
UNIT 13 W. B. YEATS: “THE SECOND COMING”

Structure

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13.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit devoted to Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming” you would have learnt about:

- The life and writings of William Butler Yeats, one of the most prominent poets of the 20th century
- His works and contribution to Modernism
- His poem, *The Second Coming*
- Analysis of the poem
- Its historical and Biblical references
- Yeats’s use of symbols in this poem and their significance.

13.1 INTRODUCTION TO W. B. YEATS



Source: [www. Wikipedia.com](http://www.Wikipedia.com)

Born in 1865 in Ireland, William Butler Yeats was one of the greatest English language poets, a towering figure in 20th century English Literature. Like T. S. Eliot, he was also a dramatist and a

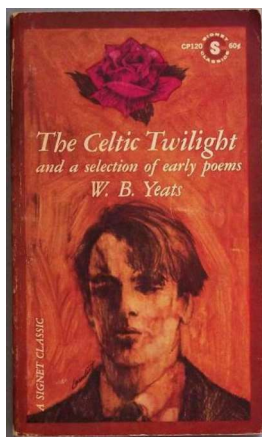
writer of prose. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923 “for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation.”¹

Born in 1865, he began writing at the early age of seventeen, and his first published poem *The Isle of Statutes* revealed the influences of Shelley and Spenser on him. The poets who influenced Yeats were diverse and include the English Romantic poets - Wordsworth, Blake, and Keats, and the French Symbolists, such as Stephen Mallarme and Arthur Rimbaud. He was also influenced by Irish mythology and folklore as is seen in his formative work, *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other poems*, published in 1869. Yeats was an Irish patriot who desired Ireland's political independence from England and many of his works are in praise of Irish culture and heritage.

In 1889, he met the Irish nationalist, Maud Gonne who was the great love of his life. It was mainly her influence that made him get involved in Irish politics and propelled him to join the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Though Maud Gonne never consented to marry him, she was the Muse who inspired him to write many poems and plays for her. He was passionate about Irish cultural identity and Irish heritage which was in line with Maud Gonne's fervent struggle for political independence for her nation. Among the most famous poems of Yeats are *The Stolen Child*, *The Second Coming*, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, *Sailing to Byzantium* and *Among School Children* alongside his powerful poems that document political unrest such as *September 1913* and *Easter 1916*.

Activity: Read some of the poems he wrote in the 1890s and identify the works that reflect Yeats' love for Ireland and its cultural heritage.

Yeats with his friend and patron, Lady Gregory founded the Irish Literary Theatre to revive Celtic dramatic literature. He was a cultural revolutionary and wrote 26 plays. Yeats joined hands with another outstanding Irish playwright John Middleton Synge and established the famous Abbey Theatre, one of the leading cultural institutions of Ireland. The motto of the Abbey theatre was to ‘bring upon stage the deeper emotions of Ireland’. In his manifesto to the Abbey Theatre group, Yeats declared, "We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted & imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory ... & that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, & without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed." ². Yeats was thus a pillar of the Irish literary establishment. The Abbey theatre he founded continues to play a vital role in launching new, young Irish writers and playwrights



Source: www.flicker.com

13.2 FAMOUS LINES OF W.B. YEATS

Yeats truly celebrated status can be best seen in some of the famous lines he wrote:

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

“There are no strangers here; only friends you haven’t met.”

“Happiness is neither virtue nor pleasure, neither this thing nor that but simply growth. We are happy when we are growing.”

“People who lean on logic and philosophy and rational exposition end by starving the best part of the mind.”

Such lines stand testimony to the romantic and humane aspects of Yeats’s mind.

Activity: Read other poems by Yeats, and identify some of his most memorable lines. Yeats is remarkable for writing on multifarious subjects that include nationalism, mythology, culture, heritage, romantic love of life and beauty, Christianity etc.

Check your progress 1:

Write a note on Yeats’s involvement in the Irish literary movement of the early twentieth century.

13.3 THE POEM: *THE SECOND COMING*

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: 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,
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,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,*

13.4 CRITICAL SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The above poem was written in 1919 and published in both *The Nation* and *The Dial* in November 1920 and later in Yeats's collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). Yeats wrote the poem to coincide with the end of World War I (1914-18) that had caused suffering and death, torture, hunger and disillusionment to millions of people. The First World War had let loose anarchy in the world. During the War, bombs were dropped, and many thousands of innocent people were killed which made people think that the time had come for the end of the world. The War proved catastrophic, almost signalling the end of the world and people began to wait for relief from the cruel happenings. This parallels the waiting of those who had earlier, witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus and had waited for his promised second coming, that is, the second coming of Jesus to earth, as revealed in the Book of Revelation (the last Book of the New Testament). In the New Testament, it is stated that the second coming would happen at the end of a catastrophic war and that the Saviour would arrive and take all devout people to a joyous life in heaven. The apocalyptic prediction of the collapse of civilization as revealed in the Book of Revelation seemed truly prophetic in the context of the deadly world War

The New Testament made many Christians long for Jesus's return to the world a second time as their Saviour. The concept of time span is revealed by the title with the three words, '*The Second Coming*'. Just as Christ's earlier arrival in the world was for saving men and women from their sins and punishments, in the same way the poet feels the second coming of Jesus will be to save mankind from total annihilation as evidenced in the First World War.

The poem is difficult to understand with its shocking imagery and obscurity. Once the images are well explained, it is easy to apprehend the theme of the poem. Simply stated it is a lament for the death of the old world and an expression of hope and expectation of a possible rebirth of a new one. The poem draws upon the Biblical symbolism of the apocalypse and the second coming of Christ to make the point. The poem is deeply pessimistic for the "Second Coming," since it is only an event that people desire; where people think there will be light, given the reality of the catastrophic war, only darkness remains.

“Yeats believed that history is cyclical, and his poem ‘The Second Coming’— a two-stanza poem in blank verse—with its imagery of swirling chaos and terror, prophesies the cataclysmic end of an era. Critics associated the poem with various contemporary calamities, such as the Easter rising of 1916, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the rise of fascism, and the political decay of eastern Europe.”³

13.5 THE HISTORICAL AND THE BIBLICAL CONTEXTS

This is an elaboration of the previous section (13.3) that provided you with a brief summary of the poem. Yeats' genius is seen in his fusion of the historical and the Biblical contexts in the poem.

1. This poem is based on *The Book of Revelation*. The title of the poem, *The Second Coming* is a phrase out of *the Book of Revelation*. *The Book of Revelation* – also variedly called *the Apocalypse of John*, *Revelation to John* or *Revelation from Jesus Christ* is the final book of the New Testament, and consequently is also the final book of the Christian Bible.

The Bible is of two parts- *the Old Testament* and *the New Testament*. *The Book of Revelation*, the final book of the New Testament is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament canon. The word Apocalypse means ‘unveiling’ or ‘revelation’. Thus, it occupies a central place in Christian eschatology . We have evidence of the second coming of Jesus in the Gospels (Matthew 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5–26; John 14:25–29), in *the Book of Revelation*, and in other biblical and traditional sources.

“**Second Coming**, also called **Second Advent** or **Parousia**, in Christianity, is the future return of Christ in glory, when it is understood that he will set up his kingdom, judge his enemies, and reward the faithful, living and dead.”⁴ John in his Gospel says that he received new revelation concerning the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Revelation 1:18, the figure whom John sees, identifies himself as ‘the First and the Last,’ who ‘was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever’, a reference to the Resurrection of Jesus. In the first ten verses the emphasis is on what he heard in special announcements in preparation for the return of Christ. In verses 11-21, however, the stress falls on what John sees concerning the actual return of the Lord. The return of the Lord brings to a close the Tribulation and the wrath of God.

The key literary influence running through this poem from start to finish is the biblical *Book of Revelation* (and *the Bible* more generally). In *the Book of Revelation*, Jesus is predicted to return to the Earth (in what's called "The Second Coming") and usher in a new era of peace, joy, and union with God. This poem is a kind of subversion of that story, seeing a bizarre beast in place of the expected saviour.

Historical Context

Since the date of composition of Yeats’ poem is 1919, i.e., a year after the end of World War I, the historical period is clear and significant even though Yeats does not make any explicit reference to it. The fallout of the war was the death of nearly 20 million people while another 20 million were wounded..

The first few lines of the poem (starting from the 3rd line) sum up the disjointed time after the war.

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

These lines detail the devastation caused by the War and the last two lines in particular is almost a foretelling of the second World War, almost prophesying the coming of “the worst” like Adolf Hitler , ‘full of passionate intensity’. Though Yeats is no prophet or foreseer, his words anticipate the deadly fascist violence that Hitler unleashed two decades later leading to World War II (1939-45). Yeats juxtaposes the historical context of the First World War that he is presently concerned with with an end-of-the-world scenario, which transforms the work partly to a work of eschatology—that is, writing about the apocalypse. The Biblical revelation had foretold the futuristic happening of a degenerate world, speedily coming to an end. Thus the poem has both a historical context woven around the Biblical narrative of the birth and crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection that holds the promise of his possible second coming to save mankind.

Check your progress 2:

Explain the biblical and historical contexts of this poem.

13.6 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

While the first stanza describes the catastrophic state of the people, the second stanza is explicit about the Biblical reference:

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming!*

But the main idea in "The Second Coming" can be elusive, especially because the poem ends with a complicated question that takes up the last five lines of the poem.

*The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

Before we take up the analysis of these last five lines, it is pertinent to focus on Yeats's use of the word 'gyre' which appears in the opening line: '*Turning and turning in the widening gyre*'. The word 'gyre' is used in oceanography and climatology. It means a vast circular system made up of ocean currents that spirals about a central point. The world *gyre* simply means spiral that widens on going up or down. Here the falcon (refer to the next line) is seen spinning round and round. As the falcon gyrates, it cannot hear the falconer. The 'Falcon' symbolizes the hawk which is the symbol of logic. Thus the falcon represents man's intellect while the falconer stands for his strong feelings about the way the world has turned anarchic (with no controlling rules or principles to give order). The image of Falcon and Falconer continues throughout the poem. Here in the poem it can also stand for the interacting and conflicting eras. According to the poet "things fall apart and the centre cannot hold", where the centre refers to the falconer and the things refer to the Falcon.

The word 'gyre' is also significant in its reference to the cyclical nature of history. Yeats believed in the theory that history consists of cycles that lasts two thousand years and then repeats itself. Yeats suggests that at the end of the 20th century the current cycle will end and the next one will be ushered in. The current cycle of 2000 years thus includes 1919 when the poem was written. This cycle had begun long time back when Jesus was born. You must remember that a *new era* started with the *birth of Christ*. Yeats says that he and his generation are living in a chaotic time. The world had gone through a terrible War, which was widespread throughout Europe and had caused the death of millions of innocent people.

Yeats, looking back on the present times as characterised by chaos, feels that the world has regressed to the point where "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Anarchy and confusion are prevailing all over the world post- War, which had degenerated into a bloodbath of innocent killings. The virtue-rewards and the sin-punishment

syndrome had taken a reverse turn whereby good people do not get justice while those full of passionate intensity enjoy the best of times. The first stanza presents a world devastated by war, inhumanity and violence and sets the tone for the second and concluding stanza that presages a new era with the second coming of Jesus. These conditions have been prophesied in *the Bible* and the poet prepares us for the next stage which according to him is not a sanguine expectation; he is sceptical about it providing relief and ushering in a new era of peace and harmony.

The poet starts the second stanza with a reference to *the Book of Revelation* and **repeats the idea of second coming in the next two lines**. Soon the poet sees a big image of *Spiritus Mundi*. This phrase means the spirit or the outlook or the social and cultural values characteristic of an era of human history. Though it was supposed to provide relief, the poet is troubled by visualizing it. Why?

This is because Yeats pictures the spirit to be like a beast, a man-lion where the head of a man is conjoined to the body of a lion. In this avatar, it shows itself to be without compassion or empathy for humans. The brutality of war had dried human feelings to such an extent that human beings are no longer capable of reacting to the sorrow and misery of fellow beings all round. Yeats's lines remind one of the twin poems *The Lamb* and *the Tiger* where the poet contrasts God's creation of a fearsome tiger with that of a gentle lamb. The speaker is in awe of the fearsome qualities of the tiger, and rhetorically wonders whether the same creator could have also made the lamb earlier. Jesus in his first descent into the world was like a gentle lamb. But the second coming may be like that of a tiger. This is how Yeats describes the coming of an apocalypse to ravage the world, no longer like a gentle lamb, but as a ferocious tiger.

"The twenty centuries of stony sleep" relates to the barbaric age prior to the advent of Christianity. But after the arrival of Jesus, the earlier 2000 years of barbarism had ended. As the world was moving towards the end of the 20th century once again barbarism had erupted. Now as the Christian Era is about to end, it is moving *"towards Bethlehem to be born"*. Bethlehem is the city of Jesus' birth. The beast is slouching towards Bethlehem. Slouching means to trudge; or, to move lazily. It is not a gentle Jesus, but a malevolent beast from the spirit world – *Spiritus Mundi* – that will now take birth at Bethlehem.

The sight of *Spiritus Mundi* vanishes and *"the darkness drops again"*. The ending of the poem suggests the wait for the promised relief that Christ will be born when the world goes through such a cataclysmic upheaval. But this time, Yeats fears it is not going to be the gentle, kind, peace loving Jesus to save mankind who will be born, but a rough beast to punish the sinners and the wicked. It seems as though Yeats fears punishment and not pardon at the end of the 2000 year cycle. "Thinking of the next 2000-year cycle, which he calls "the Second Coming," Yeats is filled with pessimism and dread. He imagines a "rough beast" rising from the sands in the desert and wonders what it is, but from the description and the questions, it is clear that he anticipates that nothing good can come in the next cycle. If the current cycle, as bad as it is, was kicked off by "a rocking cradle," a harmless event, then how much worse will be the next cycle, which is being heralded by this ominous beast? The main idea, then, seems to be pessimism about the current age and even more pessimism about the future"⁵.

13.7 SYMBOLISM IN THE POEM

From a detailed analysis given above, it is easy to identify the symbols used by Yeats in the poem. It begins with the title "The Second Coming", a phrase from *the Book of Revelation* to signify the coming of Jesus a second time. Yeats use of the 'gyre' is related to his belief in the 2000 year cycle

the world goes through. The world in 1919, the year of the poem's creation, is slowly moving towards 2000, symbolic of the end of 2000 years after the death of Jesus. Christian values taught by Jesus of love and peace, service, thankfulness, compassion, forgiveness, and empathy have all been forgotten as evidenced in the just concluded World War. Yeats anticipates a new cycle to begin. But he does not hold any hope of God sending his Son, but more likely a man-lion to destroy wickedness. "A page of history is about to flip; one epoch is about to give birth to another"⁶.

13.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the poetry of W. B. Yeats, an outstanding Modernist poet of the early twentieth century. We also read his poem "The Second Coming", and discussed the historical and biblical contexts of the poem. The symbolism of the poem was also discussed against the background of Yeats's concept of cyclical history.

13.9 Unit end questions

- (1) How does the title relate to the poem?
- (2) Discuss the symbolism in this poem with reference to Yeats's cyclical theory of history.
- (3) Explain the pessimistic overtone of the poem
- (4) Is the poem relevant to our times? Explain.

13.10 GLOSSARY

Celtic: today, the term generally refers to the languages and respective cultures of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and Brittany, also known as the Celtic nations

Saviour: ((in Christianity) God or Jesus Christ as the redeemer of sin and saver of souls.

Annihilation: extinction, destruction

Obscurity: a thing that is unclear or difficult to understand

Apprehend: Understand, perceive

Apocalypse: the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the biblical book of Revelation

cataclysmic: causing sudden and violent upheaval

Easter rising of 1916: The Rising was launched by Irish republicans against British rule in Ireland with the aim of establishing an independent Irish Republic while the United Kingdom was fighting the First World War.

Russian Revolution of 1917: Russian Revolution took place in 1917 when the peasants and working class people of Russia revolted against the government of Tsar Nicholas II. The new communist government created the country, the Soviet Union.

fascism: a form of far-right, authoritarian ultra-nationalism characterized by dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition, and strong regimentation of society and of the economy, which came to prominence in early 20th-century Europe.

The Old Testament: the first part of the Christian Bible, comprising thirty-nine books and corresponding approximately to the Hebrew Bible. Most of these books were written in Hebrew, some in Aramaic, between about 1200 and 100 BC. They comprise the chief texts of the law, history, prophecy, and wisdom literature of the ancient people of Israel.

The New Testament: the second part of the Christian Bible, written originally in Greek and recording the life and teachings of Christ and his earliest followers. It includes the four Gospels -

of Matthew, John, Mark and Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, twenty-one Epistles by St Paul and others, and the book of Revelation.

canon: the list of works considered to be permanently established as being of the highest quality.

Eschatology: in the history of religion, the term eschatology refers to conceptions of the last things: immortality of the soul, rebirth, resurrection, migration of the soul, and the end of time. This concept also has secular parallels as for example, in the turning points in one's life and in one's understanding of death.

Second Advent: the prophesied return of Christ to earth at the Last Judgment. The Last Judgement is the day when God judges everyone and decides whether they will go to Heaven or Hell.

Parousia: another term for the 'Second Coming'.

Resurrection: in Christian belief the rising of Christ again to life from the dead

Tribulation: grievous trouble; severe trial or suffering

bizarre: very strange or unusual

oceanography: the branch of science that deals with the physical and biological properties and phenomena of the sea.

climatology: the scientific study of climate

Gyrate: cause to move or whirl rapidly in a circle or a spiral

Anarchic: with no controlling rules or principles to give order

Presage: be a sign or warning of (an imminent event, typically an unwelcome one)

Sanguine: optimistic, positive, hopeful

Sceptical: not easily convinced; having doubts or reservations

13.11 REFERENCES

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13.12 FURTHER READING

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