

W. B. Yeats' 'The Second Coming'

Poetry

A Lecture Presented to The Fourth Stage

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► Introduction

- William Butler Yeats wrote “The Second Coming” in 1919, soon after the end of World War I, known at the time as “The Great War” because it was the biggest war yet fought and “The War to End All Wars” because it was so horrific that its participants dearly hoped it would be the last war.
- “The Second Coming,” of course, refers to the Christian prophecy in the Bible’s Book of Revelation that Jesus will return to reign over Earth in the end times. But Yeats had his own mystical view of the history and future end of the world, embodied in his image of the “gyres,” cone-shaped spirals that intersect so that each gyre’s narrowest point is contained inside the widest part of the other.

"The Second Coming" ➤

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.



The gyres represent different elemental forces in historical cycles or different strains in the development of an individual human psyche, each beginning in the purity of a concentrated point and dissipating/degenerating into chaos (or vice versa) -- and his poem describes an apocalypse very different from the Christian vision of the end of the world.

The first stanza of "The Second Coming" is a powerful description of apocalypse, opening with the indelible image of the falcon circling ever higher, in ever-widening spirals, so far that "The falcon cannot hear the falconer." The centrifugal impetus described by those circles in the air tends to chaos and disintegration -- "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" -- and more than chaos and disintegration, to war -- "The blood-dimmed tide" -- to fundamental doubt -- "The best lack all conviction" -- and to the rule of misguided evil -- "The worst / Are full of passionate intensity."



Surely some revelation is at hand; 
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?



The second section of the poem offers a glimpse into the nature of that next, new world: It is a sphinx — “a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi... / A shape with lion body and the head of a man” — therefore it is not only a myth combining elements of our known world in new and unknown ways, but also a fundamental mystery, and fundamentally alien — “A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.” It does not answer the questions posed by the outgoing domain — therefore the desert birds disturbed by its rising, representing the inhabitants of the existing world, the emblems of the old paradigm, are “indignant.” It poses its own new questions, and so Yeats must end his poem with the mystery, his question: “what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

It has been said that the essence of great poems is their mystery, and that is certainly true of “The Second Coming.” It is a mystery, it describes a mystery, it offers distinct and resonant images, but it also opens itself to infinite layers of interpretation.



Conclusion

Yeats prophesies in the poem the end of Christianity's dominance over human philosophy and the Western social order in the twentieth century. Clearly, then, he uses the second-coming motif as a reference to a new incarnation other than Christ's that will displace Christian civilization with something less beneficent and conducive to human progress. ➡

Like many turn-of-the-century artists, Yeats felt some ambivalence toward this apparent change in the human order. Ostensibly restricting the artistic imagination with its legalism and fixed moral code, Christianity also provided the metaphors of creator, creativity, freedom, and order that allowed the poet the sense of power to shape the world through words. In the aftermath of Christianity's reduction to mere theology or, worse, mere politics, the poet is forced to become simply one more observer, disarmed by social forces of his authority to address the issues of his times. ➡



THANK YOU 😊