

## A Spiritual Analysis of W.B. Yeats's *The Second Coming*

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### Abstract

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is one of the most prominent poets of English in the twentieth century and arguably the greatest poet of Ireland. Yeats, a Nobel Laureate was of the opinion that both art and politics were interlinked. From a very young age he connected with the national identity of Ireland. His relationship with the Irish National Theatre, the Irish Literary Society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Maud Gonne influenced his poems politically. The World War One (1914-1918) and the Easter Rising of 1916 had a profound impact on Yeats. Hence it was but normal for his poems to be a mouthpiece of these pent up emotions.

*The Second Coming* is a poem composed in the year 1919, just after the end of the First World War by William Butler Yeats. It was published in the anthology of poems *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921. The poem is in blank verse. Other than the two opening couplets, the poem has haphazard rhymes. The poem deals with the spiritual and moral crisis in the world after the devastating effect of the First World War.

**Keywords:** *The Second Coming*, spiritual, mysticism, occult, gyre, soul.

### Body

*The Second Coming* is based on the philosophical idea of Yeats that there exists a different system of universe; the solar as well as the lunar movements as per his own private belief. Yeats had a strong interest and belief in mysticism and the occult. As a result he developed a unique spiritual and philosophical system; the details of which he explained in his book, *A Vision* (1925). This added a unique flavour to his poetry in general.

In the words of Swami Vivekananda:

That one eternal religion is applied to different planes of existence, is applied to the opinions of various minds and various races. There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions, there is only the one. One infinite religion existed all

through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways. (Vivekananda, *My Master* 11)

This is what Spiritualism is. It is the belief in something higher than our own selves. It is the acceptance of something which is beyond human comprehension. It's a strong pillar on which we can depend and build our lives upon. This is the belief in which we find solace.

Owing to the tumultuous events of World War One and the Irish Revolution, Yeats expresses the widely regarded belief, that two thousand years after Christ's birth, he shall come again to the aid of mankind in general. The first part of the poem reveals the Spiritual pursuits of mankind. It also goes on to reveal the sinister state of mankind in general.

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, (Yeats, *The Second Coming* lines 1-4)

As the gyre turns rapidly and it goes up, its circumference increases. Hence the distance between the centre i.e. the soul and the ones in the periphery i.e. the physical body increases. The repetition of vowel sound /i/ in line 1 is an example of assonance.

In common usage, 'gyre' is a spiralling conical figure which rotates rapidly. Gyre is a recurrent symbol in the poetry of W.B. Yeats. He even wrote a poem entitled "The Gyres" published in his collection *The Tower* (1928). Yeats uses two conical spirals – gyres to state forth his complex spiritual theory regarding the universe. These gyres are interlocked i.e. the narrowest part of one spiral is within the widest part of the other. Its specific regions represent various historical periods. Witnessing the world after the First World War, Yeats perceives the rapidly turning gyres as an alternation between two historical cycles. The order and growth across the globe till 1914 suddenly transforms into chaos and decay post 1918.

This rapidly changing historical cycle increases the distance between the 'falcon' and the 'falconer'. The falcon frantically flying in the ever widening flight path has lost contact with the falconer. The metaphor 'falcon' represents us humans; whereas 'falconer'- a metaphor stands for Christ – the God. The world cannot hear the force which directs it. On a spiritual level, 'falcon' denotes the physical body and 'falconer' is a symbol of human soul or emotion.

Yeats also believed that the human soul, civilisation or a historical age moves from the smallest point of a conical spiral to the largest; and in the end moves along to the other spiral. It is similar to the evolution of a human life; from a new born to an adult to old age; concluding in death. Owing to the widening gaps between the gyres, the soul has lost control over the body. Man can no longer hear the voice of his own conscience.

The central spiritual ideal that makes man's life sustainable is lost. There is no compatibility between the intellectual and the emotional pursuits. There is a break up in man's spiritual life. The 'centre' i.e. the spiritual lever has lost control. Here a reference is perhaps being drawn to the change and fall of Igbo culture of Nigeria in *Things Fall Apart*; and Okonkwo resisting the new social, political and religious orders. (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*)

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. (Yeats, *The Second Coming*  
Lines 5-8)

There is no discipline anywhere and 'anarchy' everywhere in the world. Nothing can control what is being lost. No rule of law exists. The metaphor 'blood-dimmed tide' stands for the tide of uncontrolled violence. This intensifies the idea of anarchy across the human race. Here a reference is drawn to World War One and the Easter Rebellion of 1916. Irish involvement by the British in World War I (1914-1919) and the subsequent loss of life affected Yeats deeply. The Easter Rebellion of 1916 – the first significant Irish uprising by the Republicans to end British rule in Ireland, its brutal suppression and executions left a deep imprint on his mind.

'The ceremony of innocence' – a metaphor, signifies the first coming of Jesus as Christ the Lamb. (Blake, *The Lamb*) That arrival of Christ has become irrelevant. The spiritual innocence of life is lost. The human, ethical and social values have ceased to exist in man's life. Yeats gives us an example of assonance in line 6 with the repetition of vowel sound /e/.

The worthy people, the best of the lot have lost commitment towards the betterment of life. While the undeserving and unworthy people abounding with negativity make false commitments regarding things which they do not deserve. Science, democracy and order – the pillars of the civilised world are falling apart.

In the second part of the poem, the rising monstrous Sphinx symbolises the dark new age. Just as there always is light at the end of the tunnel; similarly amidst this dull and gloom atmosphere some divine intervention is eagerly awaited. Yeats's spiritual standpoint makes him believe in the hands of fate.

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 (Yeats, *The Second*)

*Coming* lines 9-13)

The word 'revelation' here stands for Apocalypse or disclosure of some sacred truth by God. During moments of human and divine interaction, fate reveals itself. Something is coming. 'Surely the Second Coming is at hand' is a hyperbole. Either God Himself will come or He will send a Messenger on His behalf at the earliest. There is a sense of historical inevitability; a tone which permeates all the poems of Yeats. 'The Second Coming!' in line 11 signifies the second birth of Christ; a biblical allusion. Jesus will be born again to cleanse this widespread anarchy. He shall settle this confusion and put the world in order.

Hardly had the assuring words of the second arrival of Jesus been spoken by the poet, when he visualises a huge image suddenly emerging out of the vast desert. This has been called 'Spiritus Mundi' by Yeats. It can be translated as the Spirit of the World. Repetition of the consonant sound /s/ in the stressed portion of line 13 is a usage of alliteration by the poet.

The 'Spiritus Mundi' carries two references. The initial reference is 'physical' to the image which Yeats saw in the British Museum, London. And also to the Great Sphinx at the pyramids of Giza which too has a man's head and a lion's body. The second reference is 'spiritual'; to the collective conscious. It has in it that something good, will come out of this grim situation. So, from this 'Spiritus Mundi' Yeats envisions the image of Sphinx.

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. (lines 14-17)

The frightening creature possessing the physical power of a lion and the brain of a human, with eyes bereft of pity and blank; moves forward. The word 'pitiless' is an image here, symbolising mindless and merciless violence of the civilisation. This is the death of the present civilisation and the birth of the new. Its movement symbolic of the crouching movement of a lion towards its prey makes the desert birds shocked and angry. They resent the monster's presence. These desert birds symbolize death. Once again the world i.e. the poet's vision is slowly engulfed in darkness. The repetition of consonant sound /n/ in the stressed part of line 18 is another example of alliteration. Yeats however feels assured that this nightmare is on its last leg.

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? (lines 18-22)

Two thousand years after the birth of Christ, Yeats visualises a ‘rocking cradle’ – image of the birth of Jesus. In line 20, the repetition of consonant sound /r/ in adjacent words is an example of consonance. He compares the passage of two thousand years to the single night’s sleep of an infant. The infant is woken up not by the rocking of its cradle rather because of terrible nightmares; which is perhaps symbolic of the present state of anarchy.

The metaphor ‘rough beast’ i.e. the monstrous Sphinx like being is slowly but steadily creeping towards Bethlehem, the same place where Christ was born for the first time. So, the time has come for Jesus to be born for the second time. This time however He shall not love and forgive; rather He has come to judge and destroy. It signals the birth of Christ the Tiger. (Blake, *The Tyger*)

However according to popular belief this can be interpreted as the return of the Christ to this mortal earth, as stated in the New Testament. The worst thing that we could have imagined has happened. But it is not the end of the world. After experiencing this awe-inspiring vision, the poet is certain that something good shall surely emerge out of this abysmal darkness.

## Conclusion

Yeats’s poetry is suffused with Irish themes and legends from Irish folklore. A rich sense of Irish culture is present in almost all his poems. Studying Theosophy at a young age and participating in a secret mystical society – Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn made his belief in the spiritual more profound. His entire spiritual philosophy can be represented by gyres. Yeats believed that all creatures and events must tread the path of these two intersecting conical spirals. Visualising the world standing at the threshold of some divine revelation the poet presents before us a symbol of the dark new era, an image of the second Christ (or anti-Christ).

A.N. Jeffares rightfully observes that, this is “probably Yeats’s most powerful poem”. (Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats: The Poems* 41) Its powerful narration, imagery, symbols make an abstract fear stand before us in flesh and blood. We not only perceive it but also relate to it.

*The Second Coming* is suffused with the spiritual and the unknown. Yeats’s inclination towards mysticism and the occult is evident in his usage of the conical gyres. He successfully uses them to explain the passage of time, change in historical cycles, the power of fate and the journey of the human soul. The conflict between the ancient and the modern world is beautifully represented in the poem. His vision, despite being unique, touches us all.

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