



From Aestheticism to Deep Philosophy: A Study of the Evolution of Yeats' Poetic Images from the Perspective of Symbolism

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Abstract

William Butler Yeats, a renowned Irish poet, holds a significant position in literary history. His poetry displays rich cultural significance and emotional expression. Being a master of symbolism, he also incorporates symbolic images into his poetry that evolve throughout his creative career, reflecting changes in his poetic style. Scholars worldwide have made significant progress in comprehending the relationship between Yeats' personal life and his poetry, particularly its symbolic elements. This has improved our knowledge of his poetry and opened up new avenues for future research. Nevertheless, the existing research is not so comprehensive, for it only examines one or a few images. Consequently, this thesis aims to systematically analyze Yeats' poetic images from the perspective of symbolism, tracing the evolution of images from his early period of aesthetic romanticism to his middle phase of profound realism, and finally to his late period of philosophical contemplation. The study finds that Yeats' poetic images evolved from early aesthetic and romantic themes to more profound and philosophical concepts, influenced by historical context, personal experiences, and artistic innovation. Key images like the island, rose, swan, stone, and Byzantium reflect his changing perspectives on love, politics, and philosophy.

Keywords

Yeats; Symbolism; Image; Evolution

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), an Irish poet and playwright, stands as one of the most eminent English-language poets of the 20th century. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923 for "his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation" (William Butler Yeats Biography, 2020).

Symbolism, a remarkable feature of his poetry, was a literary movement that originated with a group of French poets in the late 19th century, influencing European literature in the 20th century. Symbolists seek to express emotional experience through the suggestive use of highly symbolized language. Yeats is an amazing example who excels at employing symbolic imagery to convey his profound ideas.

1.2 Literature Review

As a master of symbolism and a prolific poet with extensive life experience, Yeats has long been the subject of

scholarly research both domestically and internationally. Some critics are interested in his artistic career development. The American scholar Richard Ellmann was the first to conduct a thorough analysis of Yeats' poetry. His books *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (1948) and *Yeats: The Identity of the Poet* (1954) delve deeply into Yeats' spiritual and artistic worlds, revealing his various identities as a senator in the Irish Free State, a Nobel Prize winner in literature, and an old man indulging in sensory pleasure. The analytical technique exposed the connection between Yeats' poems and his life experience, but neglected his creative personality. Brenda Webster (1973) noticed this and pointed out that after Yeats realized the illusionary feature of his early works, he endeavored to reinvent himself and create a new aesthetic style. Furthermore, R. F. Foster (1997) and Terence Brown (1999) emphasized how culture shaped Yeats' poetic style. Though starting relatively late, similar research has also been carried out in China, including Fu Hao's *A Biography of Yeats* (1999) and Li Jing's *Yeats' Poetry: Dance of the Soul* (2010). Some academics explore the symbolism in Yeats' poetry. As noted by Fu Hao (1999), Yeats' symbolism not merely expressed his nationalist complex, but also served to connect the reader, symbolic images and reality, providing a reflection on modernity after being subjected to the pressures of reality. (Fu, 1999) Many scholars have further studied symbolism by focusing on one or a few images from Yeats' poems (e.g., Byzantine, swan and rose) to interpret Yeats' ideas, feelings, and poetic styles, such as Zhang Zhongmei (2014) and Ni Jing (2015).

In recent years, the analysis of Yeats' poetry has reflected a trend toward greater diversity. Some researchers like Rehana Anwer (2021) have studied Yeats' poetry from the standpoint of comparative literature. Some academics concentrate on the themes of Yeats' poetry. Li Yingxue (2020) focused on the national spirit and modernity embedded in Yeats' poetry, while Hawk Chang (2019) explored life and death in the poet's well-known pieces like "When You Are Old". Others continue to focus only on the interpretation of the images. Yang Shenghua, for instance, looked into the body image (2019) and landscape image (2022) in Yeats' poetry.

Overall, researchers worldwide have made significant progress in understanding the connection between Yeats' personal biographical history and his poetic creations as well as the symbolic elements found in his poetry. However, research on the interpretation of Yeats' symbolic poetic images has generally been limited to investigating one or a few images, leaving it lacking in comprehensiveness.

1.3 Research Objective

Therefore, it would be meaningful to provide a systematic analysis of the evolution of Yeats' poetic images from the perspective of symbolism, starting with the early aesthetic romantic style, moving through the middle stage with the profound and realistic style, and finally ending with the late philosophical style. By analyzing the symbolic meanings of images in the three different stages, it is possible to better understand while witnessing social changes and accumulating life experience, how the poet gradually walks towards maturity and uses imagery and symbolism to display his thinking of many issues in his life. Additionally, by exploring the underlying factors driving the changes of images, the links between Yeats' personal story, historical context and his literary creations will be revealed.

2. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing key poems from Yeats' early, middle, and late periods. The analysis focuses on the symbolic significance of images such as the island, rose, swan, stone, and Byzantium, tracing their evolution across different stages of Yeats' career. The study also examines historical and biographical contexts to understand the factors influencing these changes.

3. Aesthetic and Romantic Images in the Early Period

Yeats' early poetic works varied from poems published in *The Dublin University Review* in 1883 to *The Wind Among the Reeds*, published in 1899. During his early creative era (1883-1899), Yeats absorbed the tradition of English romanticism, experienced the Aesthetic Movement, and eventually combined it with Irish traits to form his unique poetic style. Many literary images from this stage are aesthetic and romantic. The island and the rose are typical examples.

3.1 The Image of Island

The image of an island frequently appears in Yeats' poetry in his early stage, such as "To an Isle in the Water" (1889), "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1892), and "The White Birds" (1893). The island has great symbolic significance in

these poems, by which the utopia he imagines is represented.

Among these poems related to the island, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” is the most famous one. During this creative period, Yeats moved to London with his family and he was very dissatisfied with the gloomy urban life in British culture. Greatly influenced by Romantic poets like Shelley and aesthetes like Oscar Wilde, he conjures up the fantasy island of Innisfree and uses it to symbolize the idealized pastoral life he longs for in order to escape the troubles in reality.

In “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, the narrator asserts his desire to leave the “pavement gray” of his current locale and dwell on the mysterious island of Innisfree, with only “bees”, “crickets”, and “linnets” for company. It seems that the island symbolizes a place of refuge from the dangerous outside world and the life on the island symbolizes the spiritual journey undertaken by Yeats (Kabbalism, 2017). Thus, in this poem, the island is portrayed as a romantic fairyland with tranquil and beautiful landscapes, far away from the bustle of reality:

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
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. (line 5-8)

The four short lines—white mist, green crickets, black night, purple midday, golden sunset, and red linnets—combine to create a beautiful picture rich in color. Together, these sceneries create the overall image of the island, which adds to its aesthetic appeal.

Such a romantic island tinted with aestheticism can be a paradise for Yeats. It is not merely a joyful spot for the poet to rid himself of problems and forget all of his gains and losses in the real life, but also an excellent place for him to pursue his spiritual ideal and realize his own romanticism.

3.2 The Image of Rose

From Shakespeare’s sonnets to Oscar Wilde’s *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the beauty and complexity of the rose have been explored time and again in European literature. While not the first to utilize the rose as a poetic image, W.B. Yeats took this age-old imagery to new heights in his early works, imbuing it with layers of meaning that transcended the conventional interpretations. Throughout Yeats’ early poems, the rose emerges as a romantic and aesthetic symbol, representing the eternal beauty, his beloved Maud Gonne, and the Irish culture.

3.2.1 A Symbol of Timeless Beauty

The beauty of a flower is usually fleeting because, as we all know, no matter how beautiful a bloom is, it will never avoid wilting and dying. But the rose becomes the epitome of eternal beauty in Yeats’ early writings. Consider the 1892 poem “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” as a typical illustration.

The poem was created after Yeats joined the mystic society called the Golden Dawn, whose symbolic ritual centered on the rose and cross. As Daniel Albright noted, the holy rose-on-the-cross symbol is the essential symbol of Rosicrucian philosophy, which could signify the bond between woman (the rose) and man (the cross), the intersection between the four classical elements (represented by the arms of the cross) and the fifth element (spiritual quintessence), and the joint that the tribulations of temporal life ascending into the eternal and divine world (428). Deeply influenced by this mystic society, the rose in Yeats’ poem was obviously no longer an ordinary flower in nature, but a Rosicrucian rose. Fixed on the rood, the rose appeared to surpass temporal limitations in order to attain the timeless beauty.

Come near, that no more blinded by man’s fate,
I find under the boughs of love and hate,
In all poor foolish things that live a day,
Eternal beauty wandering on her way. (line 9-12)

This is the third stanza of “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time”. The narrator discovers that human beings are endlessly caught in “love and hate” conflicts in the secular world. Calling the rose to “come near” is the only option to escape such a fate and resolve the problems since the rose has the ability to transcend all boundaries and elevate itself to the state of “eternal beauty”.

These lines seem to also allude to Yeats’ exposure to romanticism and aestheticism. Subconsciously, he desired to

abandon the “poor” and “foolish” things and refused to become fully involved in the secular world. What he truly desired was the rose, the timeless beauty, and the ideal of romanticism.

3.2.2 A Symbol of Maud Gonne

From the perspective of love, the rose can refer to a beautiful but unattainable lady. And for Yeats, this lady was Maud Gonne, an extraordinarily beautiful Irish nationalist and actress. She had become the muse of Yeats since their first meeting. Nearly all the rose-related poems were addressed to her, showing his passionate and constant love for her. The rose was a symbol of Maud Gonne in many poems, such as “The Rose of the World” (1893) and “The Lover Tells of the Rose in His Heart” (1899).

In 1891, Maude Gonne ruthlessly refused Yeats’ proposal. This did not lessen Yeats’ love for the woman, despite his anguish. Maude Gonne was likened to Helen and Dreidre in the poem “The Rose of the World”. Because of Helen’s beauty, a ten-year cruel battle broke out, destroying Troy and its culture; because of Dreidre’s beauty, men became enemies and murdered each other. They were all ideal beauties in people’s expectations, but the reality was very cruel. The beautiful and unyielding Maud Gonne crushed Yeats’ love, causing endless sorrow in Yeats’ heart; the beautiful Helen prompted Greeks to destroy Troy, leading to long-lasting grief of Trojans (Li, 2015). It was clear that Yeats was aware that his love for Maud Gonne might be futile and had brought him many sufferings; nonetheless, he was still drawn to the devastating power of her beauty and was hopelessly in love with her, the rose of the world.

In “The Lover Tells of the Rose in His Heart”, the romanticist again expressed his relentless love frankly for Maud Gonne through a rose-related poem. Yeats declared, “I hunger to build them anew and sit on a green knoll apart, / With the earth and the sky and the water, re-made, like a casket of gold / For my dreams of your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart.” (line 6-8) In Yeats’ opinion, Maud Gonne was almost perfect. He refused to let those broken and old objects destroy Maud Gonne’s image, so he changed them into something new. In his dream, she was like a budding rose, her beauty lasting forever.

These love poems about Maud Gonne thoroughly display Yeats’ romanticism. Regardless of how harsh the reality was, he continued to pursue his romantic love without any hesitation. The rose, symbolizing his lover Maud Gonne, was always blossoming brilliantly in his heart.

3.2.3 A Symbol of Irish Culture

As a patriotic poet, Yeats intentionally focuses his poetry on Irish themes, and he also uses the image of rose to symbolize an idealized Ireland in the depth of his heart. To illustrate, in “To Ireland in the Coming Times” (1892), the red rose stands for the brilliant culture and spirit of Ireland.

During that time, Yeats was a cultural nationalist who opposed violent and radical political nationalism, holding that poetry should not be used as a vehicle for political propaganda and that only really creative works could advance political independence in Ireland (Zhao & Liu, 2014). Thus, in “To Ireland in the Coming Times”, the poet discussed his impact on the social and cultural landscape of Ireland. He suggested that he should be counted among the other revolutionaries who were the most important Irish figures in the early 20th century.

I cast my heart into my rhymes,
That you, in the dim coming times,
May know how my heart went with them
After the red-rose-bordered hem. (line 45-48)

The poem ends here. Ireland is compared as a gorgeous woman wearing a “red-rose-bordered hem” throughout the entire poem, with “the red rose” standing for the vibrant Irish culture. It is possible to read this final section as a love letter that expresses Yeats’ loyalty and enthusiasm for this country. He believed that Irish culture was always wonderful, much like a lovely rose. Despite the disorganized Irish social reality within the historical context, the romantic poet still depicted it as a beautiful red rose to keep the bright side of Ireland in his mind. And in the future, “his heart” would always pursue Irish civilization, and he would express his patriotism via his excellent poems with great literary merit.

4. Realistic and Profound Images in the Middle Period

Yeats’ poetic style shifted dramatically at the turn of the twentieth century, owing in large part to his firsthand experience of the Irish nationalist political movement. His middle period poems were composed between 1899 and 1925,

shortly after the publication of *The Wind Among the Reeds* and before the publication of *A Vision* (1925). During this period, he focused more on social reality, and the images in his poems became more profound, with a strong political tone. The swan and the stone are two representative examples.

4.1 The Image of Swan

“The Wild Swans at Coole” (1917) was Yeats’ transforming work, where the poet used swans as a symbol of the ideal aristocratic spirit.

At this point, Yeats started to judge the Irish masses and revolutionaries from the perspective of an aristocrat. He thought that violence and civil war were not symbols of patriotism, and that the leaders of the Irish nationalist movement lacked the traditional nobility and valor shown by John O’Leary. According to him, the world could be improved by three categories of people who had inherited the brilliant Irish traditions: villagers, aristocrats, and artists. He wished they could carry on these honorable traditions of Ireland in the future (Zhang, 2014).

Indeed, Yeats’ perspective was excessively archaic and conservative. Nonetheless, the poet’s real love for his nation cannot be disputed. He utilized the image of a swan to represent the aristocratic spirit in this poem because he was dissatisfied with Irish politics at the time and was only trying to defend his country in his own way.

Fifty-nine swans are shown in this poem floating on the lake in autumn. Nineteen years later, having gone through vicissitudes of life, the swans still remain pure and elegant. These swans never seemed to be concerned about the passage of time. The swans never lost their elegance, despite the fact that everything altered throughout time. Yeats intended to convey by using the emblem of swan that the traditional aristocratic spirit still had charm and could save society in spite of historical changes.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trode with a lighter tread. (line 13-18)

The above section depicts a melancholy character. The man “trode with a lighter tread” when he was younger, but unlike the “brilliant” swans which are still full of “passion and conquest”, the man has aged and his heart is now “sore”. By drawing a comparison between the swans and the man, the poet further highlighted the strength of the aristocratic spirit, which is unbounded by time.

As a matter of fact, Yeats was powerless to change the irreversible trend of the times about the decline of the aristocracy. He was left with little choice but to sigh with helplessness and use the poem to convey his intense love of Irish aristocratic tradition.

It is clear that Yeats’ poems from this stage were more closely related to social reality. Dissatisfied with the state of Irish politics, the poet carefully pondered his own measures to try to save the society, even though they were not very reasonable, rather than creating an idyllic and romantic utopia like the island of Innisfree as a means of escape. As a result, the representation of swans had deeper political connotations than just eternal beauty. These swans stood for the poet’s political goal of saving the society by harnessing the power of aristocracy.

4.2 The Image of Stone

Another important symbol in Yeats’ midterm poems is the stone. The stone appears to people to be a hard material with a dull gray color. The image of the stone is less beautiful and appealing than those images in Yeats’ earlier works like the rose, suggesting a shift in his literary style. His choice of images is more inclusive, and aesthetic appeal was not a very important criterion used anymore.

In Yeats’ writings, the stone has a number of symbolic implications. For example, the poem “Easter 1916” (1916) commemorated the Easter Rising, an uprising against British rule by Irish nationalists seeking independence for their country. The stone has deep meanings in this poem. The poet on the one hand clearly celebrates the revolutionary spirit whose impulse is toward the ideal of an Ireland that has recaptured and reaffirmed its tradition and history, while on the other he recognizes through his use of the image of the stone—a dual symbol of stability and deadness—the folly of it all because “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart” (Olsen, 1983). This portrayed Yeats’

inner conflicts. In his opinion, the steadiness of stone represented the Irish rebels' unwavering commitment to reviving their homeland, while the deadness of stone represented their foolish decision to pursue national independence through bloody sacrifice. Although he was moved by these people's commitment, he was not convinced that fighting for Irish independence at the expense of their deaths was necessary.

Another poem in which the stone has great symbolic significance is "The Fisherman" (1919). In this poem, the poet spends the day observing the simple yet wise fisherman and contemplating how to describe Ireland and its reality. In line 31, Yeats states, "Climbing up to a place / Where stone is dark with froth." The "dark" color of the stone represents the weighty Irish national spirit, and its placement beneath the "froth" of stone suggests that the spirit is dormant and must be awakened and conveyed. The poet expressed his political goal of reviving the spirit through the image of stone, for he understood full well that the Irish people of his day lacked such brilliant spirit.

5. Complex and Philosophical Images in the Late Period

In his later years, Yeats wrote in a more personal tone and progressively shifted away from actively addressing political issues as he had done in his middle years. His late poems primarily dealt with topics like life, death, and time. His poems were replete with contemplations on life, death, and eternity, and it was these contemplations that made his images more complex and philosophical. Among his poetry from this late period are *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair* (1929), *A Full Moon in March* (1935), and *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939).

5.1 The Image of Byzantium

"Sailing to Byzantium" (1926), one of Yeats' most well-known late poems, uses the city of Byzantium to convey a deep symbolic significance. Yeats penned it while he was already in his sixties. Besides the nationalist complex, he infused the poem with more philosophical thoughts.

The Byzantine Empire embodies his pursuit of achieving immortality through the art. During this period, age and desire presented a dilemma for him. In the poem, Yeats spoke in the form of a monologue of a frail old man who lamented the passage of youth and yearned for eternal life. He argued that only when the soul was freed from the ties of the body and rested on works of art could one effectively cope with the effects of old age, and therefore he came to Byzantium (Liu, 2011).

For him, Byzantium was not merely a kingdom of art symbolizing eternity molded by cultural icons like saints, golden birds and mosaics, but also an earthly paradise free from the sorrows of death and sadness. He utilized the image of Byzantium to convey his wish to use art as a means of achieving immortality as he grew older. This point of view was similar to what the great English poet Shakespeare had expressed many years ago. In Sonnet 18, he declared in line 11, "Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade, / When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:". That is to say, any beauty will disappear one day, but as long as these verses live on, he will always live in people's hearts. He also wanted to use excellent artistic works to achieve immortality.

In addition, the Byzantine Empire stands for Yeats' spiritual pursuit of ancient brilliant civilization. In the spatial sense, Byzantium, which stretched across both Europe and Asia, was a far-off and enigmatic place that piqued Yeats' curiosity. In the temporal sense, the empire had been once the longest-lasting government in European history until the Turks took Constantinople in 1453. For future generations, the disappearance of this country was doubly mysterious. In the cultural sense, Byzantine civilization was unique to both Asia and Europe during the medieval period. Unlike Western European Christian culture, which had a Latinization history, Byzantine civilization, while categorized as Christian culture, had its own distinct style and is distinguished by its Greek heritage. And thanks to its unusual geographic location, it overlapped with diverse cultural communities. Cultural collisions and fusions between the East and West were especially prevalent in this region. As a result, the Byzantine culture represented a typical combination of Eastern and Western cultural elements.

Yeats claimed that the empire typified the ideal aristocratic culture in his mind, where materialism and spirituality, literature and religion, individuality and society, were all harmoniously united. But in reality, he clearly knew there were many different kinds of crises in Ireland. With the image of Byzantium, he expressed his aversion to modern material civilization, and his longing for the splendid spiritual civilization in the ancient times.

During his late years, the image utilized by Yeats was more complex. Through the image of Byzantium, Yeats expressed his profound thoughts about both his personal life and his political pursuit. As for himself, he truly felt the pressure of aging and death, and thought deeply about his own philosophy of life. Even while he knew he would die

eventually, he nevertheless wanted to have a meaningful life and, like Byzantium, always be remembered by people thanks to the immortality of art. Regarding his political ideal, the poet depicted the Byzantine Empire, the ideal civilization in his heart, even though he was not so fervent about politics as he was in his middle years. As a patriot, at such an age, he was feeling increasingly powerless to alter the course of his country. The Ireland took a totally different turn than he had anticipated. All he could accomplish was to construct a highly developed spiritual kingdom in his poetry.

5.2 The Image of Swan

The image of swan also appears in Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" (1928). The poem is based on a famous Greek myth: Zeus, enamored with the beauty of Leda, transformed himself into a swan and raped her. This resulted in the birth of two daughters—the famous Helen and Clytemnestra. The former eloped with a Trojan prince, triggering the ten-year-long Trojan War that led to the fall of Troy and the beginning of the Homeric age. The latter conspired with her lover to murder her own husband, Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief of the victorious Greek army returning from the Trojan War.

In contrast to the graceful and pure white swan that Yeats painted during his middle phase, the swan in this poem is associated with violence and sexuality. The first eight lines of the poem depict the violent act of a swan raping a maiden, while the following six lines describe the dreadful consequences that arise from this act.

The swan of the poem is a symbol of historical development. In this poem, the coupling of the swan and Leda represents the beginning of human history. Through the image of swan, Yeats explores the issue of human evolution and conveys his philosophical ideas about the history and the destiny of humanity.

Admittedly, the coupling of the swan and Leda brought disaster to the earth. However, at the same time, they made some positive changes. Although Yeats assumed that any union of human and god should be horrible, he observes that it is possible for the mortal to gain a supernatural power (Babae, 2014). At the end of this poem, the poet expresses his viewpoint in line 14, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" Though under the control of the "brute blood of the air", Leda does obtain some kinds of divine power and knowledge.

Through the story of the swan and Leda, Yeats expressed his profound philosophical thoughts towards history: The humanity had no control over the path of history during the period of historical civilizations changing. Violence and war are unavoidable. Nonetheless, people are able to learn from history and gain experience from historical development, which might spur the rise of new civilizations.

6. Results and Discussion

The study finds that Yeats' poetic images evolved from early aesthetic and romantic themes to more profound and philosophical concepts, influenced by three factors: cultural and historical influences, individual experiences and artistic innovation.

6.1 Influence of Historical and Cultural Background

As an Irish poet, Yeats lived at a time of great political and social upheaval. His poetry was heavily influenced by Irish culture and history. During the early years of his literary career, he used his poetry to build an ideal Ireland in his mind, and therefore the poetic images like rose and island were full of the Irish beauty in his fantasy.

However, his style evolved significantly as Irish politics saw profound shifts. After he participated in the Irish nationalist movement, he gained more insights about the Irish society, and therefore politics emerged as one of the major themes of his poetry. Despite the admiration of Irish revolutionaries, Yeats was still discontent with the way that they used war to realize national revitalization and thought the Irish leaders lacked the aristocratic spirit in the past. Thus, later he infused his poetry with a sense of melancholy and loss, and the imagery such as the swan, the stone and the Byzantine Empire represented his lonely pursuit of the great Irish spirit and the brilliant Irish civilization missing in the past.

6.2 Changes in Personal Experiences

Yeats' poetic imagery was also shaped by his personal experiences and emotional shifts. He wrote a lot of love poems in his early years, and the image of a rose in particular eloquently captured his intense affection for Maud Gonne.

As time passed and he encountered romantic setbacks, the principal focus of his poems gradually shifted away from love. In his middle age, he paid more attention to the social reality and the poems written in this period clearly demonstrated his strong sense of responsibility for the Irish society. Through the images like the swan and the stone, he conveyed his political ideal that he wanted to use the power of aristocrats and the glorious Irish national spirit to save the society.

As he grew older, he wrote more on his philosophical views on life and society. Images from his late period perfectly reflected his profound ideas about history, human civilization, and life and death. Faced with aging and death, though the image of the Byzantine Empire, the poet declared his intention to use great artistic works to attain immortality. Faced with the reality of violence and war throughout history, through the image of a swan, he realized that these inescapable events may teach us valuable lessons and even further the advancement of human civilizations.

6.3 The Need for Artistic Innovation

Yeats is known for his continuous pursuit of artistic innovation. His poetic imagery fully reflects his growth in this field. In the early stage of his creative career, he was engaged in the romanticism and the aesthetic movement. The famous figures like William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Morris all exerted great impact on his early poems. A group of dreamy poems appeared in this period, and the poetic images he created were always tinged with romantic and aesthetic atmosphere, like the Innisfree Island.

But as Yeats matured, he abandoned the romantic ideal in the early period and began to experiment with new techniques in his poetry to create more profound expressions. Just as he mentioned in his poem "A Coat", the poet gradually took off the coat of his poetry that "was covered with embroideries" (line 2) and focused more on social reality. Aesthetic appeal was no longer a vital standard for his selection of poetic images, and various images with profound meanings appeared in his later poems like the stone. As a patriot, he tried to use these images to voice his political opinions about the Irish society.

Finally, he developed his own distinctive system of symbolism and attained the status of a true symbolism master. The poet tackled more complex and philosophical themes through the images such as the Byzantium and the swan. Both the Byzantium and the swan have symbolic implications that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, suggesting his profound reflections on both his own life and the history of humanity.

7. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Yeats' poetic images evolved from aestheticism to deep philosophy, influenced by historical context, personal experiences, and artistic innovation. Future research could further explore the role of symbolism in Yeats' poetry and its broader impact on modernist literature.

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