

The Second Coming

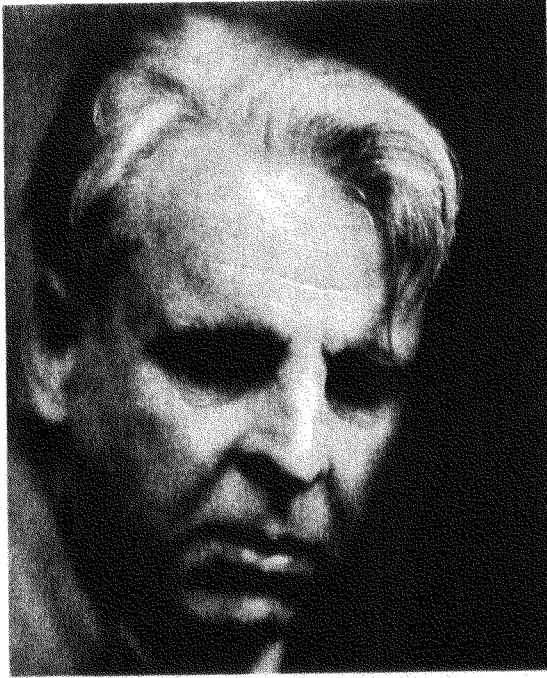
William Butler Yeats was arguably the most accomplished, most widely esteemed twentieth-century poet who wrote in English. His eminence derived in particular from his tone, which combined the grandiose with the everyday. And within Yeats's opus, "The Second Coming" is perhaps his most masterful, highly regarded poem. An epitome of Yeats's tone throughout his writings, "The Second Coming" takes as its theme a cataclysm with similarities to end of the world scenarios that have been sketched by several religions. Yet the poem never pinpoints which mythic future is being realized; it never even divulges whether the cataclysm is for the best or for the worst. Further, despite a wildly abstract and inherently preachy subject matter, Yeats's language is highly accessible—as familiar to a casual reader as to a religious-minded scholar.

W. B. Yeats

1921

Due in part to its combination of high-mindedness and familiarity, "The Second Coming" has seemed to powerfully bring timeless symbols and high fears into the imaginations of inhabitants of the modern world. While the poem is frequently linked to Russian and Irish political-historical tumult, it is sometimes read as a gasp, before the fact, at the horrors of World War II. Still, the poem's dominant meaning is the ambiguous one—as a self-declared vision, it could have been influenced by a variety of cataclysmic events, past or pending. Far from envisioning postindustrial progress as the deliverer of a world beyond God, "The Second Coming" sees the twentieth century as the precise mo-





William Butler Yeats

ment when the world will be thoroughly undone. Indeed, since its publication in 1921, the poem has become something of an anthem for those who detect imminent demise in the world, regardless of whether they view such an ending as cause for hope or for despair.

Author Biography

William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1865. By the time of his death more than seven decades later, in 1939, he had cofounded an Irish literary movement, served as a senator to the Irish Free State, and achieved enormous renown as a poet, earning the Nobel Prize for poetry in 1923. Often hailed as the twentieth century's greatest poet in the English language, Yeats was also an astoundingly well-rounded man. In his troubled love life, his decades-long quest for a satisfactory spirituality, his love of Ireland, and his activity in political and literary circles of his day, he struggled greatly and recorded his struggles in autobiographical writing—both prose and poetry—that is as dramatic as it is often self-deprecating. Though he began adulthood with the intention of following in his father's path to become a painter, he soon

discovered a fierce intention to live—not merely write—as a poet. He subsequently filled four decades with crafting consistently strong, perpetually improving poetry, all the while mining his personal life for its poetic potential. His was not a careless craft; he labored intensely over his writing, revising constantly. But his hearty will managed his task; his verse is widely adored, frequently quoted, and esteemed even by his critics.

Yeats was educated both in London and Dublin. And it was in London that he formed his first close alliances both with spiritual societies (in particular Theosophical and of the Order of the Golden Dawn) and with Irish nationalism. He then founded the Dublin Hermetic Society (1885) and joined the London Lodge of Theosophists (1887). Following his 1885 acquaintance with Irish nationalist John O'Leary, he made of Ireland an inspiring literary subject and committed himself to the cause of strengthening Irish national culture. In 1889, he devoted himself to an Irish political activist named Maud Gonne, a beautiful, intense woman who captured the young poet's heart, becoming his lifelong muse. Although the two courted for nearly two decades, she eventually refused him, but not before convincing him that he needed more than fantasy and dream in his life—that to win her, he also needed to conduct himself actively in the political events of his day. Yeats applied his political dedication to the Irish Literary Renaissance that would both form foundations for future national art and renew Irish cultural traditions. In this quest, he helped establish what became the Abbey Theatre, in Dublin, and supplied the theater with a series of plays, many of which drew on Celtic traditions and Irish fairy tales. In 1902, he became president of the Irish National Theatre Society.

While Yeats's romantic, political, and spiritual leanings pulled him in various directions, he made these conflicts the seed of his craft. He married his activity in the Irish theater with his love for Gonne in a patriotic play he wrote for production there, in which she played the lead role as a personification of Ireland. As time progressed, many of his hopes were quashed—Maud Gonne refused him, marrying another man. His theater drew criticism from both nationalists, who found the theatrical fare to be insufficiently nationalistic, and extranationalists, who found the productions too simplistically and naively Irish. And Irish politics followed a course of strife and internecine struggle. Following his disillusionment with Gonne, Yeats's alliances returned most powerfully to his attempts

to decode the mystical nature of the world. In this quest, he was much assisted by his wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees, whom he married late in his life, in 1917. She professed to be able to channel the thoughts of members of a spirit world who wished to provide Yeats with metaphors for his poetry. The contents of hours of her “automatic writing” were collected by Yeats and published by him under the title *A Vision*. There, he set forth images such as that of the gyre, which he held to be a metaphor for the nature of cyclic history. In his later work, a Yeats much sobered by disappointment laced his poems with his spiritual discoveries, as well as with details of the home he and his wife made out of a restored castle. He actively wrote and revised poetry, plays, and memoirs until his death.

Poem Text

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere 5
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. 10
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, 15
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, 20
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Poem Summary

Lines 1 to 4:

The first line of “The Second Coming” presents the metaphor of a spinning gyre. Gyres, generally, are circular or spiral forms—like vortexes or tornadoes. Gyres are spindles or bobbins made of two cones that meet internally. The smallest point of each cone enters the broad base of the

Media Adaptations



- An audiocassette of the unabridged edition of W. B. Yeats’s *Selected Poems*, narrated by William Sutherland, was released by Blackstone Audio Books in February, 1999.
- An audiocassette titled *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats* includes performances and narration by Stephanie Beacham, Gabriel Byrne, Minnie Driver, and Roger Rees. It is available from Dove Books Audio.

other, so that when the end of the thread is tugged, it will alternately unwrap from each direction. Everyday gyres are tools used to allow the consistent feeding of thread into a sewing apparatus.

But Yeats’s gyre is vast enough to contain a falcon and a falconer—it is a gyre with the dimensions of the world. What is more, its cycle is widening so greatly that the falconer, who has trained his bird to return, is now unable to summon the bird, which cannot hear the cry to return home. Again, the falcon and falconer are metaphors—for encroaching distance and disorder—and so far “The Second Coming” is an evasive and abstract poem. Then, the poem announces, baldly, what is happening: “Things fall apart.” The fact that centers of order, control, and sense (which operate like the falconer’s cry to the falcon), no longer function, but lose hold, signals an ominous message of doom. That the disintegration of things at a vast scale should be accompanied by a release of anarchy is, then, unsurprising. What is unexpected is that anarchy is identified as “mere.” Is the anarchy no real threat? Is there something far worse than anarchy whose presence dwarfs social chaos? While these questions are unresolved, the qualification of anarchy as “mere” dampens the doom of the poem, breaking up its message into something more complex than, say, familiar urgent announcements, printed on placards, that warn “The end is near.”

Lines 5 to 8:

In these lines, the poem delivers three amplifications of what it means for things to fall apart. A tide red with blood is released and “loosed” over everything, suggesting massive violent deaths, as in a war. Not merely water, this tide drowns bodies as well as innocence itself—it washes away purity. In its wake, wise, good people are reduced to self-doubt and uncertainty, while the worst of people become passionate and, presumably, powerful.

Lines 9 to 13:

The poem’s narrator now makes some guesses about what, exactly, is happening. He first surmises that “some revelation” is here. A revelation is defined as something revealed, but it is a word packed with suggestiveness, because mystical visions of the divine plan for humanity, as seen and reported by people, have traditionally been called revelations. In particular, the Christian God’s plan for the end of the world—as reported by St. John of Patmos—is featured in the last book of the Bible, titled “Revelation.” When the narrator then supposes that the “Second Coming” is here, he seems to indicate even more strongly that he witnesses an end of the world like the one described in the book of Revelation. (That scenario tells of the return of Christ to the world, his judgement of all worldly beings, and his foundation of another order, in which the just are saved and brought to join God, while the unjust are horrifically destroyed.) But the narrator is then prompted into a vision of his own. His sight becomes “troubled” by an Aimage out of “*Spiritus Mundi*”—a Latin term that means “the spirit of the world.”

Yeats and many of his contemporaries wondered about the existence of a consciousness that was not exactly a god, but that was a repository and source for the myths and imaginations of everyone in the world. Like a storehouse of symbols, “*Spiritus Mundi*” was seen as a parallel, dreamworld accessible to everyone alive. It was not considered to be a realm for Christians only, so the fact that the narrator’s vision is a projection from “*Spiritus Mundi*” means that its audience will be broader than that of the book of Revelation, and that the vision will be more widely relevant and more universally, mystically binding even than a vision of the second coming of Christ. By announcing his role as visionary, the narrator places himself in the tradition of storytellers who reveal superhuman understandings of fate.

Lines 14 to 17:

In the narrator’s vision, an Egyptian sphinx (a mythic creature that is half man, half lion) stirs in the middle of a desert, while its motion startles nearby birds into angry flight. The personality of this creature is sinister—it is without pity, and its stare is “blank.” Certainly, this vision evokes the enormous, ancient statue of a sphinx at Giza, near Cairo, Egypt. The presence of a sphinx suggests that the narrator’s ethereal vision comes from a concrete place even more ancient than Christianity, and more enormous than the Western world.

Lines 18 to 22:

Although the narrator has described a frightening and menacing creature, it is not until the end of the vision that darkness returns. But from the vision’s insight, he has learned something: a rocking cradle (signifying Christ) has caused two thousand years of sleep, which is now at the point of nightmare. At this era’s end, everything will change, awakening a “rough beast” who, apparently due at precisely this moment, is about to be born in Bethlehem. Since this town was also the birthplace of Christ, we are again reminded of the Second Coming of Christ prophesied in the Bible’s book of Revelation. But as the poetic vision was of a sun beast—the sphinx—we, along with the narrator, remain unsure what kind of creature is arriving. What is clear is that something is coming, that it is demanded by the times, that its arrival will change everything, and that it will appear amid disorder and destruction. About to be born is an incarnation of ruin.

Themes

Apocalypse

Although the term apocalypse is often used to mean disaster, its Greek root signifies revelation. The last book of the Christian Bible, sometimes called the Apocalypse, or Revelation, is so named because it reveals St. John of Patmos’s vision of the end of the world as we know it. That his vision is of enormous upheaval—of a world shaken by storm and attacked by locusts before the righteous are saved and the sinners destroyed—is part of the reason the word apocalypse has come to be synonymous with catastrophe. But in that book, the ultimate spirit of Judgement Day is as hopeful as it is furious: it is a vision of final holy justice. Be-

lievers in the fate it details could console themselves with the tale of an eventual day of reckoning. Whatever injustices took place in their lifetimes, they could know that, in the end, all would be put right.

Like the last book of the Christian Bible, and partially in reference to that narrative, Yeats's "The Second Coming" is also an apocalypse, in both senses of the word. The idea that the year 2,000 will conclude a divine cycle of history links such an ending to the birth of Christ at year zero; meanwhile, the "rough beast" that Yeats imagines is about to be born is moving toward Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ. In these ways, "The Second Coming" evokes the Bible's book of Revelation. The remainder of the poem's imagery, however, points to a mythic figure more ancient than Christ—the Egyptian sphinx, and the portents of world change are not the same as those in Revelation. This apocalypse, therefore, is unique to Yeats's vision. That it is a form of apocalypse is, nonetheless, unambiguous, first because its central episode is a divine vision that comes from beyond history to trouble the sight of the narrator, and also because the vision is of disaster. The question begged by the poem concerning the poet's vision is whether the change brought by the "rough beast" is a good one. Is this a tale of the overthrow of a good order or a bad one? Is the drowned innocence true, or is it the relic of a world that needed to be cleansed, however violently? While the poem's tone is ominous and its figures are frightening, the fact that it is an apocalypse—and is, therefore, a type of narrative that often describes righteous, final violence—makes the poem's terms fundamentally uncertain. The poet's vision asserts that what counts as dark, or innocent, and who is regarded as the best, or the worst, is about to change—and may even be reversed. He envisions a heavy beast that will turn upside down not just the world, but its values as well.

Order and Disorder

The main theme of "The Second Coming" is of a flood of disorder that drowns existing world order. One central image that conveys this theme is the falcon, a bird that flies in ever-widening circles away from its trainer, but that is meant to return when called back. In "The Second Coming," the bird can no longer hear the falconer's cry. Taken as a metaphor for the general disorder the poem describes, the bird loosed from its return suggests a slackening of communication and a widen-

Topics for Further Study

- Explain how the feeling of "The Second Coming" is established with its sounds. What are the effects of alliteration (as in "darkness drops"), word repetition ("turning," "loosed," "surely") and assonance (as in "gaze blank")? Read the poem aloud, then listen closely as someone else reads it aloud. How is the meaning of the words echoed or contradicted by the rhythm of the poem?
- Compare Yeats's vision of revolution to political revolutions of the twentieth century. Does this spiritual, symbolic rendition of cataclysmic change have bearing on historical shifts?
- Reflect on how the world would look if its order were thoroughly shaken. What changes would need to occur if it were to become a world turned upside down or brought to an entirely new state? Compare your vision of upheaval to those of a religion with which you are familiar.

ing of distance between he who controls and he who is controlled, signifying the undoing of all.

The initial image in the poem, that of the gyre (pronounced with a hard "g"), can be read as the geometry of the falcon's cyclic flight. However, readers familiar with other of Yeats's poems and, particularly, with his cosmogony (as put forth in *A Vision*), will recognize the gyre as the hourglass shape that Yeats considers as representative of all life. From the double cone of the gyre, thread spins from just one place at any given moment, but that place always contains within it an opposite influence (just as the gyre-shaped bobbin is composed of two interpenetrating cones, with the tip of one reaching to the broad base of the other cone). For Yeats, this dynamic geometry is the shape of history, which he sees as moving in two-thousand-year increments between one extreme, where history will favor utter personal individuality (and incarnation), and another, where history will endorse interpersonal unity (and disincarna-

tion). Extending this cycle to provide understandings of human personality, Yeats makes his gyre into a symbol for the workings of all of life, which rotates from one extreme to the other, but which always contains the opposite extreme within whichever one is manifest. This cyclic view of history differs from one, such as that of Christianity, that views time as linear—moving to a unique future from a particular point in the past; in this sense alone, Yeats’s vision of the end of the world differs from a Christian view. During the early twentieth century, the poet-visionary saw total disorder trampling order. But this has happened before, and it will happen again. Indeed, since Yeats’s account of history and the alternation between opposite kinds of civilization considers this process to be inevitable—the result of the hidden cycle coming forth to balance the cycle in which it was suppressed—witnessing the “blood-dimmed tide” of disorder may even be done dispassionately.

Style

At first, “The Second Coming” sounds and looks like an early example of free verse, which is poetry unorganized by any strict pattern of rhyme or rhythm. Yeats was, however, no proponent of free verse, which he considered “too personal and original” for him; “I must choose a traditional stanza,” he decided (as noted in Tindall’s *William Butler Yeats*). Just so, on closer inspection, “The Second Coming” is like strictly rhymed and metered verse that is being actively troubled and undone by its own content. The style of the poem supports and echoes its topic. It is not so much free verse as verse that is being forced into a more chaotic form, and, just as in the poem, “the center cannot hold.” The anchoring meter of the poem is iambic pentameter, which consists of lines with five feet, each of which contains two syllables, first an unaccented one, and then an accented syllable (the effect is ta-TA, like in the word “convey”). But the poem contains few lines where iambic pentameter is solid and clear, like it is in “The falcon cannot hear the falconer,” and “The darkness drops again but now I know.” Such solid sound patterns exist in the poem, but they are surrounded by exceptions. The poem opens, for example, with a line of only four strong stresses; and in the middle and last lines of that first stanza, the lines: “The ceremony of innocence is drowned,” and “Are full of passionate intensity” foreshorten the rhythm other lines have established.

The effect of these inconsistencies echoes the poem’s theme of order and center lost, but this effect is all the stronger for the presence of a metrical example of the order that is on its way out. Similarly, the rhymes in “The Second Coming” are slight, when remarkable at all, and are eventually lost. While the first two, and second two lines of the first stanza set up a light *aabb* rhyme pattern, the rhyme is of the end consonants only, rather than of the vowels and end consonants (like in lake and rake). Even this flavor of rhyme, which is called half-rhyme, then dissolves by the end of the stanza. Given this diminishment, it is surprising to see the second stanza begin with two virtually identical lines that begin and conclude with identical words, “Surely,” and “is at hand” (although the repetition does point to the significance of the event). But again, this tight repetition—which we have also seen with the “is loosed” of the first stanza—does not remain. In Yeats’s day, many poets had made the abandonment of metric and rhyme conventions a part of their poetry for the new century. In every era, poets have composed deeply awkward phrases in an effort to make their verse conform to such conventions. Yeats, however, was a perfectionist and an able user of conventional forms, who was capable of composing even and rhymed metrical lines, such as these in “The Spur” (1938):

You think it terrible that lust and rage
Should dance attention upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young;
What else have I to spur me into song?

We can take seriously, then, his decision in “The Second Coming” to swing his verse in and out of such patterns, and we can also judge his word repetitions as significant—they do not appear for lack of the poet’s vocabulary. The emphasis of the sound and rhythm of this poem redouble its identification of destined disorder.

Historical Context

The narrator of “The Second Coming” seems to speak from a place outside of time. Despite the mention of “twenty centuries,” which, in the context of a poem about the Second Coming, indicates the years between 1900 and 2000 C.E., the poem’s revelations seem to be so broad that they could arise from a poet of any time or culture. Nevertheless, in his heavily symbolic and mystical poetic style, in his adoption of an apparently ancient mythology, and in his imagination of worldly revolution, Yeats

Compare & Contrast

- **Early 1900s:** Having digested industrialism and an increasingly scientific and rational worldview, many Europeans and Americans seek a spiritual order even more embracing than Christianity and interpret the progress and revolution of their times as signs of that order.

1999: While the impending turn of the millennium has inspired many to postulate new spiritual orders culled from ancient mythology, contemporary apprehension of the impact of the year 2000 C.E. centers most popularly on the anticipated threat of a computer virus—the Y2K bug—which is sometimes expected to bring about cataclysm through machine failure.

- **1100s:** In the Anglo-Norman conquest, England's King Henry II declares himself overlord of Ireland, crediting this privilege to a letter to him from Pope Hadrian IV that authorized efforts to bring the Irish church more closely in line with Roman standards, and initiating centuries of British domination of Ireland. Through the late Middle Ages, however, British rule is only effectively established in Dublin and its immediate surroundings.

1840s: In southern Ireland, several years of a failed potato crop lead to crushing famine. Between 1841 and 1851, the Irish population shrinks from 8.2 to 6.6 million, due to disease, starvation, and emigration (especially to the United States). The next generation of rural Irish compare that devastation, as well as their own merely modest success, with the industrialization and prosperity in both England and the northern Irish counties. By the time an agricultural depression hits, during the 1870s, discontent is widespread. It is fortified and put to spir-

ited purpose by Charles Stewart Parnell, an Irish patriot and founder of a vigorous movement for Irish Home Rule.

1914: The successes and strategies of Parnell and his successor, John Redmond, force the British to enact a Home Rule Bill. In the face of World War I, however, it is suspended. Northern Protestants have vowed to resist home rule by force, and Ireland is on the verge of civil war. Frustration over the postponement of home rule eventually leads to the Easter Uprising of 1916.

1921: Having refused Britain's 1920 Government of Ireland Act, representatives of a revolutionary Irish parliament (established after the 1916 uprising) negotiate a treaty making the Irish Free State a self-governing dominion within the British Commonwealth of Nations.

1948: Final constitutional ties between Ireland and Britain are cut, as Ireland becomes a republic outside the British commonwealth. Twenty of Ireland's thirty-two counties declare independence as the Republic of Ireland; the remaining six counties become Northern Ireland, a region with a Protestant minority that is still ruled by England.

1999: The continent of Ireland remains a site of strife between Protestants and Catholics, the North and the South, and proponents and opponents of British-Irish allegiances. Since the late 1960s, both Catholic and Protestant paramilitary organizations have engaged in terrorist activities promoting their own, particular views. Although a cease-fire is negotiated in 1994 and voters in Northern Ireland overwhelmingly back a peace plan in May of 1998, the country has yet to reach agreement.

is preoccupied with his own sphere of history and culture in "The Second Coming."

Literary Influences

As widely regarded as is Yeats's poetic style, it exemplifies no one poetic tradition. His formal

schooling in poetry was not extensive, consisting mostly in learning the English Romantic tradition that celebrated, usually in the form of lyric poetry, the bond between man and nature. In any case, Yeats was not a very capable student; his teachers

remembered him for his bad spelling, and he failed to make high enough marks to allow him to study at Trinity College. Yeats made up for this lack of formal training with avid attention to the various kinds of writing that most moved him—including the Romantic poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, the symbolically rich and mystical poetry of William Blake, and Eastern religious texts such as the Upanishads (which he helped translate into English). But while high-minded and literary influences dominated his early work, Yeats balanced his learning with the sensibilities of more common perspectives. In particular, Yeats was interested in forming an altogether new kind of literature that was an outgrowth of Ireland. Since much of Irish literary history had been lost or suppressed during the long period of Ireland's domination by England and English culture, much of the Irish tradition available to Yeats was oral history and folktale. Also balancing his writing toward the readily accessible was Yeats's association with Ezra Pound, an American Imagist and Modernist poet who worked for several months as Yeats's secretary and pressed him, with some success, to temper abstract symbols with common speech and modern concerns. Over the span of his career, then, Yeats was touched by most of the poetic movements of his day; that his poetry—singing in a voice as individual as it is developed—now ill fits any one of those traditions is due to Yeats's wide interest as well as his final skepticism in appropriating traditions wholesale. Instead, he chose what he liked from a variety of sources, blending each influence into a style of his own.

Spiritual Influences

In turn-of-the-century England and Ireland, Christianity still held much power, in terms of being a moral code that people believed would bring about a better world. Gaining much sway alongside it, however, were the often competing views of the world set forth by scientific and rationalist thinkers, who yearned to break with religious tradition, and political thinkers, who wished to remove any semblance of divine purpose to the social order. Under these competing demands, many, like Yeats, chose to turn their backs on both traditional Christianity and more contemporary theories. They chose, instead, to discover and explore types of spirituality that were supposedly more ancient and powerful than Christianity. A number of schools of spiritual study arose, and Yeats was active in several of them. Typically, though, he allied himself wholly with none of them, preferring, fi-

nally, to found his own set of spiritual theories. One movement that attracted Yeats was Theosophy, a school of thought founded by a Russian woman known as Madame Blavatsky that claimed to unite science, religion, and philosophy. Citing a fundamental similarity between all religions, she asserted that enlightened individuals had special powers of telepathy, that all souls belonged to an enormous collection called the "Universal Oversoul," and that matters of history and fate are governed by patterns of flux and reflux detectable by Theosophical sages. Yeats also studied with an organization called the Order of the Golden Dawn, which had roots in other secret, magical orders, including Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry. Believers in clairvoyance and visions, members of this clandestine sect invoked spirits, meditated on the rose (which Yeats called the "Eternal Rose of Beauty and Peace"), and tried to induce mystical visions. In 1892, Yeats wrote in a letter that "The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write." While Yeats's alliance with these and other mystical groups was never total, it was earnest and serious. According to Ellmann, Yeats used his mystical practices to create a path to self-transformation and the source of poetic inspiration, claiming consistently that a hidden order was the engine of and key to the world we perceive.

Political Influences

Yeats witnessed several political insurrections, including World War I, the Russian revolutions, and the rise of fascism. More important, he observed and participated in Ireland's lengthy revolt against English rule and its quest for an Irish Free State. Indeed, he was appointed one of the first senators of the Irish Free State, serving in that capacity for six years. Next to occultism, Yeats's most fervent interest was Irish nationalism. This, too, was a commanding presence during his day. In the late-nineteenth century, the Irish Republican Brotherhood had become active in bombing English railways; the great Irish leader Charles Stewart Parnell had pressured Parliament to introduce a Home Rule Bill for Ireland; and nationalists of various stripes argued about their differing visions. Committed to Ireland's cultural autonomy and its self-identification as a land distinct from England, Yeats was also wary of the excesses of nationalism and patriotism, including terrorism. While he actively promoted the foundation of a national theater, his productions promoted cultural riches over political propaganda: he wished for a balanced national

strength, not a reduction of all narrative and drama to commentary about politics. Much of his political activism was inspired by his goal of impressing and allying himself with Maud Gonne, a revolutionary who was sometimes called the Irish Joan of Arc for her nationalist fury. Like his mystical interests, Yeats's political interests found their place in his writing, particularly his plays. Having founded a National Literary Society in Dublin, whose purpose was to publicize both traditional and contemporary Irish lore and literature, he went on to establish the Irish dramatic movement and the national theater later called the Abbey. Among the first productions there was Yeats's play "Cathleen Ni Houlihan," in which Maud Gonne played the lead role as a woman representative of the Irish nation.

Critical Overview

Since its publication in 1921, "The Second Coming" has been hailed by critics as an accomplished poem and embraced by readers, making it Yeats's most popular and central work. That it is a powerful, mysterious, and beautifully crafted poem has never been challenged. There is, however, extensive and often unnoticed controversy concerning the meaning of the poem.

Poet and critic Yvor Winters, writing in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, believes that the ideas of the poem are "perfectly clear" and indicate a promising world revolution in the wake of the "rough beast": "Yeats's attitude toward the beast is different from ours; we may find the beast terrifying, but Yeats finds him satisfying—he is Yeats's judgement upon all that we regard as civilized. Yeats approves of this kind of brutality."

In his *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, A. Norman Jeffares suggests that "The falcon represents man, represents civilisation, becoming out of touch with Christ, whose birth was the revelation which marked the beginning of the two thousand years of Christianity." However, for Richard Ellmann, as noted in *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, the source of the poem and its meaning lie in the events of the Russian Revolution and its promise to wrest power from the aristocracy—a promise that to Yeats was a threat, since he favored rule by the elite and feared the mob or mass rule he associated with popular government, including democracy.

Two other critics, Donald Davie and Harold Bloom, have suggested that tying the poem to Christian apocalypse is not as automatic a necessity as the poem itself suggests. Davie remarks that the Christian apocalypse features not a second but a first coming; in *Yeats*, Bloom refers to early drafts of the poem, in which Yeats used the phrase "second birth" instead of "second coming," to suggest that Yeats's word switch was an attempt to tie the poem to a portentous religious prophecy that is, however, at odds with the rest of the poem. Bloom insists that the poem is about the second birth not of Christ, but of the sphinx, and that Yeats is above all attempting to characterize leftist political movements in Ireland as well as in Russia as disastrous to the ceremony and conviction of the ruling classes.

That a relatively brief poem would lend itself to such a variety of interpretations, and that those interpretations are sometimes mutually exclusive, is indeed one of the poem's most remarkable characteristics. Packed with warning and fierce language, the poem is at the same time highly ambiguous.

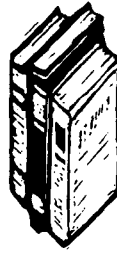
Criticism

Michael Lake

Michael Lake, a published poet who holds a M.A. in English from Eastern Illinois University, currently teaches English at a Denver area community college. In the following essay, Lake dismisses several standard interpretations of Yeats's "The Second Coming" and instead, after analyzing the poet's metaphysical writings, argues that Yeats held extremist political views and, indeed, looked forward to the arrival of the "rough beast" that would mark the end of a historical cycle.

Many readers find William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," difficult to understand, especially if it is their first experience with his poetry. But even if they have first encountered some of Yeats's more frequently anthologized poems, such as his earlier work "The Lake Island of Innisfree," they still lack a proper frame into which to place this most startling prophecy. They often interpret "The Second Coming" as a foreboding warning of the advent of some sort of antichrist. Or they may innocently view the poem as an augury of and democratic protest against rising totalitari-

What Do I Read Next?



- *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968), Joan Didion's collection of nonfiction essays on late-twentieth century, American culture, borrows its title from "The Second Coming" and finds in contemporary California many good people lacking conviction and many scary ones filled with passionate intensity.
- Chinua Achebe's 1959 novel, *Things Fall Apart*, also borrows its title from "The Second Coming." In this novel about the effects of Christian missionaries and colonialism in Africa, the falling apart of a native African tribe is an example of one way in which the world ends.
- *A Treasury Of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore*, compiled by Yeats and Lady Gregory, his friend, benefactor and cofounder of the Irish Literary Renaissance, is a collection of Irish folk stories and was meant to spread traditional Irish tales to a people in search of their long-submerged cultural traditions. The book was rereleased as *Irish Myths and Legends* in 1999.
- William Butler Yeats's *A Vision* (1925; 2nd edition 1937) is the delineation of Yeats's occult cosmogony. Said to be channeled through the automatic writing of his wife, and representative of spirit voices speaking from beyond life, *A Vision* lays out theories of civilization, history, personality, and fate.
- Many of Yeats's poems are more meaningful when read among others. Themes in "The Second Coming" are renewed and expanded upon in "The Gyres," "The Dolls," "Led and the Swan," and, in particular, in "A Prayer for My Daughter," which Yeats wrote as a companion piece for "The Second Coming." These works can be found in Yeats's *Collected Poems* (1933; rereleased in 1996). His *Collected Plays* (1934; rereleased, 1995) includes Yeats's drama, from his highly nationalistic early plays to the later ones that borrowed inspiration from symbolic, mask-filled Japanese Noh theater.

anism in Europe after World War I. Nevertheless, when viewed from within the context of the metaphysics of Yeats's *A Vision*, his spiritual, poetic, and even political manifesto, and his other writings, "The Second Coming" plainly becomes a celebration of the end of the Christian era and actually invites the approach of that "rough beast" (line 21) slouching "toward Bethlehem" (line 22) as somehow necessary for the completion of the present historical cycle. The fact is that Yeats, rejecting his youthful optimism about humanity's natural goodness and his utopian enthusiasm for anarchocommunist revolution, considered both the implicit egalitarianism of Christ's teachings and the bowdlerized sentimentality of bourgeois Christianity during his time to be finished as cultural/historical forces. He believed they would soon be swept away by an aristocratic neopaganism that would reassert hierarchical control over society and replace the industrial middle classes with a beneficent landed

gentry, well-subsidized and grateful artists, and happily sweating peasants.

Regarding himself as the "last of the Romantics," Yeats tightly held onto William Blake's and Percy Bysshe Shelley's faith in the poet as prophet in the midst of an era of spiritually defeated materialism. The son of an agnostic painter, Yeats had grown up in an anticlerical and antireligious environment. Still, early on he was drawn to the uncanny and mysterious, and he eventually located a spiritual home in the works of William Blake. Blake's hermeticism (itself derived from the writings of Jakob Boehme and Emanuel Swedenborg) inspired Yeats to join Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and eventually an occult named Order of the Golden Dawn. But throughout Yeats's mystical quest, his mythological, spiritual, and psychic investigations always acted to serve his poetic muse. Like Blake, his master, Yeats was in search of a personal mythology that would both feed his

soul and inspire his poetry. Also like Blake, he was seeking a spiritual cosmology with which he could oppose and defeat materialism. Yeats was finally able to complete the finishing touches to his mythic cosmology through the help of his wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees, whom he married when he was middle-aged and who, soon after their wedding, began to channel messages from the spirit world by means of automatic writing and, later, mediumistic sleep talking. The substance of these messages, recorded and systematized from 1917 to 1925 and further expanded and annotated until 1937, formed the basis of *A Vision*.

Mirroring Hegelian and Marxist dialectic, the metaphysical system of *A Vision* offers an alternative to the Marxist interpretation of history by describing a world of deterministic necessity driven by "gyres." The book explains human personalities and historical events in terms of repeating cycles created by four "Faculties": Will and Mask; Creative Mind and Body of Fate. These spiral in opposing pairs up and down two interpenetrating cones, one primary and the other antithetical. Significantly, when Yeats presented this antithesis in *A Vision*, he emphasized that "*Primary* means democratic. *Antithetical* means aristocratic." With the apex of each cone tangent to the center of the other's base and the two sets of Faculties rotating in helicoidal paths upon the surfaces of their respective cones, different configurations of the four evolve in relation to one another. Yeats's spirit instructors then transposed this configured interplay of positive and negative forces to the waxing and waning of the moon during its monthly circuit. In the end, the motion of the four Faculties becomes fixed into twenty-eight phases that can explain the past or predict the future of individuals, peoples, or eras. And yet, as Yeats wrote in *A Vision*, "gyres may be interrupted or twisted by greater gyres, divide into two lesser gyres or multiply into four and so on. [Still, t]he uniformity of nature depends upon the constant return of gyres to the same point." In other words, the gyres' movement constitutes yet another version of what German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche called "eternal return," a myth that ethnologist Mircea Eliade declares as a fundamental proposition in all traditional societies.

As fantastic as such a worldview may seem, however, we must remember that until modern science destroyed medieval scholasticism, poets, such as Dante, did not need to "invent" their mythologies or cosmologies to sustain the meaning of their metaphors. Even Milton's *Paradise Lost* suffers from the fact that it depends upon Ptolemy's out-



For all of his longing for the pastoral gentility of eighteenth-century Ireland, Yeats harbored a more destructive, dark side to his personality."

dated system in which neither Milton nor his audience could believe after the Copernican revolution. The epic's plot relies on the reader's willing suspension of disbelief to carry its action forward. For his own part, Blake resolved this dilemma by creating his own cosmological and mythological model of the world as a counter to the Newtonian mechanist universe. Yeats merely continued Blake's work with additions and variations of his own. Written in January of 1919, not long after the beginning of Georgie Hyde-Lee's automatic writing sessions, "The Second Coming" exemplifies the cosmological principles later detailed in *A Vision*.

The first stanza of the poem emblematically exhibits the state of affairs in Europe at the end of the World War I. At first, we encounter the falcon whose "widening gyre" (line 1) has put it beyond its falconer's recall. This figure may portray the trajectory of Christian civilization past the gravitational pull of the Christ archetype. But in another poem, Yeats contrasts the "butterfly" of wisdom with reason's "bird of prey." If we take the falcon to signify intellectual reason, then the gyring falcon represents the passing away of Christian rationalism as it reaches its widest extent and begins to implode into irrationality. According to Yeats's system, it is precisely when an era reaches its widest extent at the base of the cone that "[t]hings fall apart" and "the centre cannot hold" (line 3) because of the immediate reversal of the gyres and the new precedence assumed by the inner cone. Chaos dissolves order at the turning from primary to antithetical or vice versa.

After all, the war's own "blood-dimmed tide" (line 5) could not possibly stop with the armistice, because the issues of European imperialism and nationalism had not been resolved despite the war's incredible body count. While the Allies pro-

claimed the war as a “war to end all wars” and a “victory for democracy,” Yeats saw it as democracy’s death knell and the beginning of crueler conflicts. In the Irish Easter Rebellion of 1916, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and the vicious civil wars and homicidal insurrections that followed, Yeats could discern the “mere anarchy” (line 4) unleashed by the gyres’ reversal, an anarchy that would eventually call forth a return to aristocratic conservatism. But for now, no aristocratic “ceremony of innocence” (line 6) could possibly escape the wave of blood—as Russian Czar Nicholas II and his family were soon to discover (they were murdered by Bolsheviks in July of 1918). In such a state of murderous madness, the “best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity” (lines 7–8). But to Yeats, this emergent situation reflected the fact that “[a]ll our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilisation belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation ... of the civilisation that must slowly take its place,” as he wrote in the preface to *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, the volume in which “The Second Coming” first appeared. At the death of an era, the best of people lack any firm footing for their convictions while the worst can clearly see circumstances have reversed into their favor and do not flinch at the prospect of taking advantage of them.

Before such brutality and terror, Yeats, fulfilling his poetic office as prophet, proclaims that “some revelation is at hand” (line 9), even the “Second Coming” (line 10). However, he does not make this prophecy in the name of the Judeo-Christian God, but from a vision conjured up from the “*Spiritus Mundi*” (line 12), that vast repository of psychic and spiritual images called the collective unconscious by Carl Jung (who was making his own incursions into its disturbing depths as a psychiatrist and experimental psychologist about the time Yeats was receiving his ghostly instructions). Many years earlier, when he was studying what we would now call creative visualization under MacGregor Mathers in the Order of the Golden Dawn, Yeats was once startled to envision just such a titanic figure as he describes in line 14 of the poem. Later, about the time he was writing a play inspired by Nietzsche’s nihilist philosophy called *Where There is Nothing* (a story about an anarchist who desires the annihilation of everything because nothingness is the closest approach to godhead), Yeats felt the return of this beast. As he later remarked in his collection of essays titled *Explorations*, “I began to

imagine, as always at my left side just out of the range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing ecstatic destruction.” Is this then the “rough beast” that must precede the coming of the next two-thousand-year era’s antithetical gyring, the spirit of “ecstatic destruction,” a spirit that Yeats himself had carried along with him at his side for many years? According to the determinism of *A Vision*, the answer is an emphatic, if not ecstatic, “Yes.”

Still, we must ask ourselves whether Yeats found the advent of the “rough beast” into European history personally satisfying and utterly necessary to the coming of the antithetical age, as critic Yvor Winters, in his book *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats*, so vigorously maintains. Denying this assertion, Elizabeth Cullingford, in her 1981 monograph, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, points to the fact that the language of the poem expresses shock and dismay at the “blood-dimmed tide” of anarchy and that, after all, the beast’s gaze is “pitiless.” But what are we to think of one who himself bears the archetype of nihilist destruction within his consciousness? Like Blake and Shelley, Yeats had begun as both a Romantic and a radical in his youth. He had even been a disciple of William Morris, a utopian socialist, sociologist, and labor agitator. Admittedly, Morris was a reactionary of sorts insofar as he opposed technological progress and favored some sort of a return to medieval handicraft production, but he was also an advocate of extremist anarchism, and neither he nor his philosophy ever quite left Yeats’s affection. Nietzsche’s influence was also quite strong upon Yeats’s thinking, and history has shown the fascist uses that Nietzschean thought can be put to, despite what Nietzsche’s modern, liberal apologists may say. For all of his longing for the pastoral gentility of eighteenth-century Ireland, Yeats harbored a more destructive, dark side to his personality. Like the Marxist-Leninism he loathed, his metaphysics easily justifies any enormity in the name of historical necessity. Besides, as few adherents of the present New Age movement, who share so much of Yeats’s spiritual heritage, really want to face, the fact is that Nazi mysticism in Himmler’s SS derived from Blavatsky’s mythical racism and hermetical magic. Yeats may have backed off from his association with the Irish “Blue Shirts” before his reputation was utterly lost before his death in January of 1939, but how can we believe that he didn’t yearn to see the rising of a “Celtic Reich” from the ashes of a defunct Chris-

tendom annihilated with “laughing ecstatic destruction”?

Source: Michael Lake, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2000.

Carolyn Meyer

Carolyn Meyer holds a Ph.D. in modern British and Irish literature and has taught contemporary literature at several Canadian universities, including the University of Toronto. In the following essay, Meyer analyzes how, in a brief poem, Yeats details the crumbling of society in preparation for a new epoch.

“The Second Coming” ranks among W. B. Yeats’s most powerful poems. Part pronouncement on the immediate postwar situation in 1919, part prophecy of the terrifying shape of things to come, it plays upon war-wearied humanity’s hope for something better only to play into its worst fears—that the impending collapse of civilization is the sign not of the return of Christ, as the title suggests and as Matthew 24 foretells, but of a coming age of barbarism, an anti-civilization embodied by a savage, sphinx-like deity who makes the beast of the Apocalypse in Revelation pale by comparison. When he wrote “The Second Coming” in January of 1919, Yeats was not alone in reacting with fear and fascination to the turbulent political crises of his day or in interpreting those calamitous events as harbingers of the end of an historical era. Within a matter of years, T. S. Eliot had completed *The Waste Land*, a poem that likewise captured the state of despair and disillusionment felt by intellectuals as the Western Hemisphere continued to reel from a series of shock waves: first from the carnage of the World War I, then, in quick succession, from the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the political decay of eastern Europe. For Yeats, that violence and chaos hit much closer to home, as Ireland moved toward independence through the turmoil and bloodshed of the Easter Rising of 1916 and the Black and Tan War that followed. Yet despite references to the collapse of Russia and the German military advances that Yeats eventually edited out, the poem is neither overtly political nor topical, but instead, according to Stephen Spender in an article in *Tri-Quarterly*, it particularizes “a more general kind of public historic statement,” using historical events as mere coordinates in the mapping out of a personal “system” or cosmology. Yeats’s esoteric philosophy and view of history, heavily influenced by the occult, finds its fullest expression in *A Vision* (1925), a work that serves as a handbook to

many of his later poems. Of these, “The Second Coming” ominously dramatizes the end of one epoch and the birth of another within a complex scheme of historical change.

Yeats believed that history was cyclical. Human history, he claimed, was governed by the rotation of a Great Wheel, whose phases, “like the signs of the Zodiac”—as noted in *An Introduction to Poetry*—influence events and determine human personalities. Every two thousand years, the Wheel completes a turn and a new cycle or civilization (one of two of opposing characters) is ushered in, heralded by violence and incarnated through an act of union between a male god in avian form and a mortal female. According to his scheme, the cycle of Greco-Roman civilization commenced with the descent of Zeus in swan’s form, his begetting of Helen, and the subsequent destruction of Troy in the wake of her kidnapping—events that Yeats recounts with brutal force in his sonnet “Leda and the Swan.” The advent of the radically different Christian era two thousand years later was marked by yet another descent: that of the Holy Spirit appearing to Mary as the dove of the Annunciation. On the brink of the new millennium, there are ominous portents that the Christian cycle is drawing to a close and that what will replace it—its antithesis—will merely deepen the nightmare of history.

For this most public, vatic, and visionary of poems, Yeats adopts the elevated tone and high rhetoric of a hellfire sermon. The hypnotically incantational dactyls and trochees of the opening lines quickly give way to richly textured blank verse, but not before those swaying rhythms have evoked the spiraling motion of the errant falcon in flight. The dissonance of the off-rhymes “gyre” and “falconer,” as well as “hold” and “world,” convey a growing sense of dissolution as empires fall and the coherence of experience is lost. While the world spirals hopelessly out of control, however, Yeats remains firmly in control of his lines, building up the poem climactically through a series of parallel constructions, enhancing its oracular quality through internal rhymes and alliteration. The two stanzas, of 8 and 14 lines respectively (vaguely reminiscent of an octave and a sonnet), mark off its separate movements of factual reportage and emotive prophecy.

The first section combines concrete images with great abstract statements in a lament for civilization’s loss of direction and control. This Yeats conceptualizes through the image of the “gyre,” one of his most durable symbols, a kind of whirling vor-



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tex or spiral-within-a-spiral that is meant to show how one cycle loses strength in direct proportion to the other's gain. In a note to *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), the collection to which "The Second Coming" belongs, Yeats writes that "at the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward ... all our scientific, democratic and fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation as in a lightning flash...." To make this plain in his poem, Yeats resorts to a metaphor of falconry, one that shows a breakdown in the symbiotic relationship of man and beast. Under normal circumstances in this disciplined sport, the falcon, having been thoroughly tamed and trained, remains firmly under its master's control as it circles downward to its prey. But in this case, the gyre, or spiral, of the bird's flight is "widening"—not because it is disobedient or "indignant," like the grotesque desert birds with which it is paired, but because it is out of range of hearing and cannot respond to its master's commands. Nevertheless, what is unleashed is a destructive and potentially murderous force. Man has lost his control not simply over nature but over the beast within himself, leading inalterably to the collapse of civilization as Yeats defines it in Book 5 of *A Vision*:

A civilization is a struggle to keep self-control, and in this it is like some tragic person, some Niobe, who must display an almost superhuman will or the cry will not touch our sympathy. The loss of control over thought comes toward the end; first a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation—the scream of Juno's peacock.

As if to dramatize the disintegration of official order, the medial caesura in "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" effectively breaks the line in half, disrupting its syntax. Yeats piles on image after image of swirling terror and chaos in his prog-

nostication of civilization's collapse, but in qualifying anarchy as "mere," he also points accusingly at the casually dismissive and negligent attitude that allows such turbulence to continue unabated. Even the poet's friends, it seems, were guilty of this. Yeats had apparently been outraged when fellow writer and Irishman George Russell (AE) proclaimed that the Russians had executed only 400 people in the toppling of the old tsarist regime—a deliberate downplaying of the Marxist threat Yeats blamed for the "growing murderousness of the world" (A. N. Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*). Humankind's value systems and faculties of judgment—its ability to distinguish what is "mere" from what is portentous—have been impaired and overwhelmed, opening the floodgates to "the blood-dimmed tide", which, like the "murderous innocence of the sea" ("A Prayer for My Daughter," *Collected Poems* 211-214), violently engulfs the world in a final victory for materialism and murderousness. There is nothing, not even "conviction" or social responsibility, to impede its alarming progress. What succumbs in its wake is "the ceremony of innocence," a catchphrase for everything Yeats holds dear: the ceremoniousness and ritual that keep vulgarity at bay and the innocence by which the soul "recognizes no force but its own" (Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*). With ceremony gone, the prevailing order has been overturned. Yeats uses a rhetorically forceful parallel construction to portray a polarized world of opposites, where the "best" are ineffectual because they have no ideology, and the "worst," violent partisans such as the revolutionaries of Ireland and Russia, have assumed violent control because they have too much.

The disorder of the world is a prelude to some revelation, as the Gospels predict time and time again. Like a pious preacher intoning from the pulpit with his best ecclesiastical rhetoric, Yeats, in the next section, offers up the comforting prospect of Christ's beneficent return: yet each mention of "the Second Coming" brings with it a mounting irony just as the insistent reiteration of "Surely" betrays an ever-growing uncertainty. Even so, until line 13 there is no reason to believe that the coming dispensation will be anything other than a more awe-inspiring reprise of the Christian revelation. All of this changes, however, as the horrifying prophecy begins to unfold. The poet presents himself as the passive recipient of a vision that comes to him almost offhandedly, like a casual thought. The vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi* is at first a mere annoyance that "troubles" his sight, only to

inspire fear as it comes into focus. The vision comes not from his own imagination but from out of a great storehouse of images or Platonic forms, similar to what Swiss psychologist Carl Jung called the collective unconscious. This desert beast with a lion's body and a man's head is all the more terrifying not because it is so utterly alien but because it is vaguely familiar (like the Egyptian sphinx), having become entrenched in universal consciousness. With its blank, pitiless gaze, Yeats's "rough beast" is an emblem of a mindless, amoral, and un-pitying fierceness. Moreover, with its "slow thighs," the creature embodies the violent sexuality, raw power, and primeval savagery of the fearful new dispensation. According to Denis Donoghue, in his *William Butler Yeats*, even the most despicable desert birds, which sustain themselves on carrion, are comparatively human in their "indignation" as they react in contempt and horror to this new incarnation. This demonic parody of Christ's nativity (for it is toward Bethlehem that the beast slouches) is also an awakening. The doctrines of mercy and gentleness ushered in by the "rocking cradle" of the Christ child have, like a tranquilizer or a magic spell, dispatched this monster to a state of suspended animation ("stony sleep") for two thousand years, but as the tenets of Christian belief wane, so too does the power to suppress such unspeakable evil. Yeats makes it abundantly clear that the next cycle will be antithetical to the current one—for the message of the Gospels is the stuff of the beast's worst nightmare. As critic Richard Ellmann observed in his landmark study *The Identity of Yeats*, "the final intimation that the new god will be born in Bethlehem, which Christianity associates with passive infancy and the tenderness of maternal love, makes its brutishness particularly frightful." As past and future threaten to come into horrifying collision, Yeats questions not the fulfilment of his vision but its exact nature; for what he has envisaged is perhaps only one of many equally terrifying outcomes.

Written only a month before his daughter's birth, Yeats's "The Second Coming" expresses both the poet's paternal anxiety—a profound distress at the state of things both in his native Ireland and throughout the rest of Europe and his fear as to the consequences of that turbulence. The Second Coming" is a poem that asks "what's next?" then shudders at the probable answer to that question. Though the poem can be read as a working out of Yeats's highly personal and idiosyncratic "system," in view of the world events that followed it, it also serves as a vivid prophecy of the rise of

fascism and other totalitarian regimes. Ironically for Yeats, a fascist sympathizer, it was precisely such an ideology that answered his demand for order, discipline, and ceremoniousness—the very things he feared would be swept away by the cataclysmic events of his day.

Source: Carolyn Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2000.

Kristina Zarlengo

Kristina Zarlengo taught literature and writing for five years at Columbia University. A scholar of modern American literature, her writings have appeared in academic journals, newspapers, and national magazines. She received a doctorate in English from Columbia in 1997. In the following essay, Zarlengo characterizes "The Second Coming" as indicative of Yeats's penchant for antinomies, or contradictions.

William Butler Yeats liked to claim that "consciousness is conflict," and while his diagnosis may not serve as a general description of what it means to be aware and alive, it is certainly an apt diagnosis of himself and his verse. He saw life—whether his own, that of other people, that of invisible spirits, or that of the cosmos as a whole—as a balancing act, and he walked a tightrope between opposing, equally profound forces. This skill is particularly evident in his later poetry, which, like "The Second Coming," is at once personal and solemnly broad.

Yeats was, from the beginning, solemn and grand in aspiration. Through his involvement with politics, and in particular the political bent of his love, Maud Gonne, in whose name politics and great love were combined, Yeats tempered his abstraction with vigorous interest in the events of his nation during his day. The timeless met the timely. His love for Ireland and his desire to champion its culture led to his founding the Irish Renaissance, a movement whose twofold purpose was to revive and maintain a literary past and to originate an indigenous contemporary literature. In that capacity, he came to love plainly stated folk wisdom in the form of Irish legends, another counterbalance to his loftier ambitions. In a nation where the English language was inseparable from a suppression of Irish culture and tradition, Yeats wondered, "Can we not build up a national literature which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language?" and responded, with his verse, in the affirmative. He unified the Irish tradition he loved with the English of high culture by writing in an



What 'The Second Coming' sets forth unambiguously is the ominous overthrow of one order by another. All else is open to interpretation."

"English which shall have an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style." Never did he revoke his loftiness, but he came to combine it with an energizing attention to everyday events. Of assistance in Yeats's conversion to the quotidian was American poet Ezra Pound, who celebrated Yeats's poetry but urged him to temper it with a more modern style, one that was clear, economical in expression, and meaningful to modern readers. Together with the blows delivered to Yeats's idealism—by disappointments such as his failure to win the heart of *Gonne* and the perpetuation of political strife that he had hoped would diminish but instead he saw multiply—Pound's influence helped bring Yeats to his mature, and most adored, style. "I tried," he later wrote (as noted in Tindall's *William Butler Yeats*), "to make the language of poetry that of passionate normal speech."

In "Adam's Curse," a poem that serves as both a mission statement and as an example of this mature style, Yeats writes—in tightly metered, rhymed verse that exhibits an extraordinary ease—about a meeting he had with *Maud Gonne* and her cousin, addressing the poem to *Gonne*:

We sat together at one summer's end,
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said, "A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world."

This revealing stanza holds the secret to Yeats's craft: hard, rigorous work, which he calls

the fate of all laborers after Adam, hence "Adam's curse." And indeed, Yeats's poetry, however light and lovely, came to him only after hours of painstaking revision. A single line did, often, take him hours to craft.

But Yeats was relentless, and his labors were fruitful. He filled his new style with a matched celebration of opposing forces, which he called "antinomies," hailing them as not just contrary, but fruitfully at odds. In the friction between opposites, he saw the sparks of life. Finally, in his mature work, Yeats combined classical myth and autobiography (in one poem, he turned *Maud Gonne* into *Helen of Troy*), but he was equally enchanted with folk legends. In his usage of traditional metrical and rhyme schemes, as well as in his preferred subject matter of heroic quests, love and roses, and humanity among natural wonders, Yeats was a traditional poet, picking up ideas and techniques both from the Romantic poets who immediately preceded him and from poets throughout history. Such traditionalism was cut, however, with approaches to poetry new in Yeats's day that have gone on to inflect the greater part of twentieth-century poetry. By the time of his death, Yeats was producing poetry with extraordinary depth, as well as unusual range: it touched on the personal as well as the political, on the spirit world as well as history, on the symphony of world events as well as the small sounds of momentary emotions. In his every effort was the grand desire to understand everything—from his own life to the world itself—as part of a pattern grasped by poetic imagination. This effort was at times flattening; having been fed through Yeats's interpretive machinery, much emerged in a dubious form. Under the sway of an understanding of modernity that cast the twentieth century as a time of chaos, mob craziness, and the dilution of worthy powers, he was, during the 1930s, quite enchanted with the rise of fascism in Europe—in particular with the rise of *Mussolini* in Italy.

Indeed, "The Second Coming," which was written in the wake of the Russian Revolution, can be understood as a cry against popular rule and as a call for the kind of central, elite-seated power represented by fascism. Later, however, Yeats acknowledged the destructiveness of fascism, and he put a new spin on "The Second Coming." In a letter he wrote in 1936 in response to a friend who asked him to take a definite public position against totalitarianism by recommending a Nazi prisoner for the Nobel Peace Prize, Yeats wrote (as noted in *Richard Ellmann's Yeats: The Man and the Masks*):

Do not try to make a politician of me, even in Ireland. I shall never I think be that again—as my sense of reality deepens, & I think it does with age, my horror at the cruelty of governments grows greater, & if I did what you want I would seem to hold one government more responsible than any other & that would betray my convictions. Communist, Fascist, nationalist, clerical, anti-clerical are all responsible according to the number of their victims. I have not been silent, I have used the only vehicle I possess—verse. If you have my poems by you look up a poem called “The Second Coming.” It was written some sixteen or seventeen years ago & fortold [*sic*] what is happening. I have written the same thing again and again since.... I am not callous, every nerve trembles with horror at what is happening in Europe. The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

As in the religious myth of the return of the messiah and his riddance of world suffering and injustice, “The Second Coming” anticipates a revolution, couching it in the form of a poetic revelation. But in this vision the hope assumes the incarnation of a monster. That the same poem some decode as a cry for central control such as totalitarianism can also be deciphered as a prophecy of the destructiveness of totalitarianism is testimony to Yeats’s love of antinomy. What “The Second Coming” sets forth unambiguously is the ominous overthrow of one order by another. All else is open to interpretation. By evoking Christian symbolism, Yeats suggests the return of a benevolent judge; by evoking a “rough beast” that was “vexed to nightmare,” put to sleep by a “rocking cradle” that seems to indicate the newly born Christ, Yeats suggests a nascent ruler who is opposite of Christ. “Things fall apart,” but the poet, as visionary, points to a supreme order, “*Spiritus Mundi*,” that provides him with a bright glimpse of fate. Thus an order above those that are drowned prevails. We can, then, take “The Second Coming” to be a testimony of the supreme and timeless authority of poetic vision, a claim that the poetic imagination is allied to what lasts and is capable of seeing beyond merely timely, if utterly disastrous events. Seen in this light, “The Second Coming” distills Yeats’s personal quest for total vision, for a poetry that is also comprehensive understanding.

Distinguishing “The Second Coming” from the rich tradition of literary renditions of divine purpose and world fate is its extreme brevity. In packed language, the poem suggests vastness and a kind of tumult that is commonly and fearfully anticipated, particularly by history’s unfortunates—those people who find themselves in circumstances at odds with their own or their God’s characterizations of them as worthy of the best of lives. That

the decades following “The Second Coming” have been riddled with turmoil—in particular the upheaval of World War II and attendant atrocities such as Nazi concentration camps, Stalinist genocide, and the extinction of entire cities of people by firebombing and atomic bombs—has made the poem into an anthem for those who detect a nebulous but formidable promise of destruction in the world. But the poem is equally a kind of autobiographical meditation on Yeats’s vision of the role of the poet. For him, the poet is one who sees and grasps all, including that which he is helpless to understand rationally or to change, and fuses this vision to language that reveals the imaginative order that outlasts and defines us all. The proper antinomy to the poem’s “rough beast” is quite possibly the bright force of poetic vision that witnesses its slouching approach.

Source: Kristina Zarlengo, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2000.

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