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Research Papers

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**“A CRITIQUE STUDY OF W. B. YEATS'S THE SECOND COMING”**

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Abstract

*W B Yeats is considered one of the finest poets in the English language. He was devoted to the cause of Irish nationalism and played a significant part in the Celtic Revival Movement, promoting the literary heritage of Ireland & ancient Irish sagas. Magic and occult theory is also important elements of his own in Yeats's work, such in lyric poem, "The Second Coming" is viewed as a prophetic poem that envisions the close of the Christian epoch and the violent birth of a new age. The poem's title makes reference to the Biblical reappearance of Christ. Other symbols in the poem are drawn from mythology, the occult, and Yeats's view of history as defined in his cryptic prose volume A Vision.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

"The Second Coming." soon after the end of [World War I](#), known at the time as "The Great War" and "The War to End All Wars". It was also not long since the Easter Rising in Ireland, a rebellion that was brutally suppressed and the topic of Yeats' earlier poem "[Easter, 1916](#)," and the [Russian Revolution of 1917](#). It's no wonder the poet's words convey his sense that the world he knew was coming to an end. In December 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and was determined to make the most of the occasion. He was aware of the symbolic value of an Irish winner so soon after Ireland had gained independence, and sought to highlight the fact at each available opportunity. His reply too many of the letters of congratulations sent to him contained the words:-

*"I consider that this honor has come to me less as an individual than as a representative of Irish literature, it is part of Europe's welcome to the Free State."*

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Critical analysis will be the Central agenda of the proposed research paper. The interpretation

of the poem is interpreted in different perspective up to Biblical reappearance of Christ. The poem is explored and explained with understanding different perspective. The Harvard system of Research Methodology will be followed for this exploratory comparative research paper.

**PAPER**

William Butler Yeats wrote "The Second Coming" generally viewed as a symbolic revelation of the end of the Christian era, and is one of Yeats's most widely commented-on works. Thought to exemplify Yeats's cyclical interpretation of history, "The Second Coming" is regarded as a masterpiece of Modernist poetry and is variously interpreted by scholars, whose principal concern has been to unravel its complex symbolism.

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

"The Second Coming" was intended by Yeats to describe the current historical moment (the poem appeared in 1921) in terms of these gyres. Yeats believed that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation, as history

reached the end of the outer gyre (to speak roughly) and began moving along the inner gyre. In his definitive edition of Yeats's poems, Richard J. Finneran quotes Yeats's own notes:

*"The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to its place of greatest contraction... The revelation [that] approaches will... take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre..."*

"The Second Coming" is a [poem](#) composed by [Irish](#) poet [William Butler Yeats](#) in 1919 and first printed in [The Dial](#) (November 1920) and afterwards included in his 1921 collection of verses titled [Michael Robartes and the Dancer](#). The poem uses [Christian](#) imagery regarding the [Apocalypse](#) and [second coming](#) as allegory to describe the atmosphere in post-war Europe. The poem is considered a major work of [Modernist poetry](#) and has been reprinted in several collections including [The Norton Anthology of Modernist Poetry](#).

In the early drafts of the poem, Yeats used the phrase "the Second Birth", but substituted the phrase "Second Coming" while revising. The [Second Coming](#) of Christ referred to in the [Biblical Book of Revelation](#) is here described as an approaching dark force with a ghastly and dangerous purpose. Yeats's description of a 'rough beast' has more in common with [The Beast \(Revelation\)](#) than the [Christian](#) concept of the Second Coming of Christ. This image points rather to the sinister figure of [Antichrist](#) that precedes the Second Coming of Christ.

"The Second Coming," of course, refers to the Christian prophecy in the Bible's Book of Revelation that Jesus will return to reign over Earth in the end times. But Yeats had his own mystical view of the history and future end of the world, embodied in his image of the "gyres," cone-shaped spirals that intersect so that each gyre's narrowest point is contained inside the widest part of the other. The gyres represent different elemental forces in the historical cycles (or different strains in the development of an individual human psyche), each beginning in the purity of a concentrated point and dissipating/degenerating into chaos (or vice versa)—and his poem describes an apocalypse very different from the Christian vision of the end of the world.

W B Yeats spent years crafting an

elaborate, mystical theory of the universe that he described in his book *A Vision*. This theory issued in part from Yeats's lifelong fascination with the occult and mystical, and in part from the sense of responsibility Yeats felt to order his experience within a structured belief system. The system is extremely complicated and not of any lasting importance—except for the effect that it had on his poetry, which is of extraordinary lasting importance. The theory of history Yeats articulated in *A Vision* centers on a diagram made of two conical spirals, one inside the other, so that the widest part of one of the spirals rings around the narrowest part of the other spiral, and vice versa. Yeats believed that this image (he called the spirals "gyres") captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical process, and he divided each gyre into specific regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods (and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual's development).

W B Yeats had written in 1900 that: 'It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, than any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of Nature. The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstances of life' The symbols that he uses here similarly partake of a wider symbolism of 'numberless meanings' rather than just the ones which are linked to his System and the poem's immediate inspiration, so that although a knowledge of Yeats's ideas certainly clarifies elements in the poem, 'The Second Coming' has no single explanation.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,*

It has been said that the essence of great poems is their mystery, and that is certainly true of "The Second Coming." It is a mystery, it describes a mystery, and it offers distinct and resonant images, but opens itself to infinite layers of interpretation. "The Second Coming" has resonated in cultures all over the world since its first publication, and many writers have alluded to it in their own work.

The opening image derives from the System and the [widening gyre](#), an historical movement or trend that started at the [birth of Christ](#), is figured as a falcon's towering. In the System, this gyre is accompanied by a diminishing gyre which reaches its minimum at the same time as the first reaches its widest extent, which may therefore be linked to the 'twenty centuries of stony sleep'; these gyres have the inevitability of the tides, and like them are connected to the Moon and its phases. In the symbol of the falcon, the falconer represents control but stands at the lowest point of the gyre's apex, so that, as the falcon towers higher, it can no longer hear the controlling centre. This leads to the stark, simple statements 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'. Indeed, much of the power of the opening section derives from the simplicity of its language, as well as the accumulation of symbols and images, which proceed with an oneiric logic through a single sentence: falcon's gyre widening, disintegration, anarchy, tide of blood, drowning of ceremony of innocence, weakness and passion.

The word [gyre](#) in the poem's first line may be used in a sense drawn from Yeats's book [A Vision](#), which sets out a theory of history and [metaphysics](#) Yeats claimed to have received from spirits. The theory of history articulated in *A Vision* centres on a diagram composed of two [conic helixes](#) ("gyres"), overlapping each other, so that the widest part of one cone occupies the same plane as the tip of the other cone, and vice versa. Yeats claimed that this image captured contrary motions inherent within the process of history, and he divided each gyre into different regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods (and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual's development). Yeats believed that in 1921 the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic moment, as history reached the end of the outer gyre and began moving along the inner gyre.

*The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,*

The falcon in the second line, turning and turning in the widening gyre, represents the 'gyres' or cones that Yeats refers to in his book. These govern the progression of time and the human race, and can be represented by the 28 phases of the moon. 2000 years ago was the beginning of a new cycle, Christ was born at exactly the right time to have a perfect soul, and now we reach the end of

the cycle, nearing the end of the 28th phase, about to start again. Yeats imagines the rebirth of Christ as the start of the new cycle, and the revolution at hand in the rebirth of the human race. Your analysis of the poem fits in with the end of the cycle when the gyres dictate that we will behave as we do and cause what is happening in the world, i.e. - wars and destruction, and ultimately our end.

*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.*

The technology progressing beyond the mankind's ability to control it. The problem was evident to Yeats 80 years ago, and the problem has worsened since then. Yeats shows his concern that technology has advanced to the point where mankind can do a great deal of harm with relative ease. The world had never seen destruction of the likes of World War I, and most people were shocked at the extensive loss of human life during the war.

In the time that Yeats speaks of, the rulers of the world were caught up in imperialism and expanding circles of power to the point where they would do almost anything to accomplish their goals. The ruthless power mongers were outspoken and numerous, and there seemed to be few who dared to speak out against them in the name of peace.

The lines "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" can be read as a paraphrase of one of the most famous passages from [Percy Bysshe Shelley's Prometheus Unbound](#), a book that Yeats, by his own admission, regarded from his childhood with religious awe:

*The good want power, but  
to weep barren tears.  
The powerful goodness want:  
worse need for them.  
The wise want love,  
and those who love want wisdom;  
And all best things are thus confused to ill."*

The speaker describes a nightmarish scene: the falcon, turning in a widening "gyre" (spiral), cannot hear the falconer; "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold"; anarchy is loosed upon the world; "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned." The best people, the speaker says, lack all conviction, but 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*

Chinua Achebe's "**Things fall apart**". It can believe the concept of "Spiritus Mundi", or as it is translated "the Spirit of the World", is nothing else but today's concept of collective unconscious, given to us by the work of the great Freud's disciple, Jung. It cannot know if it is familiar with his idea of collective unconscious, it has much in common with the theory of linguistic structuralism of Chomsky and Levi-Strauss, but it would fit very nicely to interpret the "Spiritus Mundi" syntagm as part of this idea (as something as an archetype idea, as is also the falcon in the beginning of the poem).

The second section of the poem offers a glimpse into the nature of that next, new world: It is a sphinx—"a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi... / A shape with lion body and the head of a man"—therefore it is not only a myth combining elements of our known world in new and unknown ways, but also a fundamental mystery, and fundamentally alien—"A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun." It does not answer the questions posed by the outgoing domain—therefore the desert birds disturbed by its rising, representing the inhabitants of the existing world, the emblems of the old paradigm, are "indignant." It poses its own new questions, and so Yeats must end his poem with the mystery, his question: "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

Surely, the speaker asserts, the world is near a revelation; "Surely the Second Coming is at hand." No sooner does he think of "the Second Coming," then he is troubled by "a vast image of the Spiritus Mundi, or the collective spirit of mankind: somewhere in the desert, a giant sphinx ("A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun") is moving, while the shadows of desert birds reel about it. The darkness drops again over the speaker's sight, but he knows that the sphinx's twenty centuries of "stony sleep" have been made a nightmare by the motions of "a rocking cradle." And what "rough beast," he wonders, "its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

The principal figure of the work is a sphinx-like creature with a lion's body and man's head, a "rough beast" awakened in the desert that

makes its way to Christ's birthplace, Bethlehem. While critics acknowledge the work's internal symbolic power, most have studied its themes in relation to Yeats's A Vision. According to the cosmological scheme of A Vision, the sweep of history can be represented by two intersecting cones, or gyres, each of which possesses one of two opposing "tinctures," primary and antithetical, that define the dominant modes of civilization. Yeats associated the primary or solar tincture with democracy, truth, abstraction, goodness, egalitarianism, scientific rationalism, and peace. The contrasting antithetical or lunar tincture he related to aristocracy, hierarchy, art, fiction, evil, particularity, and war. According to Yeats's view, as one gyre widens over a period of two thousand years the other narrows, producing a gradual change in the age. The processes then reverses after another twenty centuries have passed, and so on, producing a cyclic pattern throughout time. In the early twentieth-century Yeats envisioned the primary gyre, the age of Christianity, to be at its fullest expansion and approaching a turning point when the primary would begin to contract and the antithetical enlarge. Yeats wrote: "All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilisation belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation as in a lightning flash ... of the civilisation that must slowly take its place." Thus, in "The Second Coming" scholars view the uncontrolled flight of the falcon as representative of this primary expansion at its chaotic peak, while the coming of an antithetical disposition is symbolized in the appearance of the "rough beast" in the desert, a harbinger of the new epoch.

*Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;  
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  
Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.*

The [manticore](#) or [sphinx](#) like beast described in the poem had long captivated Yeats' imagination. He wrote in the introduction to his play [The Resurrection](#), "I began to imagine [around 1904], as always at my left side just out of the range of sight, a brazen winged beast which I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction", noting that the beast was "Afterwards described in my poem 'The Second Coming'. However, there are some differences between the two characters, mainly that the figure in the poem has no wings.

In other words, the world's trajectory along the gyre of science, democracy, and heterogeneity

is now coming apart, like the frantically widening flight-path of the falcon that has lost contact with the falconer; the next age will take its character not from the gyre of science, democracy, and speed, but from the contrary inner gyre—which, presumably, opposes mysticism, primal power, and slowness to the science and democracy of the outer gyre. The “rough beast” slouching toward Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age; the speaker's vision of the rising sphinx is his vision of the character of the new world.

*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?*

The phrase "stony sleep" is drawn from the mythology of [William Blake](#). In Blake's poem, [Urizen](#) falls, unable to bear the battle in [heaven](#) he has provoked. To ward off the fiery wrath of his vengeful brother Eternals, he frames a rocky womb for himself: "But Urizen laid in a stony sleep / Unorganiz'd, rent from Eternity." During this stony sleep, Urizen goes through seven ages of creation-birth as fallen man, until he emerges. This is the man who becomes the Sphinx of Egypt. Keeping in mind the overall message of the poem, the apocalypse, a rocking cradle could refer to the birth of the Anti-Christ (literal and figuratively), and Bethlehem was the birth place of Jesus Christ. The "beast" is slouching toward its aim (Bethlehem) to wreak havoc (the spirit of this world hates humans) on this earth (even though the ultimate end and greatest bloodshed will be his defeat). Maybe Keats saw that WWI didn't resolve conflict and saw something worse on the horizon (WWII). It would have been heart wrenching to have witnessed such human waste. (all at the hands of human choices but also with the coaxing of spiritus mundi). There is a verse in the Bible that says, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places"

Because of its stunning, violent imagery and terrifying ritualistic language, “The Second Coming” is one of Yeats's most famous and most anthologized poems; it is also one of the most thematically obscure and difficult to understand. Structurally, the poem is quite simple—the first stanza describes the conditions present in the world (things falling apart, anarchy, etc.), and the

second surmises from those conditions that a monstrous Second Coming is about to take place, not of the Jesus we first knew, but of a new messiah, a “rough beast,” the slouching sphinx rousing itself in the desert and lumbering toward Bethlehem. This brief exposition, though intriguingly blasphemous, is not terribly complicated; but the question of what it should signify to a reader is another story entirely.

'The Second Coming' also has an intrinsic linguistic vividness that is witnessed by the frequency with which it is quoted. From Chinua Achebe's novel, [Things Fall Apart](#), to Joan Didion's [Slouching Towards Bethlehem](#), almost every phrase in the poem has been used, usually more than once, to entitle a book or an article of greater or lesser impact (there is a collage version of the poem at [deuceofclubs.com](#) that uses some of these to build the poem from book-covers; some bits work better than others). Even relatively small modifications of language weaken it considerably, as is evidenced by Joni Mitchell's generally respectful reworking, '[Slouching Toward Bethlehem](#)'

The form of “The Second Coming” is full of aesthetic and linguistic pleasure which can be found in every line. It is written in a very rough iambic pentameter, but the meter is so loose, and the exceptions so frequent, that it actually seems closer to free verse with frequent heavy stresses. The rhymes are likewise haphazard; apart from the two couplets with which the poem opens, there are only coincidental rhymes in the poem, such as “man” and “sun.”

The underlying metric pattern of “The Second Coming” is iambic pentameter, that mainstay of English poetry from Shakespeare onward, in which each line is made up of five iambic feet,-

**da DUM / da DUM / da DUM / da DUM / da DUM.**

But this fundamental meter is not immediately evident in Yeats' poem, because the first line of each section (one hesitates to call them stanzas, because there are only two and they are nowhere near the same length or pattern) begins with an emphatic trochee and then moves into a very irregular, but nonetheless incantatory rhythm of mostly iambs:

**TURN ing / and TURN / ing in / the  
WIDE / ning GYRE  
SURE ly / some RE / ve LA / tion IS /  
at HAND**

The poem is sprinkled with variant feet,

many of them like the third foot in the first line above, pyrrhic (or unstressed) feet, which enhance and emphasize the stresses that follow them. And the last line repeats the strange pattern of the first lines of the section, beginning with a bang, the trochee, followed by the tripping of unstressed syllables as the second foot is turned around into an iamb:

**SLOU ches / toward BETH / le HEM / to be / BORN**

There are no end-rhymes, not many rhymes at all, in fact, though there are many echoes and repetitions:

*Turning and turning...  
The falcon... the falconer  
Surely... at hand  
Surely the Second Coming... at hand  
The Second Coming!*

Altogether the effect of all this irregularity of form and emphasis combined with the incantatory repetitions creates the impression that "The Second Coming" is not so much a made thing, a written poem, as it is a recorded hallucination, a dream captured.

The first stanza of "The Second Coming" is a powerful description of apocalypse, opening with the indelible image of the falcon circling ever higher, in ever-widening spirals, so far that "The falcon cannot hear the falconer." The centrifugal impetus described by those circles in the air tends to chaos and disintegration "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;" and more than chaos and disintegration, to war "The blood-dimmed tide" to fundamental doubt "The best lack all conviction" and to the rule of misguided evil "the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

#### **FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This seems quite silly as philosophy or prophecy (particularly in light of the fact that it has not come true as yet). But as poetry, and understood more broadly than as a simple reiteration of the mystic theory of A Vision, "The Second Coming" is a magnificent statement about the contrary forces at work in history, and about the conflict between the modern world and the ancient world. The poem may not have the thematic relevance of Yeats's best work, and may not be a poem with which many people can personally identify; but the aesthetic experience of its passionate language is powerful enough to ensure its value and its importance in Yeats's work as a whole. The poem's power of image and language is to some extent independent of Yeats's own ideas, and by using Biblical echoes, both in style and

reference, Yeats gives the poem immediacy, which some of the other poems that derive from the System of A Vision lack. It draws on the cultural context or schema in which we tend read it, giving expression to millennial dread and the feeling that we live in times of unprecedented upheaval, whether or not we actually do.

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