The Second Coming

Characters

A falconer and his/her falcon
The "best" and "worst" among the human population
The Sphinx (the image referred to in the second stanza)
"Indignant desert birds"; harbingers of doom
The "rough beast"-may or may not be related to the Sphinx
The speaker, observing the apocalyptic scene

SUMMARY

Plot

"The Second Coming" is a commentary on the disintegration of modern civilization, and culminates in a terrible prophecy of the world's end, overcome by a nightmarishly malevolent, bestial force.

Style for "The Second Coming"

The poem's structure relates directly to its content. A relatively short poem, "The Second Coming" is made up of two compact, distinct stanzas that shape the piece's content: the first stanza outlines the present condition of the world as the speaker envisages it, and the second contains a prophecy about the future and the meaning of the Second Coming. The stanzas are causally connected in that the decadence and decline of civilization described in the first sets the stage for the consequence of evil that emerges in the second.

Unlike "Among Schoolchildren" and "Sailing to Byzantium," "The Second Coming" does not adhere to a strict verse structure or rhyme scheme. Though still an example of Yeats' carefully polished style, in which each word seems painstakingly chosen, the fact that it is structurally freer than some of Yeats' other work helps to reinforce its theme of "anarchy" and the destruction of a world.

This poem was first published in Michael Robartes and The Dancer (1921).

Themes and Motifs

- **Unity of Being**: The central theme of Yeats' poetry is the conflict between the ideal and the real. In A Vision Yeats outlined his philosophical response to this dualistic problem, a response that depends in large part on the symbol of the sphere. For Yeats the sphere represents the unity of being, or a unified "truth" beyond the chaos of opposition (in other contexts Yeats referred to this transcendent stance as "tragic-joy"). The sphere symbol is comprised of pairs of interpenetrating gyres (also called cones or vortexes), and these are in a state of continual conflict with one another while simultaneously emerging from one another. The gyres stand for the continual opposition between the basic elements of existence; e.g. the sun and the moon, day and night, life and death, man and woman,
permanence and change. Unity of being is a state of enlightenment that is simultaneously involved with the turmoil of the mundane; in other words, unity of being is paradoxically both transcendent and manifest in the world.

- **The Collective Unconscious:** Yeats wrote of his belief in three doctrines: (1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy; (2) That the borders of our memories are shifting, and that our memories are a part of a great memory, the memory of Nature herself; (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols (qtd. in Dyson 25). Another way of thinking about this philosophy is to identify it as a kind of "collective unconscious," a concept that plays an important role in Yeats' poetry. This term refers to the Jungian idea that all human beings share, at an unconscious level, a basic vocabulary of images, or "archetypes," that help to give meaning to experience. For instance, "The Second Coming," with its apocalyptic vistas, employs images that are archetypal in this sense (consider for instance the circling "desert birds" of line 17). The collective unconscious, which lies beyond individual consciousness, is also an important symbol of the interrelatedness of human life, and thus is closely aligned with Yeats’ Unity of Being.

- **Magic:** Yeats’ belief in the supernatural—a belief originating in the Romantic revolt against scientific, hyper-rational conceptions of the world—provides an alternative to conventional forms of rationality and a response to the modern loss of meaning. Yeats was convinced that change was imminent in the modern world, and that we would develop an understanding that "natural and supernatural are knit together" and thus construct a "new science" to explain the workings of our universe (Dyson 25). His theory was to culminate in his book A Vision.

- **Art:** Yeats espoused a comprehensive theory of art that embraced all forms, including the visual and the musical. Expressions of this theory abound in his work; for instance, the diction, rhythm, and rhyme of his poetry are meant to consciously evoke music. Further, the poet frequently treats the subject of art itself, seeing in it, as did his Romantic precursors, a permanence that often satisfied his philosophical search for unity and balance (in that art can transcend the conflict of opposites in mortal existence), and occasionally even functioned as a replacement for the imperfection of life.

- **Alienation and the Search for Meaning:** A Modernist poet, Yeats was concerned with the existential crisis in society and the search for new foundations of meaning. In the early twentieth century the Western world had been shaken by events like the First World War and the growth of secularism, and by new advances in scientific, philosophical, medical, and other fields of knowledge. Traditional values and systems of truth had been questioned by thinkers like Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche, and the intelligentsia was in the process of reevaluating definitions of self, knowledge, and morality. The result was general disillusionment and uncertainty, and Yeats, like other modernists, spent much of his career searching for alternative definitions of truth, and alternative means of transcendence.

- **Symbolic Systems:** Symbolism is crucial to Yeats’ work. His symbols can be thought of as many-sided crystals, which "grow slowly from solutions of traditions, from the dissolved thoughts of many minds" (Henn 146). They are contexts of meaning, allowing for multiple interpretations and variations within themselves. Yeats relies on them so much because for him they compensated for the modern loss of spirituality; Yeats felt it was the artist's role to reinvest tired symbols (some of his most common include the sun, the moon, towers, masks, trees, and birds) with transcendent meaning. When properly utilized, they could also work together to create the mystical "unity" that Yeats strove for in his work. As Unterecker puts it: "when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion" (Unterecker 32).
Historical Repetition: Yeats viewed history as cyclical. By observing nature he posited an endlessly repeating pattern of twenty-eight phases (corresponding to the phases of the moon). Yeats described this view in detail in a prose work entitled A Vision, where he conceived of a great wheel with twenty-eight spokes that correspond to all things. For Yeats the cycle of history included a movement from the "primary" to the "antithetical": the "primary" is associated with primeval darkness and the coarseness of the first day of creation, the "antithetical" with refinement and light. The abovementioned "gyres" (see "The Search for Unity of Being") correspond to the historical cycles. As one age begins to decline, so the next age is born within the dying spiral of the previous gyre; thus, thesis and antithesis are continually in simultaneous progress.

HIGHLIGHTS

The Title

The phrase "the second coming" is taken from the Christian narrative: according to the bible, the arrival of an antichrist would inspire a period of anarchy that would be followed by the Second Coming of Christ; this "Second Coming" would be a period of divine retribution in which the antichrist would be destroyed and the wicked punished. Interestingly, Yeats does not actually focus on the return of Christ in his poem, but seems to be referring instead to the period of evil preceding this return.

Stanza One

The first stanza outlines the contemporary situation and sets the scene for the horrible revelation in the second.

The poem begins with a reference to Yeats' concept of the "gyre" (1).

Historical Repetition: When Yeats speaks of the "turning" of the gyre, he is referring to the idea that the present age is changing into the next or antithetical age (recall that the "gyres" are Yeats' mythical symbols for historical eras). For Yeats such changes inevitably brought confusion and disruption; hence the "anarchy" of the poem.

In the second line, the speaker refers to a disruption in the relationship between falcon and falconer.

The falcon and falconer ideally represent a symbiotic relationship based on reciprocal communication and trust; though the falcon has the power to escape the falconer, the strength of their relationship (and the quality of the falconer's training) ensures that it won't. However, in the scenario the speaker envisions, the bond between falcon and falconer has been disrupted. This metaphor of a broken trust could be expanded to refer to the relationship between man and God, since the speaker seems to be arguing that it is this relationship or communication that is breaking down in the present age.

Note the repetition of words in these and other lines of the poem [for instance: "falcon" and "falconer" (2), "Turning and Turning" (1), and "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand" (9-10)]. This repetition gives the poem an incantatory aspect that adds to the prophetic atmosphere, in turn contributing to the poem's mood of ominousness and foreboding.
This leads to the following, often-quoted lines: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (3). The poem continues to expand on the theme of social dissolution with the line, "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (4).

Note how the language used in the poem contributes to its tension. In the above line, for example, the word "mere" is used to describe "anarchy." Mere means something trifling or minor and anarchy suggests social chaos. The juxtaposition of a word indicating banality and insignificance with one indicating upheaval and confusion create a tension of opposites in the poem that contributes to its meaning.

Unity of Being: While the poem stresses the dislocation and disruption of contemporary life, it is also important to remember its philosophical underpinning, which is an implied search for a unity of being. Yeatsan philosophy was strongly influenced by the idea of balance and harmony; the advent of a "bad" age, which follows the "good" or Christian Age, is part of this inherently natural process of historical balance. This in turn also leads to an acceptance of both the good and bad as part of the holistic nature of the cosmos.

The apocalyptic vision Yeats suggests is not unique but has been a part of the store of historical myth for centuries. We have already seen some of the Christian elements at work in this poem. What other apocalyptic traditions come into play here? Consider a research paper in which you investigate cultural variations on this theme, and make an argument about how you think they inform Yeats' work.

As the stanza proceeds, the images of destruction become more specific: "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (5-6).

The Collective Unconscious: This image is telling: tides are usually associated with the sea and fruition, while here the phrase "blood-dimmed" gives an impression of war and slaughter. Arguably, the sea is one of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, and its resonance as an image of destruction appears in such common stories as that of the biblical flood.

The word "loosed" (as if the tide is a wild animal that had been struggling to be released from a cage) adds to the feeling of unrestrained anarchy and violence. Note that this word is repeated in lines 4 and 5-in addition to the incantatory effect described above, the repetition here emphasizes the word's importance to the themes of the poem.

The speaker next suggests the type of people who will rule in the new age: "the worst" (7).

Lines 7-8 suggest an impending dominance and "passionate intensity" of evil or ineptitude, and a concomitant lack of conviction in those who are actually qualified to be leaders. This latter group is presumably Yeats' "elite"-the kind of capable artist-statesmen-philosophers that he imagined to inhabit ancient Byzantium (see "Sailing to Byzantium"). Placing the poem in its historical context - it first appeared in 1920, following the end of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and, particularly, during a time of great political turmoil in Ireland - these lines can easily be read as expressing the hopelessness and the sense of a loss of innocence experienced by many during this period of widespread, violent upheaval.

Note how, in line 8, the word "passionate," in conjunction with the word "worst," takes on a diabolic energy, as opposed to its standard connotation of love.

One of the central elements of the poem is a movement between opposites; this movement creates an inner tension that structurally echoes the phrase "[t]hings fall apart" (3). For instance, consider the perfect inversion of the last two lines of the first stanza, and the antithetical juxtaposition of "worst" and "best."
The first stanza closes without elaborating on this idea of a modern decline.

In retrospect, the pace of the first stanza seems rapid, in part because of its varied rhythm. Instead of a monotonous series of observations, tension is created when short sharp phrases ["Things fall apart" (3)] are juxtaposed with longer ones ["Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer" (1-2)]. Note too that the tone of the first stanza seems declarative and distant; the observations it contains are presented with certainty, as if they are objective facts. In part this tone is due to Yeats' philosophy that the cycles of history cannot be changed. The subtle placement of words like "worst" (8) and "drowned" (7) create a tone of ominous portent. Note for instance how the penultimate line of the first stanza ends with the word "worst." The word's placement leaves it "hanging" (in a sense), thereby heightening its significance. The rhythm of the next line seems to be slowed down by the disruptive and harsh sound of "worst," making the last line of the stanza seem softer in comparison. This analysis can be applied to other parts of the first stanza. In line five, for example, the word "everywhere" is emphasized in the same way.

**Alienation and the Search for Meaning:** The loss of meaning and the incipient destruction expressed in the above stanza emphasizes the dire contemporary need for a reconnection with a more enlightened state of existence.

**Stanza Two**

The second stanza opens by qualifying and determining the import of the observations made in the first, characterizing them as a "revelation" of the "Second Coming" (9).

**Historical Repetition:** In many mythological systems, dire events are seen as precursors of great historical changes. The revelation Yeats refers to here indicates that the same thing is true of the events listed in the preceding stanza, and that the speaker is actually describing a fundamental change in the conditions of the world.

Line 11 makes the point about "revelation" more specific, placing it within the Christian tradition. It is worth noting that the "Second Coming" is not itself the cause of the disruptions the speaker has described, but rather a response to them. According to the Christian tradition, after the "First Coming," the teachings of Christ are eventually inverted and replaced by a regime of evil. "The Second Coming" is meant to deal with this lapse.

Note the emphasis, again by means of repetition, on the word "surely" in the first two lines of the second stanza. What is the significance of this emphasis? What tone does it convey? Does it undercut the speaker's professed certainty at all? Or is it merely an incantatory effect?

The repetition of the title of the poem in this second stanza occurs as an exclamation: "The Second Coming!" (11). The effect of this single exclamation is important: it creates the impression that the speaker has interrupted himself to ponder at greater length the significance of the repeated phrase. Also, unlike the first stanza, it allows a certain degree of emotion into the poem, as the speaker seems to express terror (or perhaps wonder, or even conviction) at the realization of what is actually happening.

In lines 12-13 an image emerges that "troubles" the speaker's sight. This image, which appears to be a sphinx, comes from "Spiritus Mundi."

**The Collective Unconscious; Magic:** This image of the "Spiritus Mundi" does not originate solely from the poet's imagination but from a larger reservoir of images and knowledge. "Spiritus Mundi" refers to a reservoir of images of Platonic forms. It is both the artist's source of
imaginative material and a shared collection of symbols and images common to all humanity. This is similar to the "archetypal unconscious" or collective human unconscious suggested by Jung. For Yeats, however, this source or reservoir was neither of a conscious or unconscious character but rather originated from a supernatural source that existed prior to birth (Dyson 54).

**Magic:** The speaker introduces a symbol of evil in lines 14-15: "A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" (14-15). The mixture of man and beast is of course a typical symbol of apocalypse; it is also a reference to the sphinx of Egyptian mythology (which Yeats became familiar with in his studies of the occult). Note too the simple effectiveness of the simile here ("blank and pitiless as the Sun"); the image of the sun is used to express both a terrifying emptiness and an emotional vacuity. This simile compounds the series of inversions the speaker has already described, for the sun is usually used positively as a symbol of life and warmth.

The sphinx is described as "Moving its slow thighs" (16).

Note the subtleties of Yeats' language toward the end of this stanza. The phrase "moving its slow thighs" (16) creates the impression of a ponderous and deliberate weight, which, in reference to this monster, perfectly suggests an ominous and persistent movement toward an evil goal. This meaning is reinforced several lines later by the carefully chosen word "slouches" (22); though the approaching beast is not fast, it is ineluctable, a fact that makes it all the more terrifying. The desolation and emptiness of this passage is heightened by the image of the desert birds and, particularly, by the use of the word "shadows" to describe their presence (17). This last word adds to the sense of lifelessness and unreality in the scene.

The poem concludes with the prophetic words that the "last twenty centuries" have slowly been breeding this monster which now "slouches towards Bethlehem" to begin the new gyre or cycle of history.

**Historical Repetition:** The inversion of the Christian era is further emphasized by the fact that an approaching beast (perhaps to be born of the aforementioned sphinx) is to be born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ and a place thus symbolic, in Christianity, of charity and compassion. The beast, of course, will signify the opposite.

Why do you think Yeats believed that the future would necessarily contrast ominously with the past and present - why, for example, couldn't a new era be wonderful, compared with the present? Yeats' view of the world, here, seems to fall neatly in accord with Christian apocalyptic beliefs, and suggests a perhaps irrational fear of change. At the same time, however, the chaotic political events of Yeats' time (which many at the time believed were genuine signs of an apocalypse) could have seemed sufficiently dire to him to indicate that only worse times were ahead. What kind of doom does this poem ultimately seem to suggest - a world ruined by human means or by the emergence of a supernatural, evil force? Do you think Yeats' perspective on these issues is justified or paranoid?