: The sound of words and the rhythm of poetry were paramount. Symbolist poets often sought to create a musical quality in their work, using assonance, alliteration, and meter to enhance the auditory experience. This musicality was seen as essential to the emotional impact of the poem. The concept of musicality in poetry refers to the way sound patterns, rhythm, and the arrangement of words contribute to the overall aesthetic and emotional experience of a poem.

In Symbolist poetry, musicality is paramount, as poets sought to create a harmonious auditory experience that resonates with the reader, enhancing the emotional depth of their work. This was achieved through various techniques, including **assonance**, **alliteration**, and careful attention to meter.

### Key Techniques

#### Assonance

Definition: Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds within closely placed words. This technique creates a musical quality and can evoke specific emotions or moods, enhancing the overall auditory experience of the poem.

Example: In the line "Hear the mellow wedding bells," from Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Bridal Ballad," the repetition of the vowel sound "e" in "mellow," "wedding," and "bells" creates a melodic effect that draws the reader's attention to the imagery of the bells.

#### Alliteration

Definition: Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of closely placed

words. This technique can create rhythm, emphasize particular phrases, and contribute to the musicality of the poem. Example: An example of alliteration can be found in the phrase "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." The repetition of the "p" sound creates a playful and rhythmic quality that enhances the auditory experience.

3. Subjectivity: The focus was on personal experience and emotion. Symbolist poets often explored themes of dreams, the subconscious, and the inner workings of the mind. This emphasis on subjectivity marked a departure from the objective observations of earlier poetic forms.

4. Ambiguity: Symbolist poetry often embraces ambiguity, leaving interpretations open to the reader. This allows for multiple readings and a personal connection to the text, encouraging readers to explore their own emotional responses.

### **Influence on Twentieth Century Poetry**

The Symbolist Movement laid the groundwork for various modernist movements that followed, such as Imagism and Surrealism. Its emphasis on subjective experience and the use of symbols influenced poets like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W.B. Yeats, who incorporated Symbolist techniques into their own work. For instance: - T.S. Eliot: In poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot employs fragmented imagery and stream-of-consciousness techniques, reflecting the Symbolist focus on the inner psyche. - Ezra Pound: Pound's Imagist movement, while distinct, drew on Symbolist principles by emphasizing the use of precise imagery and the musicality of language. - W.B. Yeats: Yeats's later works, particularly "Sailing to Byzantium," exemplify the Symbolist influence through their exploration of art, immortality, and the human condition.

### **Focus on W.B. Yeats: "Sailing to Byzantium"**

W.B. Yeats, one of the most significant figures in modern poetry, was heavily influenced by the Symbolist Movement. His poem "Sailing to Byzantium" serves as a prime example of how Symbolist techniques can be employed to explore profound themes of art, aging, and the quest for immortality.

### **Key Themes in "Sailing to Byzantium"**

1. Art and Immortality: The poem reflects Yeats's belief in the power of art to transcend the limitations of the physical world. The journey to Byzantium symbolizes a quest for eternal life through artistic creation.

2. Aging and the Human Condition: Yeats grapples with the inevitability of aging and the desire to escape the decay of the body. The contrast between the vitality of youth and the wisdom of old age is a central theme.

3. Symbolism and Imagery: Yeats employs rich imagery and symbols, such as the "golden bird" and "the artifice of eternity," to evoke complex emotions and ideas. These symbols serve to

deepen the reader's understanding of the poem's themes.

4. Musicality and Form: The poem's rhythmic quality and sound patterns enhance its emotional impact. Yeats's use of meter and rhyme contributes to the overall musicality, a hallmark of Symbolist poetry.

Discussion Questions

## **Stanza by Stanza Analysis of "Sailing to Byzantium"**

### **Introduction**

W. B. Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" (1928) constitutes one of the most profound meditations in modernist poetry on the dialectic between corporeal transience and the aspiration toward metaphysical permanence. Situated within the later phase of Yeats' oeuvre, the poem dramatizes an ontological exile from the sensual contingencies of the temporal world into the symbolic topography of Byzantium, a locus emblematic of spiritual transcendence and artistic immortality. The text enacts a paradigmatic tension between the organic cycles of genesis and dissolution, which Yeats deems inimical to the aged subject, and the monumental artifices of intellect, which promise a form of eternity beyond the flux of historical temporality. Through an intricate orchestration of metaphoric displacements, symbolic confluences, and imagistic juxtapositions, Yeats articulates the desideratum of transfiguration: the desire for the soul to be disentangled from its perishable vesture and subsumed into the aesthetic permanence of the "artifice of eternity." Consequently, "Sailing to Byzantium" not only delineates a metaphysical voyage toward spiritual consummation but also inscribes itself as a manifesto of the Symbolist conviction that art alone may secure a permanence denied by both nature and history.

### **Summary of the Poem**

The poem consists of four stanzas, each expressing Yeats's thoughts and feelings about growing old and the desire for a place of beauty and eternal art.

W. B. Yeats — "Sailing to Byzantium"

### **Stanza 1**

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.

### Idea of the stanza:

Yeats contrasts the fleeting world of youth, sexuality, and nature with the neglect of eternal things — art, wisdom, and spiritual permanence.

Line-by-line analysis:

“That is no country for old men.”

Theme of aging, Yeats declares that the world, obsessed with youth and passion, has no place for the elderly.

Figure of speech: Antithesis (young vs. old).

“The young / In one another’s arms, birds in the trees —”

Youth and sexuality are parallel to nature’s vitality. The embrace of lovers compared to birds singing.

Symbolism: youth = natural fertility.

“Those dying generations — at their song,”

Birds sing, but they too represent mortality. All life is perishable.

Oxymoron: beauty in death.

“The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,”

Nature’s abundance and cycles. Fish symbolize fertility and the natural order.

“Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long / Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.”

All living creatures (three categories of life: fish, flesh/mammals, birds) follow the birth-life-death cycle.

Tricolon: emphasizes universality of mortality.

“Caught in that sensual music all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect.”

The world’s focus on physical pleasure makes people ignore art, wisdom, and eternal creations of the mind.

Contrast: sensual music (temporary) vs. monuments of intellect (eternal).

### Stanza 2

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.

### Idea of the stanza:

Yeats reflects on old age. The body decays, but the soul can achieve greatness through art and spirituality. Byzantium (symbol of spiritual/artistic eternity) is his chosen destination.

Line-by-line analysis:

“An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick,”

Harsh metaphor for old age: the body is weak, shabby, like scarecrow clothing.

Metaphor: “tattered coat” = decaying body.

“Unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress,”

The soul must rejoice, transcending physical decay. The worse the body, the stronger the spirit must sing.

Personification: Soul as singer.

“Nor is there singing school but studying / Monuments of its own magnificence;”

To learn how to “sing” (spiritually), one must study art, history, and immortal achievements.

Symbolism: monuments = timeless art/intellect.

“And therefore I have sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium.”

Byzantium symbolizes a spiritual/artistic haven, a timeless world of creativity and permanence.

### Stanza 3

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.

### Idea of the stanza:

Yeats seeks spiritual transformation. He appeals to the sages of Byzantium (mosaic saints) to teach him, purify his soul, and free him from the decaying body.

Line-by-line analysis:

“O sages standing in God’s holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall,”

Saints in mosaics appear eternal, frozen in sacred fire/light.

Imagery: religious, golden, eternal.

“Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre, / And be the singing-masters of my soul.”

Yeats asks them to guide his soul in a spiraling cycle (gyre = Yeats’ philosophy of history).

Symbolism: gyre = eternal spirals of existence.

“Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal”

His heart is tied to bodily lusts, but the body is a “dying animal” — transient, mortal.

Metaphor: body = animal.

“It knows not what it is; and gather me / Into the artifice of eternity.”

The body is ignorant, but the soul can join eternity through art/spiritual form.

Artifice of eternity: man-made permanence (art) vs. nature’s decay.

### Stanza 4

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.

### Idea of the stanza:

Yeats imagines his soul freed from nature, transformed into an eternal work of art — a golden bird singing timeless songs.

Line-by-line analysis:

“Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing,”

After death, he rejects the cycle of rebirth in perishable forms.

“But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling”

He desires permanence: to exist as art, like a golden statue or artifact.

Imagery: luxury, artistry.

“To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;”

Byzantine emperors had golden mechanical birds — Yeats sees himself as such an immortal symbol of beauty.

“Or set upon a golden bough to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium”

His soul, eternal and mechanical, will sing endlessly.

Symbolism: golden bird = immortal art, eternal voice.

“Of what is past, or passing, or to come.”

Song becomes timeless wisdom, covering all of existence.

Theme: transcendence of time.

Themes in the Poem

Aging and mortality vs. immortality through art.

Nature’s cycle of birth and death vs. man-made eternity (art).

Body vs. soul.

Spiritual journey — Byzantium as symbol of artistic and spiritual transcendence.