

W.B. Yeats's The Second Coming: A Bird's-Eye View

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Abstract

The widespread murder and bloodshed in Ireland following the Easter Rebellion of 1916, the Irish civil war, the First world war and the various other events of violence and disintegration in Europe which charged William Butler Yeats with gloomy thought and ominous nightmare led him to produce the poem. . Graham (1961) observes that "Like any great poet, Yeats offers many satisfactions, but there seem to me good grounds for rating the simple direct centrality of much of his work as the most lasting in the history of English poetry." The poem The Second Coming is an instance of such everlasting. This present is an attempt to discuss the occasion, observation and significance of the poem The Second Coming.

Keywords: *Jesus Christ, Rough beast, Spiritus Mundi, anti-Christ etc.*

1. Introduction

William Butler Yeats was a great metaphysical and apocalyptic poet of 20th century literature. He was Irish and born in the year 1865, 13th June at County Dublin Ireland and died 28th January 1939. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2023 for his outstanding work in literature. According to Sanders (2004), "Yeats always professed to see the world as in a state of perpetual flux. He also suggested that poets should share that flux by recognizing that poetic language was shaped and adapted by the shifting structures of culture and society." Starting as a Romantic stylist under the influence of Spenser, Shelley, Rossetti and the aesthetic moment of the late 19th century W B Yeats gradually changed his style of poetry until it took a hard and tight colloquial manner. MacNeice (1941) has pointed out that "Yeats's fondness for indefinite pronouns, parentheses, rhetorical questions, and self-quotations are excellent and remarkable" Yeats identified himself with the Irish Nationalist Movement but was deeply affected by the bloodshed and disintegration which he encountered in Ireland in particular and in Europe in general, during and after the First World War.

1.2. Occasion of the poem *The Second Coming*

His poem *The Second Coming* is taken from a volume of 15 poems published in 1921. The central theme of the poem is a prophecy about the coming of a new destructive God and the reverence of Christian values. The widespread murder and bloodshed in Ireland following the Easter Rebellion of 1916, the Irish Civil War, the first world war and the various other events of violence and disintegration in Europe which charged W.B. Yeats with gloomy thought and ominous night mares led him to produce the poem *Second Coming*. Collins (1996) stated that the poem is vastly applicable with the modern period.

“Yeats in *The Second Coming* saw
anarchy rising in bloody violence
to inaugurate a new and bestial age”

1.3. About the poem *The Second Coming*

The poem *The Second Coming* begins with a view of history in its cyclical process. There is a failure of obedience and order in the widening ‘gyre’ innocence and faiths are lost and the passions only rage. The ‘gyre’ for Yeats stands for the cyclical movement of history. The falcon, a symbol for man, no longer responds to the call of the falconers, i.e. God. This observation is followed by a compressed and terrifying picture of the world’s situations as Yeats saw in 1919 innocence had not only come to discount, it was nearly lost in the society where the best variety of man even wanted conviction while the worst are found at the height of wildness and fanatic frenzy. It is the state of utter confusion and disorder and the role of evil which is suggestive of the Rebellion of Jesus Christ, the savior of humanity:

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

But the blessing of the poet with regard to the reappearance of God in the form of Christ turns out to be horribly ironic when he seems to visualize in the light of nightmare the slouching arrival of a repulsive and frightening monster moving towards Bethlehem to reign over the Christian civilization. The poet finally holds forth the reality of the menacing birth of the formidable force of evil and anti civilization antichrist. The poem ends on a pessimistic note with prophetic interrogation as to the plight of humanity under the new regime of the rough beast.

1.4. Observation

Technically speaking, the measured verses, the repeated phrases, the simple and terribly effective images and symbols convey the mode of the poet with his concentrated and shattering vision. The poem is charged with intensity and dramatic tension. The symbolisms of W B Yeats' culminate in the projection of

“A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun”

The poem produced the overwhelming effect of horror and terror as it concludes with an image of ‘rough beast’ slouching towards Bethlehem. The language in it testifies to the development of the romantic poet with escapist tendency to a very mature self conscious, contemplation, poet craftsman. Who is in control over a chain of visual images and transparent symbols such as ‘widening gyre’ ‘falcon and falconer’ ‘tide’ and so on. The expression of *Spiritus Mundi* represents a metaphorical representation of humanity’s collective fears.

1.5. Significance of the Title

The poem *The Second Coming* related to the Easter rising in Ireland, the fatal fight between the British forces and the Irish patriots in a prophetic masterpiece of W. B. Yeats, which demands a special reference to chapter 13, the book of St. Mark of the Bible. It is said that a time will come when anarchy, chaos will present on the earth, brothers will betray the brother to death, and the father, the son and the children will rise up against their parents to drive them to death. Under such a state of violence and hate and destruction Jesus will reappear usher in a new era of peace and happiness for mankind. In Bhagwat Gita (Chapter 4 verse 7-8) Lord Krishna we hear to declaring to Arjuna that

“Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir-bhavati bhārata, abhyutthānam-adharmasya
tadātmānam sṛjāmyaham ! Paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām, dharmā-
samsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yugē yugē!”

He will reappear on earth when it will be torn in conflict and engulfed in waves of violence, murder, anarchy and so on. In other words the Second Coming means the reappearance or revelation of Jesus Christ. In this milieu of the modern world of chaos, bloodshed and anarchy that brings to the poet mind the inevitable reflection of the second coming of God in the form of Jesus Christ. But the vision turns out to be ironical and gloomy when he seems to identify the birth of a Sphinx-like beast and it marches to Bethlehem to take charge of the world and rule

over it. The Second Coming signifies to the poet as to the ironical and frightful emergence of a monster representing anti-Christ and anti-civilization that will bring about annihilation of all achieved by mankind so far.

2. Conclusion

The present poem is an admirable illustration of the free verse set with iambic meter with trochaic variation. What is more it carries a melody on the strength of the liquid sounds such l, m, n. Greening (2005) had mentioned "the craftsmanship of Yeats' verse that is so original and enduring." The Christian beliefs in the resettlement of divine order by the second coming of Christ and concept of the Millennium work at the base of the thought of the poet. The rough beast slouches towards Bethlehem which indicates the re-birth of the order and spiritual regeneration of the human world. Yeats' vision catches the glimpse of the future which accounts for the uniqueness of the poem. The scenario and images of anarchy violence and disintegration of the contemporary world, particularly Europe inevitably brings to the poet's mind. The reflection of the revelation of God in the form of Jesus Christ, he feels sure the second coming of the Savior of humanity is in the offing. He feels inspired and concludes that the glory of the Divine Father will spread over all things of chaos and consequently there will be regeneration, rejuvenation and reconstruction in the world under the sobering Radiation.

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