

William Butler Yeats's Poem *'The Second Coming'*: Great Expression of World War First

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Abstract: World War I, often known as the First World War or the Great War, was an international struggle that engulfed the majority of the European countries, as well as Russia, the United States, the Middle East, and other regions, between 1914 and 1918. The war opposed the Allies—primarily France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and, starting in 1917, the United States—against the Central Powers—primarily Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey. The Central Powers were defeated at its conclusion. In terms of the amount of death, destruction, and carnage, the war was essentially unprecedented. The people of Europe largely welcomed the start of the war in August 1914 with optimism and joy, and it sparked a wave of patriotic fervor and celebration. Few people believed that a conflict between the great European powers could last for so long or be so devastating, and the majority thought that their country's side would win in a matter of months. Either out of patriotism, as a defensive conflict imposed by national need, or out of idealism, as a conflict to uphold right against power, the honor of treaties, and international morality, people embraced the war.

“There was no really good true war book during the entire four years of the war. The only true writing that came through during the war was in poetry. One reason for this is that poets are not arrested as quickly as prose writers”. (Ernest Hemingway, *“Men at War”*).

Not only did World War One change the course of world history, but it also had a profound impact on literature. Due to the war's tremendous cruelty, there was a literary explosion about its course and ramifications that started with the war poets themselves, continued through the interwar years, and made recurrent appearances into the 20th century. England underwent a significant cultural and intellectual transformation as a result of World War I, which was represented in the literature of the country by writers and poets, especially those who participated in combat. A massive wave of optimism and patriotism engulfed England as the war got underway (and the other warring nations as well). Young authors and poets, like Rupert Brooks, have produced works about patriotism and duty that are motivating and idealistic. But it didn't take long for English literature to start capturing the brutality and ruthlessness of war. Writing by Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon changed to represent the grim realities of war. The idealism of bygone times has vanished. Their works are now being utilized to highlight the senseless loss of human life and the hypocrisy of a society and the politicians who started the war. Many English authors investigated the issues that modernity poses in the years following the war. Several pessimistic and cynical writings by T. S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley cast doubt on the advantages of modernity. In other words, the idealism and romanticism seen in Victorian English literature and poetry came to an end with World War I. The war's atrocities, trauma, and futility prompted an analysis of the social and political frameworks that made such a struggle possible.

The First World War's war poetry tended to have a variety of themes and formal components in common. The way a particular poet views the conflict typically reflects both his personal experiences and the period in which the poem was written. Early wartime poems frequently emphasized concepts of grandeur and honor, thus endorsing the conflict. This is a common theme in the early poems of John McCrae and Rupert Brooke, for example. One of the areas of culture that the war had the biggest impact on was literature. Because it frequently focuses on and scathingly exposes the atrocities of war as well as the societal upheavals that were occurring, The Great War establishes a strong contrast between pre- and post-war writing. Any writers of the time felt obligated to criticize the issues they perceived in their society as a result of the numerous social, political, and economic upheavals that occurred during the war, sometimes even as they risked their lives in the trenches. The new method of warfare gave soldiers an unprecedented length of time to reflect on the conflicts they had fought—battles not just on the battlefield, but also in their minds and spirits, which were in no short supply given the horrible circumstances they were forced to endure. Reading became a regular method for British soldiers to learn the reality of the conflict or to express their disapproval of it.

Key Words: Blood-dimmed, falconer, gyre, Second Coming, sphinxlike

Poetry that captured the mood and setting of battle probably more clearly than ever before was inspired by the First World War. Ireland had three towering writers who were at the top of their fields in poetry, prose, and theatre throughout the war years. Yet none of them had any direct involvement in the massive calamity that was occurring all around them. Although he would finally be forced to produce a different kind of war poem, Yeats was cautious. Yeats was forced to pay tribute to Robert Gregory because he was the only child of his close friend Augusta Gregory and was killed over Italy by friendly fire. It is telling that it took him three attempts before he finally succeeded, and that he did it while masterfully evading detection. An Irish Airman Foresees His Death, the one outstanding poem Yeats produced during the First World War, came after *Shepherd and Goatherd* and *In Memorial of Major Robert Gregory*. In order to escape dying, he avoids the battle instead—with all of its prejudices, mass killings, and torturous scenery. In his 1921 collection of verses, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, Irish poet W. B. Yeats included a poem he had written in 1919 called "*The Second Coming*," which had been published for the first time in *The Dial* in November 1920. The poem allegorically depicts the mood of post-war Europe using Biblical imagery from the Apocalypse and Second Coming. It is regarded as a significant piece of modernist poetry.

The poem was written in 1919, during the First World War and before the British government decided to send in the Black and Tans to Ireland. The Irish War of Independence began in January 1919, following the Easter Rising in April 1916. In his early versions, Yeats referred to "the second birth" rather than "the Second Coming". "*The Second Coming*," a poem by W.B. Yeats, is among his best-known compositions. It presents a highly enigmatic and compelling alternative to the Christian concept of the Second Coming—the anticipated appearance of Jesus as a savior heralding the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. It was drafted in 1919, not long after World War I came to a close. The poem presents a bleak view of humanity, suggesting that the appearance of civilization's progress and order is only a ruse. Perhaps for this reason, it is not unexpected. Right away, the poem makes a clear allusion to the *Bible's Book of Revelation*. In this book, Jesus just returns to Earth to redeem the righteous. This is what the *Bible* says will happen when mankind reaches the end of time: a time of utter war, famine, destruction, and hatred. The poem suggests that the end times are already upon us because humanity has lost its moral sense, and possibly because this moral sense was an illusion all along. The poem's allusions help to highlight the bloodshed, destruction, and harsh circumstances of the conflict. The tone of the author's voice is depressing and pessimistic. Via allusions, Yeats has given the listener a taste of death.

Yeats wrote "*The Second Coming*" in 1921 with the intention of using these gyres to represent the current historical period. As history (approximately) approached the end of the outer gyre and started to move down the inner gyre, Yeats thought that the world was on the verge of a catastrophic revelation. In other words, the world's trajectory along the gyre of science, democracy, and heterogeneity is now disintegrating, like the frantically widening flight path of the falcon that has lost contact with the falconer. The next age will draw its character from the opposing inner gyre, which, presumably, opposes mysticism, primal power, and slowness to the science and democracy of the outer gyre. This new era is symbolized by the "rough beast" sauntering towards Bethlehem, and the speaker's vision of the rising sphinx represents his perception of the traits of the new world. This looks like a very absurd theory or prophecy (particularly in light of the fact that it has not come true as yet). But, "*The Second Coming*" is a wonderful statement about the opposing forces at play in history and the clash between the contemporary and the old worlds when read as poetry and taken in a broader context than as a straightforward repetition of the mystic doctrine of *A Vision*.

But, despite its many metaphors, "*The Second Coming*" actually has a quite straightforward message: it essentially foretells that humanity's time is up and that civilization as we know it is going to come to an end. During the global calamity of World War I, which claimed millions of lives, Yeats composed this poem. The poem paints a dark picture of humanity, implying that civilization's sense of advancement and order is merely a façade. Perhaps this is why it is not surprising. The falconer, a metaphor for humanity's desire to rule the planet, has lost its falcon in the whirling gyre (the gyre is an image Yeats uses to symbolize grand, sweeping historical movements as a kind of spiral). These opening remarks might also allude to how society in the modern day has alienated people from nature (represented here by the falcon). Whatever the case, it's obvious that whatever bond there may have been between the metaphorical falcon and falconer no longer exists, and as a result, chaos is engulfing the entire human race.

In fact, the poem implies that despite the appearance that humanity had advanced over the previous "twenty centuries"—as evidenced, for instance, by what seemed to be a constant increase in knowledge and scientific advancements—the First World War revealed that people were still capable of committing acts of self-destruction. Chaos and blood tides were "loosed upon the planet" (which clearly evoke the mass death of war). Just a "ceremony," "innocence" has since "drowned." The "worst" people appear pleased and eager for destruction, whilst the "best" people lack "conviction," which signals they are not bothering to do anything about this nightmare reality. The speaker asserts that the current state of affairs demonstrates that society's "core," or basis, was never very solid. In other words, the

apparent upward trajectory of human development has been a myth. It's unclear from the poem whether mankind has lost its way or never had one, but in either case, the promises made by contemporary society—of safety, security, and human dignity—have proven to be hollow. The "*Second Coming*" promised by Christianity, when Jesus Christ is expected to return to the world and extend an invitation to sincere believers to enter heaven, has been replaced with a horrifying creature in their stead. There is no doubt that the Second Coming is not Jesus, but rather a "rough beast" that humanity itself has awakened (perhaps, the first stanza implies, by the incessant noise of its many wars).

The speaker explains how "things" have "fallen apart" as a result of the anarchy, disorientation, and moral lapses. In the second, the poem explicitly states that a certain Christian ethic is being destroyed. The poem questions whether Christian morality was founded on sound principles in the first place by recounting this extensive destruction, implying that perhaps mankind was never truly moral but merely appeared to be. Images give rise to the idea that morality has been flipped on its head: instead of the good and evil (the "best" and "worst") that they once were, "mere anarchy" (where "mere" is used to signify something like "pure" in this context) has taken their place. The "blood-dimmed stream" suggests that morality was only ever a "ceremony," a performance that created the appearance that civilization was "innocent," because humanity has "soaked itself in blood." *The Book of Revelation* in the *Bible* foretells a form of final judgment in which individuals essentially receive what they deserve based on their moral conduct and religious virtues; it also suggests that Jesus will come to save those who are deserving of salvation. But "*The Second Coming*" does not provide such solace.

And it ends up that "some revelation" is about to happen. But instead of bringing about world peace once more, this new insight only serves to worsen the situation as a new and repulsive beast is on its way to Bethlehem, the city where Jesus was born. If Jesus represented a moral revolution, this new monster leader represents a new state of "anarchy," where the "worst" are let to flourish and the "best" (often the most moral) lack the courage of their beliefs. In other words, in the face of the violence and devastation that humanity has wrought, the poem portrays Christian morality and prophecy as feeble or even proven untrue. This new creature's "blank look" serves as additional proof of how bleak the situation is. This thing may have a "man's" head, but it lacks morality and is instead "pitiless." It's coming to rule over "blood-dimmed tide[s]" and "drowned innocence," not a compassionate, charitable, and just society. Further implying a departure with Christian morality is its sphinx-like appearance, which is purposefully at variance with Christian imagery. Yeats believed that the "Spiritus Mundi" was the collective consciousness of all people, from which the poet may get knowledge. So, this beast vision portends a global transition into "anarchy," as mankind as a whole lets go of morals.

The poem "*The Second Coming*" is incredibly vague. In fact, before the poem was published, Yeats removed particular cultural references from it. There is no denying, however, that this is a grim outlook for humanity, one that portrays morality as a kind of shared dream that is now morphing into a nightmare. He is considered a public hero and challenges accepted popular opinion with this classic, prophetic poetry, making him the first iconoclastic Modernism in English writing. "*The Second Coming*" is an emblematic poem about history's terrible return because of its magnificent, deadly imagery and terrifying ritualistic language. It shows Yeats' instant response to the unstable political climate in Ireland, England, and Europe following the American Civil War, the Russian Revolution, and World War I. As a result, Yeats' "*The Second Coming*" is one of his most cryptic works, making it initially rather challenging to comprehend. Each line of "*The Second Coming*" is explored in order to demonstrate the fundamental themes of W.B. Yeats' poem and to demonstrate the poet's growth.

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