

# Cemetery Symbolism Cheat Sheet

## Early Cemetery Symbolism (16<sup>th</sup> through early 18<sup>th</sup> century)

### **ANGEL**

Flying angel: Rebirth

Trumpeting angel: Call to the Resurrection

Weeping angel: Grief

**ARROW:** Mortality

**BIRD:** Eternal life

In flight: Flight of the soul

Dove: Purity, devotion

**BREASTS/GOURDS/POMEGRANATES:** The church, the ministry; the nourishment of the soul

**CANDLE FLAME:** Life Being snuffed: Death

**COFFIN, PICK, SPADE, PALL:** Mortality

**CROWN:** Glory of life after death

**FIG, PINEAPPLE, OTHER FRUIT:** Prosperity, eternal life

**FLOWER:** Frailty of life

**HEART:** Love, love of God, abode of the soul

**HOUR GLASS:** Inevitable passing of time (and life) Winged: Swift passage.

**ROOSTER:** Awakening, call to the Resurrection

**SCYTHE:** Death, divine harvest

**SHELL:** The Resurrection, life everlasting, life's pilgrimage

**SKULL, BONES, SKELETON:** Mortality

**SUN SHINING, SUN RISING:** Renewed life

**TREE:** Life.

Cut down: Mortality

Sprouting: Life everlasting

Severed branch: Life cut short

Willow: Life, mourning

**VINE with GRAPES:** The sacraments

**WINGED FACE:** Effigy or soul of the deceased, soul in flight

**WINGED SKULL:** Flight of the soul from mortal man

**WREATH:** Victory. Worn by skull: Victory of death over life

## Victorian & Edwardian Cemetery Symbolism (Mid-18<sup>th</sup> century through 1920)

**Anchor** - Early Christians used the anchor as a disguised cross, and as a marker to guide the way to secret meeting places. A Christian symbol of hope, it is found as funerary symbolism in the art of the catacombs. It can also be an occupational symbol in sea-faring areas or the attribute of Saint Nicholas, patron saint of seamen, symbolized hope and steadfastness. An anchor with a broken chain stands for the cessation of life.

**Angels** - The agent of God, often pointing towards heaven; guardians of the dead, symbolizing spirituality. Angels are shown in all types of poses with different symbolism. Two angels can be named, and are identified by the objects they carry: Michael, who bears a sword and Gabriel, who is depicted with a horn.

**Books** - Books remind us that tombstones are documents, bearing vital statistics and epitaphs concerning the deceased. Books may be open, possibly to signify that the stone is a kind of biography, or closed in recognition of the fact that the story of the dead is over. The book on a tombstone may be The Book or The Bible.

**Butterfly** - The soul. It is symbolic of the resurrection of Christ. The meaning is derived from the three stages of the life of the butterfly-the caterpillar, the chrysalis, and the butterfly. The three stages are symbols of life, death and resurrection. Short-life.

**Candle** - Candles stand for the spirit or the soul. In Christian contexts, candles can symbolize Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. Catholics often leave candles on the grave to show that prayers have been said for the deceased.

**Chains** - Medieval thinkers sometimes held that a golden chain bound the soul to the body. Broken links on a headstone can mean the severance and subsequent release of the spirit from the body. Chains are also the insignia of the International Order of Odd Fellows, so called because of their dedication to giving the poor decent burials. This association can be clinched by the observation of the letters IOOF or FLT (Friendship, Love, Truth) either inside or near the chain.

**Chalice** - The chalice often appears in association with a white circle representing the consecrated Eucharist. The two items combine to signify the Catholic rite of Holy Communion. The headstones of priests often bear these objects.

**Cross** - Christianity. Usually mounted on three steps, signifying 'faith, hope and charity'. The most potent symbol of the Christian faith, the cross has been used for religious and ornamental purposes since time immemorial.

**Daisy** - Innocence of child, Jesus the Infant, youth, the Son of righteousness, gentleness, purity of thought.

**Dog** - Dogs often appear at the feet of medieval women, signifying the loyalty and inferior place of each in the chivalric order. Modern dogs only imply that the master was worth loving.

**Dogwood** - Christianity, divine sacrifice, triumph of eternal life, resurrection.

**Dove** - The little bird appears in both Christian (usually Catholic) and Jewish cemeteries, representing some of the same things and some different things in each. Catholics usually see the dove (which makes its first Biblical appearance in Genesis carrying an olive branch for Noah) as the Holy Spirit. Jews interpret the dove as a peace symbol.

**Draperies/Curtains** - In the days when the body lay in state in the parlor, it was the custom to cover everything in black. Draperies, with their fancy frills and tassels, are more elaborate than a simple shroud. They allow the expression of mourning to linger long after the body has been taken out the front door and the accoutrements have been stowed for the next death in the family. Curtains can also set the stage. Parted, they reveal a telling excerpt. What is important in such displays is the main actor or central object of the stone.

**Heart** - Stylized hearts stand for the affection of the living for the dead. Two joined hearts on a stone mark a marriage.

**Holly** - People used to believe that holly bushes protected tombs and other monuments from lightning strikes.

**Ivy** - Ivy springs up naturally to cover English tombs, but Americans who transplanted it to their graveyards decided that it meant friendship and, like most cemetery plants, also immortality.

**Lamb** - Usually marks the grave of a child. The lamb always stands for innocence. Christians go a little further and associate it with the Lamb of God, meaning Jesus.

**Lily** - Chastity, innocence and purity. A favored funeral flower of the Victorians. Joseph is often depicted holding a lily branch to indicate that his wife Mary was a virgin. In tradition, the first lily sprang forth from the repentant tears of Eve as she went forth from Paradise. The use of lilies at funerals symbolizes the restored innocence of the soul at death.

**Lion** - Symbolizes the power of God and guards the tomb against evil spirits. Like other guardians, the lion's watch is as eternal as the stone of which it is depicted. The lion also recalls the courage and determination of the souls, which they guard; they manifest the spirit of the departed.

**Marigold** – This flower enjoys a special association with Mexico's Day of the Dead; mostly because of its availability in that season. Marigolds not only decorate the graves in the form of crosses and arches, but also form trails to lead the souls of the dead to a home altar set with their favorite foods, photos, and other pleasantries hard to obtain in the afterlife.

**Mistletoe** - The marvelous ability of this parasite to sustain itself far above the ground lent to the Druidic belief that it was a sacred plant and an ingredient of immortality. The "golden bough" was used in animal sacrifices. The Norse God Balder lost his immortality when he was pierced by a mistletoe-tipped spear.

**Oak tree** - Hospitality, stability, strength, honor, eternity, endurance, liberty. It is believed to have been the tree from which Jesus Christ's cross was made. In smaller pioneer cemeteries, it is common to place children's graves near oak trees.

**Palm** - Spiritual victory, success, eternal peace, a symbol of Christ's victory of death as associated with Easter.

**Pine** - Intimations of immortality ooze from the very sap of the pine tree. The cone, for example, ensures the perpetuity of life's renewal. Pine boxes were used as coffins in the Wild West, however, simply because the wood was so plentiful.

**Rose** - Love, beauty, hope, unfailing love, associated with the Virgin Mary, the "rose without thorns." A red rose symbolizes martyrdom and a white rose symbolizes purity and virginity. Whether the rose is a bud, flower or somewhere in between indicates how old the person was at the time of death:

- Just a bud - normally a child 12 or under
- Partial bloom - normally a teenager
- Full bloom - normally in early/mid-twenties. The deceased died in the prime of life
- Rosebud, broken - life cut short, usually found with a young person's grave

**Sacred Heart of Jesus** - An image unique to Catholics. The Sacred Heart is shown containing wounds to which Christ points and it is surrounded by a crown of thorns. The heart represents the suffering of Jesus for our sins. Prayers to the Sacred Heart are said to be efficacious for the release of souls from Purgatory.

**Scroll** - A symbol of life and time. Both ends rolled up indicates a life that is unfolding like a scroll of uncertain length and the past and future hidden. Often held by a hand representing life being recorded by angels. Can also suggest honor and commemoration.

**Star of David** - Six-pointed star or Star of David, typically used as a symbol of Judaism. The star is actually made of two triangles. It signifies divine protection as epitomized by the alchemistic signs for fire and water, which are an upward and downward triangle. The star is a very ancient symbol, for Judaism, the Star of David came into widespread use at the beginning of the 20th century.

**Torch** - Until the church banned such things, most people were buried at night. Torches furnished the light which both allowed the gravediggers to see and the bearers to scare off evil spirits and nocturnal scavengers.

- Lit, the torch signifies life -- even eternal life. Extinguished, it stands for death. It can also stand for living memory and eternal life (e.g. an eternal flame).

**Wheat** - A symbol of rebirth or of a life fully lived.

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