

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

**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.

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: a waste of desert sand;  
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  
Wind 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?

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### The Second Coming of the Antichrist

“The Second Coming” by W. B. Yeats, was written in 1919 following World War I and was to present the idea that he thought that the apocalypse as presented in the *Book of Revelation* from the *Bible* was about to begin. The poem does not mention the second coming of Christ but rather focuses on the coming of the antichrist, meaning Yeats could only see despair, hopelessness, and chaos in the world. These sentiments of Yeats and others are due to war damages, collapsing economies, and the coming of the Great Depression and the Irish civil war. The word choice, meter, persona, subject, and lack of mention of Christ all collectively contribute to reflecting Yeats’ sentiments in the poem.

Several lines in the poem support this mentality of despair and chaos. “Turning and turning in the widening gyre” refers to the worsening state of society with the collapse of democratic governments and economies. (1) The second line, “The falcon cannot hear the falconer” means that any sense of hierarchy and authority has been lost. The best people don’t have the conviction to combat the growing evil and the worst, the sinners, are full of passionate intensity meaning the world is filled with those who wish to do evil. (7-8) These lines emphasize the corruption that the world is falling into.

The selection of adjectives and nouns used in the poem carry a negative connotation reflecting the negative thoughts of the state of the world. Yeats uses words such as “blood-dimmed,” “anarchy,” “indignant,” “vexed,” and “nightmare” to describe or present a subject. The beast is described as “rough,” “slow moving,” “pitiless,” “blank,” and comes from a “waste.” When describing the state of the world in the first stanza, there is only mention of its despairing condition. Anarchy is rampant, the innocents are lost, hierarchy is ignored, and the worst people are filled with evil intentions. These events in the poem reflect events happening in the world when Yeats wrote the poem and are described negatively because the worldly events are negative.

The meter of the poem also contributes to the sense of chaos alongside word choice. The general number of syllables for the poem is 10, showing an iamb, with variations in lines 11 through 14. These lines are when the persona receives the vision and signifies the confusion and shock that it gives. The accented and unaccented syllables do not show any type of standard such as an iamb or trochee for the rest of the line, stanza, or poem. For example, the first line contains two instances of disyllabic words ending in “ing,” which puts the accent on the first syllable. They are separated by “and” which creates a dactyl. The word “widening” also creates a dactyl but is followed by a monosyllabic accented word and is preceded by a trochee. All this together forms its own type of flow but it deviates from the structure of any of the following lines. Adding to the disruption of the flow, line 11 has an exclamation forming the first half of the line following another break in a sentence for the second half of the line. The reason for this is that it contributes to the abrupt interruption of the vision which puts emphasis on the

shock and meaning of it, and adds to the poem's brokenness. These lines with varying syllable counts and accents emphasize the chaos in the world.

The persona of the poem is both confused and troubled because the author presents the world in a negative light through word choice and meter, which is a representation of the mindset of the time. The perception of the world is that it is in darkness presented in line 18: "The darkness drops again but now I know" He sees this darkness and realizes that some type of revelation is at hand and can only initially come to the conclusion that it is the Second Coming of Christ, signifying the end of the world. As he receives this vision, the line breaks after "Coming!" in line 11 and "sight;" in line 13 show a choppy and interrupted thought process. The poem begins to become smooth again when he realizes in line 18 that the beast is actually the antichrist. Even though he realizes that this is the antichrist, the persona is still left troubled at the significance in lines 21-22 "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" Likewise, Yeats sees the strife in the world around him and thinks that this must be the coming of the antichrist but is still left confused as to the significance of its coming.

The subject matter and its presentation are large factors adding to the feeling of hopelessness because it deals only with the negative. When referencing "The Second Coming," the meaning is usually referencing Christ from the *Bible*. In this poem, the persona says that he is receiving a vision of this Second Coming but the vision received changes the meaning of it. It is not immediately apparent that the subject of the poem is the coming of the antichrist and the reader is left wondering why Christ is coming in the form of a sphinx: "A shape with a lion body and the head of a man." (14) The meaning is

revealed in line 20: “were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.” The rocking cradle is symbolic of the cradle of Christ at the nativity: the only thing that could have disturbed Satan. In *Revelation*, Christ does not come amidst all of the pain and strife in the world but rather after it passes: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” (*The Holy Bible*, Rev. 21:1) The antichrist does come amidst the tragedies, as described in the first stanza of the poem.

Establishing that the beast was the antichrist, the context to which its appearance is called the “Second Coming” is made clear by passages from *Revelation*. In scripture, many are led to follow the beast, thinking it is Jesus Christ, because of its authority,

“And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority...and the whole world followed the beast with wonder. Men worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast...” (*Rev.* 13:2-4) In this excerpt from revelation, the dragon is Satan who has begun to reign on earth, and the beast is the antichrist, who, by the power of Satan, has been able to exercise dominion over many. The beast of the antichrist arises in the midst of the apocalypse in which events such as a third of the sea turning to blood like “the blood dimmed tide,” (5) a third of the stars, moon, and sun are destroyed as “darkness drops again,” (18) and “the ceremony of the innocence is lost” (6) as locust torture those with the seal of God on their forehead. (*Rev.* 8:6-9:5)

The beast is the subject of the second half of the poem and provides an explanation of the chaos presented in the first half. The focus of the poem is on this antichrist and the evil that is present in the world but does not mention the following coming of the Christ, which would usher in a new kingdom of heaven on earth. This is due to a reflection on what he saw in the world around him. The devastation and poverty left across the world has large parallels to the description presented in the *Book of*

*Revelation* as the apocalypse. It is hard to see hope and how Christ would be able to make the world better after it was recently devastated and when surrounded by violent tensions in his own country. The mention of “*Spiritus Mundi*” in line 12 refers to a pagan belief that means the spirit or soul of the world, which ties a secular belief to a Christian one, which is a parallel to Yeats’ religious beliefs. Yeats grew up Protestant but had strong ties to astrology and cultic beliefs. He could not relate to or believe in a Christ who brought peace and joy because, due to his surroundings, he could only relate to the possibility of an antichrist.

Yeats uses word choice, meter, persona, subject, and the lack of the mention of Christ in “*The Second Coming*” to express his sentiments of despair, hopelessness, and chaos from the events in the world surrounding him. World War I had left the world in a state of political and economic collapse and the Irish Republican Army was violent, involved in such events as the Easter 1916 post office rising. This poem was written only a few years after Yeats proposed for a fourth time to his love interest Maud Gonne and was denied. This and his marriage soon after to Georgie Hyde-Lees left him bitter. This bitterness and despair from these love relationships, and his hopelessness for a true relationship could be possible themes in this poem. The beast is a possible metaphor of his love life, which, in a state of confusion, was trying to be born again.

Works Cited:

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