



Poetic Dialogue Beyond Imagery: A Comparative Study of Li Shangyin's Untitled Poem and Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium* from the Perspective of Symbolism

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Abstract. This comparative study explores the poetic dialogue between Li Shangyin's Untitled Poem and W.B. Yeats' "*Sailing to Byzantium*" from the perspective of symbolism. The research delves into the inner logic and aesthetic value of their symbolic exchanges, examining the masterful use of symbolism by both poets in their respective cultural and historical contexts. The study identifies commonalities in their utilization of symbolism, such as the visualization of abstract concepts, the borrowing of classical elements, and the deployment of contrasting techniques, while highlighting differences in the construction of their symbolic systems, thematic tendencies, and choice of symbols, which reflect the unique artistic styles and cultural backgrounds of each poet. The comparative analysis uncovers the intricate interplay of symbolic themes and unique cultural expressions across different times, geographies, and literary traditions.

Keywords: Symbolism, Li Shangyin, Untitled Poem, W.B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*, comparative poetry.

1 Introduction

Li Shangyin, an outstanding poet of the Late Tang Dynasty, is known as "the mystery of poets" for his untitled poems with their profound meaning, hazy beauty and rich symbols, and has become a model of ancient Chinese symbolism poetry. On the other hand, W.B. Yeats, a leading figure of the Irish Renaissance, whose "*Sailing to Byzantium*" is one of the most outstanding masterpieces of modern Western Symbolist poetry, constructed a spiritual world full of symbolic imagery that transcends reality through his profound reflections on life, art and time. Although the two poets lived in very different cultural backgrounds and historical periods, the masterful use and deep understanding of symbolism in their works make them resonate across time and space in the dimension of poetic dialogue.

This study aims to reveal the artistic characteristics and ideological connotations of symbolism in the works of Li Shangyin's Untitled Poem and Yeats's *Sailing to Byzantium* through an in-depth discussion of the poetic dialogue between the two poets on

the level of symbolism. Through close reading and in-depth analysis of the texts, we will explore the specific use of symbolism in Li Shangyin's Untitled Poem and Yeats's *Sailing to Byzantium*, such as the choice of symbols, the construction of symbolic structure, and the symbolic meaning of symbolic images, etc., so as to reveal their respective unique artistic styles and ideological cores.

2 Similarities and Differences in Symbolism between Untitled Poem and *Sailing to Byzantium*

Li Shangyin and Yeats share commonalities in their use of symbolism—such as the visualisation of abstract concepts, the borrowing of classical elements, and the use of contrasting techniques—as well as differences—such as the construction of the symbolic system, the thematic tendency, and the choice of symbols, which reflect the unique artistic style and cultural background of each poet. These differences reflect the unique artistic styles and cultural backgrounds of the two poets.

Both Li Shangyin and Yeats are good at conveying abstract emotions and ideas through figurative imagery. Li Shangyin expresses the persistence of love in "The silk worm is not finished until it dies, the wax torch turns into ashes and the tears begin to dry", and Yeats expresses the situation of the elderly in "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick". Yeats' "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" is a metaphor for the situation of the elderly, both of which transform abstract concepts into vivid images. They both excel in the use of historical and mythological symbolism. Li Shangyin's poems contain many references to ancient myths and historical allusions (e.g., "Jia peeps at Han Shou's handsome youth through the curtain"), which give the poems deep cultural symbolism. Li Shangyin's poems often use allusions to the goddess of Gaotang, and the poem "Feelings" reveals some kind of justification^[5](Jiang Yin, 2023). Yeats, on the other hand, uses the historical city of Byzantium as a symbol to carry the yearning for the eternity of art and spiritual transcendence. Both poets make contrasts of imagery in their poems. In Li Shangyin's poems, there are common contrasts, such as "no colourful phoenixes flying in the wings, but the heart has a spiritual rhinoceros", which contrasts the communication between the reality and the heart, and in Yeats's poems, "That is no country for old men" and "holy city of Byzantium", which contrasts with the "holy city of Byzantium". In Yeats' poem, "That is no country for old men" and "holy city of Byzantium" compare the reality and the ideal place, both of which strengthen the theme through comparison.

In the construction of symbolism, Li Shangyin's symbolism is often more personal and emotional, focusing on the delicate portrayal of individual emotions and psychological analysis. Li Shangyin's emotional world is secretive, but he is precisely a sentimental poet. In his delicate and sensitive inner experience, the dead lotus has decayed, but he knows that he is in the place of love, a bunch of dead lotus, but also the light of the subtle place of his life^[3](Gong Huilan, 2023). Yeats's symbolism is more grandiose and philosophical, focusing on macroscopic themes such as life, art, time and eternity, such as "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any

natural thing". Li Shangyin favoured everyday objects, natural scenery or myths and legends as symbolic vehicles to create an oriental poetic atmosphere. Yeats, on the other hand, chose things with strong artistic and religious symbols such as "Grecian goldsmiths" and "golden bough" to build up a symbolic system in the context of Western classical culture. The use of allusions often makes the emotional expression of poetry more subtle, Li Shangyin's poetry is a large number of allusions, not only to create the beauty of the poem's mood, but also to deepen the poem's sense of haze^[9](Wu Weixing, 2023).

3 An Exploration of the Cultural Background and Roots of Li Shangyin's and Yeats' Symbolism

Li Shangyin and Yeats are outstanding poets of the Late Tang Dynasty in China and modern Ireland respectively. Although their poetic works span time and space, both of them show a deep tendency of symbolism. By analysing Li Shangyin's Untitled Poem and Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*, we can reveal their respective cultural backgrounds and roots in symbolism.

As the earliest collection of poems in China, *The Book of Songs* has a profound influence on later poetic creation, especially in Li Shangyin's untitled poem, this tradition has been significantly inherited and developed. "Bi" means simile, which is used to show the similarities between things through analogy, comparing one thing with another to enhance the effect of expression. "Xing", on the other hand, is to evoke feelings, triggering associations from the objects in front of one's eyes, or to speak of other objects first in order to evoke the words being chanted, so as to make the imagery of the poem closely connected with the emotions. The technique of "Bi and Xing" is widely used in *The Book of Songs*, aiming to draw out deeper themes or emotions through figurative depictions. Li Shangyin was deeply inspired by the tradition of Bi-xing in *The Book of Songs*, and his untitled poems are rich in natural imagery for symbolic expression. For example, "It is difficult to part when meeting each other; the east wind is powerless and hundreds of flowers are left in ruins" symbolises the sadness of parting and the impermanence of human affairs with the decaying flowers in spring, which is a direct inheritance of the natural scenes in *The Book of Songs* as an allegory of the life situation. This is a direct inheritance of the natural scenes in *The Book of Songs* to illustrate the life situation. Li Shangyin's symbolism inherits the ambiguity and polysemy of *The Book of Songs*. He is good at using symbols to convey complex and subtle emotions, so that the meaning of the poem is hidden underneath the words, which requires the reader to figure out carefully.

When Yeats wrote *Sailing to Byzantium*, it was at the time of the rise of Western modernism, especially symbolism, which had a profound influence on his poetry. This trend emphasised the use of symbols, allusions and associations to touch upon the deepest emotions and thoughts of the human subconscious, in pursuit of a deeper meaning that transcends the superficial reality. In his reflection and criticism of modern society regarding politics, religion, and spirituality, we can see Yeats' meditation on modern civilization. In his exploration of aesthetic space from Irish cultural lega-

cy, Yeats' responsibility and homeland consciousness are revealed in poetic rhymes^[2] (Fu, 2023).

Yeats was keen to express spiritual pursuits and eternal themes. "Byzantium" wholly represents "the intellectual world a symbol of life after death^[8] (Pater-son, 2023).. In his poems, Yeats used Byzantium as a symbol to convey the ideal of transcending the material world and pursuing spiritual immortality. For example, "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", expressing the poet's wish to transcend life and death and integrate eternity through art, which is in line with the Western modernism's emphasis on the spiritual value of the individual. At the same time, Yeats was deeply influenced by Christian culture and Celtic mysticism, and expressions such as "O sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall" in "*Sailing to Byzantium*" reflect the poet's The borrowing of Christian symbols such as sacred fire and gold mosaic, as well as the yearning for the mysterious transcendental world, are symbolic elements unique to the soil of Western culture.

4 Intertextual Interpretation in the Perspective of Symbolism

In an intertextual reading of Li Shangyin's untitled poem and Yeats's *Sailing to Byzantium* under the perspective of symbolism, we first need to understand the types of imagery, themes, and the potential dialogue between the two.

Li Shangyin's untitled poems are known for their high degree of symbolism and density of imagery, usually dealing with themes such as love, the passage of time, the impermanence of life, and the pain of lovesickness. Li Shangyin's choice of imagery and mood has already been covered with a gloomy mood, and he has also created a hazy and obscure, sad and sentimental poetic environment through the jumping combination of a large number of elegiac imagery^[10] (Xue Binghua, 2022). The symbolic elements in these poems include: flowers and seasons: for example, "There is a light thunder outside the Hibiscus Pond", which uses the blossoming and falling of flowers to symbolise the flourishing and declining of life, the ups and downs of love, or the flow of time. Myths, legends and historical allusions: Ancient stories are quoted to express memories of good feelings or aspirations for an ideal world. Artifacts and environment: The scenes depicted in "How much does the thin silk with the phoenix tails weigh?" are both realistic and imply subtle changes in emotions and the loneliness and anticipation of the characters.

Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*, a work from his later years, embodies the pursuit of eternal art and spiritual transcendence. *Sailing to Byzantium* is a poem about nature, arts, age, travel, mortality, and immortality. The mortality or immortality of someone can be seen through his/her deeds, works, and in the case of our speaker in this poem, such a thing appears through his poetry^[11] (Abbas, 2020). The main symbolic elements include: age and stage of life: "That is no country for old men." It directly points out that the secular world is not suitable for the elderly, hinting at the reality of aging and death, as well as the longing for youthful vigour. Utopia is thus the innate desire in

the poet's mind—not a mythical place away from home, but a possibility to transcend the existing delirium^[7](Mohanty,2020).Nature and sensory experience: "Birds in the trees", "salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas", etc. depict vibrant nature, contrasting with aging individuals, symbolising the wheel of life. individuals, symbolising the cycle and transience of life. Works of art and immortality: "Monuments of unageing intellect", "Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling" and so on. ", etc. The works of art made by ancient Greek goldsmiths are used to symbolise the eternal value of the creation of the human spirit, as well as the possibility of the individual to transcend the limits of the physical body through art.

The recurring imagery of the impermanence of life and the passage of time in Li Shangyin's poems contrasts with Yeats's reflections on the finite nature of life and the immortality of the spirit. Both are concerned with the different stages of life, but Li Shangyin is more immersed in the delicate experience of his personal emotions, while Yeats tries to seek ways to transcend the limitations of individual life through artistic creation. When a certain image is repeatedly chosen by the poet, it is reflecting the poet's specific state of mind, specific emotional mode and aesthetic mode^[4](Han Daqiang, 2023).The imagery of both poets is symbolic of art and spirituality. The emotional world constructed by Li Shangyin through various symbolic techniques is intertextual with the Byzantine art world that Yeats aspires to. Although Li Shangyin does not directly refer to artistic creation, his poetry is itself a kind of artistic expression, expressing his persistent pursuit of ideal love and lost time through symbols.Yeats, on the other hand, explicitly presents art as a means of salvation for the soul, hoping to integrate the eternal spiritual world through artistic creation. Moreover, intertextuality is important in poems. The image Byzantium in *Sailing to Byzantium* expresses the love for the art^[6](Lei, 2022).

To sum up, although Li Shangyin's Untitled poems and Yeats's *Sailing to Byzantium* were written in different cultural backgrounds and eras, they show rich intertextuality under the perspective of symbolism. They jointly explore the themes of life, love, time, art and spirituality, and through their respective symbolic techniques, they build up a poetic world that is both independent and mutually echoing, reflecting the universal concern of human beings for the value of individual existence and the pursuit of eternity.

5 Conclusions

This comparative study has successfully demonstrated the richness and versatility of symbolism as a poetic tool, enabling Li Shangyin and W.B. Yeats to engage in a profound dialogue across centuries and cultures. Their masterful use of symbolism not only reveals the unique artistic styles and ideological cores of their individual works but also underscores the enduring relevance and power of poetry to bridge temporal and cultural boundaries, offering readers a transformative encounter with the profound questions that lie at the heart of the human experience. By illuminating the similarities and differences in their symbolic language, we have fostered a deeper appreciation of the complexity and diversity of poetic expression, while simultaneous-

ly highlighting the shared human quest for meaning and understanding that transcends the confines of time and place.

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