

Notes on The Second Coming by W.B. Yeats:

In A Nutshell

"The Second Coming" is easily one of the most famous and frequently quoted poems in all of Western literature. Several famous prose writers have used lines from W.B. Yeats's poems as titles to their books, and "The Second Coming" is no exception. For example, Chinua Achebe, an African writer, used part of the third line as the title of his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, and Woody Allen recently wrote a book called *Mere Anarchy*.

Yeats's poem was first published in 1920, a year after the end of World War I, "the Great War," in which millions of European died. While many people at the time just wanted to get on with their lives, Yeats thought that European society had pretty much broken down, and the poem is a terrifying prediction of future violence. Unfortunately, the rise of Hitler and fascism in the 1930s proved him largely correct, and many find the poem disturbingly prophetic in light of the later wars of the twentieth century. However, we shouldn't somehow think that Yeats was a depressive based on this single work, his bleakest. Many of his other poems engage with more uplifting subjects, like love and Irish folklore. Nor should we think that Yeats was defeatist. After all, he was a very active figure in Irish politics throughout his life, which was in the process of gaining its independence from England. By the time this poem was published, he had already been famous for many years, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

This is one of a handful of poems written in the 20th century that people from all walks of life – politicians, bankers, and scientists – are not afraid to learn and quote by heart. For one thing, you can't accuse W.B. Yeats of being elusive or indecisive: a complaint about a lot of modern poetry. This one hits like a ton of bricks. The language is blunt and direct, but the rhythm is complicated and musical. When you repeat lines like, "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed," it's like an entire period of history has been summed up in only a few words. Indeed, people still quote from Yeats during every war. The recent war in Iraq is no exception: for example, in 2006 a Congressman Jim McDermott gave a speech titled "The Center Cannot Hold."

Another reason the poem has been so popular is that its mysterious symbolism can be interpreted in a meaningful way by anyone, regardless of their social or political views. Some people think that Yeats is trying to steer society back to its traditional values; others say that he thinks only a revolution will lead to a new order. Above all, "The Second Coming" amounts a frightening document of how poets often have a specific perspective – a "vision" of the way things are that most of the rest of us are unable to see.

The poem begins with the image of a falcon flying out of earshot from its human master. In medieval times, people would use falcons or hawks to track down animals at ground level. In this image, however, the falcon has gotten itself lost by flying too far away, which we can read as a reference to the collapse of traditional social arrangements in Europe at the time Yeats was writing.

In the fourth line, the poem abruptly shifts into a description of "anarchy" and an orgy of violence in which "the ceremony of innocence is drowned." The speaker laments that only bad people seem to have any enthusiasm nowadays.

At line 9, the second stanza of the poem begins by setting up a new vision. The speaker takes the violence which has engulfed society as a sign that "the Second Coming is at hand." He imagines a sphinx in the desert, and we are meant to think that this mythical animal, rather than Christ, is what is coming to fulfill the prophecy from the Biblical Book of Revelation. At line 18, the vision ends as "darkness drops again," but the speaker remains troubled.

Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker asks a rhetorical question which really amounts to a prophecy that the beast is on its way to Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, to be born into the world.

Lines 1-2

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

The falcon is described as "turning" in a "widening gyre" until it can no longer "hear the falconer," its human master.

A gyre is a spiral that expands outward as it goes up. Yeats uses the image of gyres frequently in his poems to describe the motion of history toward chaos and instability. In actual falconry, the bird is not supposed to keep flying in circles forever; it is eventually supposed to come back and land on the falconer's glove. (Interesting fact: falconers wear heavy gloves to keep the birds from scratching them with their claws.)

Line 3

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

The "notion" that "things fall apart" could still apply to the falcon, but it's also vague enough to serve as a transition to the images of more general chaos that follow.

The second part of the line, a declaration that "the centre cannot hold," is full of political implications (like the collapse of centralized order into radicalism). This is the most famous line of the poem: the poem's "thesis," in a nutshell.

Lines 4-6

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

These three lines describe a situation of violence and terror through phrases like "anarchy," "blood-dimmed tide," and "innocence [. . .] drowned." (By the way, "mere" doesn't mean "only" in this context; it means "total" or "pure.")

Overall, pretty scary stuff.

Also, with words like "tide," "loosed," and "drowned," the poem gives the sensation of water rushing around us. It's like Noah's flood all over again, except there's no orderly line of animals headed two-by-two into a boat.

What's Yeats referring to here? Is this a future prophecy, the poet's dream, or maybe a metaphor for Europe at war? There's really no way to be sure – Yeats doesn't seem to want us to know too much.

Lines 7-8

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Who are "the best" and "the worst"?

One way of deciphering them is that Yeats is talking about "the good" and "the bad." But he doesn't use those words in the poem, and these lines are a clue as to why not. For one thing, if "the best lack all conviction," can they really be that good? Believing in something enough to act on it is kind of what being good is all about.

On the other hand, "the worst" have all the "intensity" on their side, which is good for them, but definitely not for everyone else.

Think about that time you dropped your lunch in the cafeteria and all the people you hate laughed really hard, and all your friends were too embarrassed to do anything about it. According to Yeats, Europe after the war is kind of like that. Things are so messed up that you can't tell the good and the bad apart.

Lines 9-10

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

Notice how these two lines are almost exactly the same. This is where the speaker tells us what he thinks is going on, but the repetition means that he's maybe not so sure and is slowly trying to figure things out.

It's a revelation, he says, which is when the true meaning of something is revealed.

Not only that, but it's a revelation according to the most reputable source for these kinds of things: the Book of Revelation.

Apparently, all this violence and moral confusion means "the Second Coming is at hand."

According to the Bible, that means Christ is going come back and set everything straight, right?

We'll see. For now, the poem is about to take another turn.

Lines 11-13

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

So maybe we're not saved.

The words "Second Coming" seem to have made the speaker think of something else, so that he repeats the phrase as an exclamation. It's like, "Eureka!" It makes him think of a "vast image out of Spiritus Mundi."

To know what this means, you have to know that Yeats was very interested in the occult and believed that people have a supernatural connection to one another. It's in the same ballpark as telepathy or a psychic connection, but not quite as kooky as those other things. It's more like we're all connected to a big database of communal memories going back all the way through human history, which we can get in contact with when we're feeling truly inspired.

Literally, Spiritus Mundi means "spirit of the world."

The speaker, through his sudden, revelatory connection to the world, is given access to a vision that takes him "somewhere in the sands of the desert."

Line 14

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

Here, he is describing the sphinx, a mythical beast "with lion body and the head of a man."

You might have seen the picture of the ancient sphinx in Egypt: it's pretty famous. But Yeats isn't talking about that sphinx, per se. He's talking about the original, archetypal symbol of the sphinx that first inspired the Egyptians to build that big thing in the desert, and which is now inspiring him.

Lines 15-17

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

In these lines he describes the sphinx's expression and what it is doing.

By calling its gaze "pitiless," he doesn't mean "evil" or "mean-spirited." In fact, the sphinx really seems to have an inhuman expression that is as indifferent as nature itself. It is "blank," statuesque, and incapable of having empathy with other humans.

This might not tell us much, but now we know that the sphinx doesn't jibe at all with the way most people think of Christ. In other words, this "Second Coming" doesn't seem to have a lot in common with the descent of Christ from Heaven as described in the Book of Revelation. Nor does it seem to be in any big hurry to get here, as it moves "its slow thighs."

But, strangely, this slowness only seems to add to the suspense and terror, like Michael Myers chasing Jamie Lee Curtis in the movie Halloween.

Even the birds are ticked-off, or "indignant," but it's not clear why. Their circling is similar to the gyres of the falcon from the beginning of the poem, but from what we know about desert birds, like vultures, when they fly in circles it's often because they think something will die soon.

Lines 18-20

The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

The vision from Spiritus Mundi ends as "darkness drops again," like a stage curtain, but it has left the speaker with a strong prophetic impression. He knows something that he didn't before, namely, that this strange sphinx is a symbol that will bear on the future.

Thinking outside the poem, it's safe to say that he is talking about Europe's future, and perhaps the world's in general.

What exactly does the speaker claim to "know"? "Twenty centuries" refers to roughly the amount of time that has passed since the "first coming" of Christ. But we have already seen that the Second Coming is not going to be anything like the first.

Although 2,000 years seems like a long time to us, Yeats compares it to a single night of an infant's sleep, which is suddenly "vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle."

The cradle reinforces the image that something has recently been "born," and its motion also serves as a metaphor for social upheaval.

It's interesting that the infant doesn't wake up because of the rocking. It instead begins to have nightmares, much like the recent nightmares afflicting European society, whose long history amounts to no more than the first stages of childhood. It's the terrible two's of an entire continent.

Lines 21-22

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The object of Yeats's vision, which was formerly symbolized as a pitiless sphinx, is now described as a "rough beast" on its way to Bethlehem – the birthplace of Christ – "to be born."

The "slouching" of this beast is animalistic and similar to the slow gait of the sphinx in the desert. It sounds more than a little menacing.

Yeats is using the birth at Bethlehem as a metaphor of the passage of this malevolent beast from the spirit world – Spiritus Mundi – to the real, everyday world, where its effects will be visible to everyone.

By phrasing these lines as a question, Yeats tantalizes us with all the possibilities of what he might be describing. In the time since Yeats wrote the poem, the beast has been interpreted as a prediction of everything bad that the twentieth century has wrought, particularly the horrors of World War II: Hitler, fascism, and the atomic bomb.

It is the "nightmare" from which society would not be able to awake. Of course, Yeats would not have known about these specific things. However, he did seem to have a sense that things were still getting worse while most people around him thought things were getting better.

Some readers have thought that the birth at the end was an ironic vision of the Antichrist, an embodiment of evil as powerful as Christ was an embodiment of goodness.

Others believe that the beast, even though it is described as "rough," might not be evil, but merely a manifestation of the kind of harsh justice that society as a whole deserves. In other words, things have become so violent and decadent that God's only solution is to deploy his all-purpose cleanser.