'The Second Coming' by W. B. Yeats. BA (HONS) PART III, P. VI

The poem 'The Second Coming' was written by W. B. Yeats in the aftermath of the First World War. The poem was first published in The Dial, an American magzine in November 1920. It was later included in Yeats' collection of poems Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921).

The poem opens with an unsettling and ominous image where a falcon is gyrating in the sky and is unable to follow the instructions of his master. The reader is bound to feel apprehensive at the image of a predatory bird in action as if he is about to be nabbed anytime soon. The inability of the falcon to hear the falconer suggests that once the forces of destruction are let loose it is not within the capacity of man to arrest them. The images reflect on the mindless destruction caused due to the First World War which was unparalleled in history in terms of the loss of lives where nearly sixteen million people died as a direct result of the war. The falcon is also suggestive of the aircrafts which were used as weapons for the first time in the history of warfare.

The next two lines are possibly referring to political unrest and violence in different parts of the world including Ireland, the poet's homeland, in part as a fallout of the great war. Events like The Russian Revolution (1917-1923) and the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) were representative episodes where the "centre" was failing to arrest the collapse of the earlier order. But apart from political turmoil, the lines also evoke a sense of failing traditional social and religious structures where all the goodness of scriptures



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and moral values handed down to humans as a part of upbringing in a family proved futile in containing the brutality of the war and subsequent conflicts. As a result of this moral collapse a sanguine chaos engulfed the entire world.

The ~~terrorizing~~ terrifying image of "the blood-dimmed tide" evokes waves of insane violence and incessant bloodshed that took place during and after the war. This motiveless blood-bath drowned the "ceremony of innocence": everything that restores order, sanity and meaning and supports a purposeful existence. The ceremony of innocence includes family, society, community, religion, faith and trust. Both the images when juxtaposed, reflect on the anxious state of mind of the poet who believes that the ancient codes of conduct no longer hold currency in a barbaric and savage present and nothing as yet has been invented to fill the vaccuum created by the rupture of the old order.

The next two lines deal with superlatives where the "best" lack necessary conviction to restore order while the "worst" are profused with destructive intent. The two poles leave a vast space between them for the humanity to suffer and grieve as a result of the stagnation and inertness of one and hyperactivity of the other.

The second stanza of the poem introduces the reader to an apocalyptic vision through "revelation" and "Second Coming". But contrary to the Biblical allusion of the rebirth of Christ to suggest a call for endurance on the part of believers as the final battle between good and evil would pave the way for a better world, Yeats' revelation hints at a dystopia: absolute



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disaster, confusion and disarray. The use of the adverb "Surely" in the second line of the stanza to define the Second Coming marks a sharp contrast with the exclaimation mark after "the Second Coming" in the third line. Why an element of surprise if the poet is so sure of an impending Second Coming? The answer lies probably in the nature of the event. While the biblical second coming is constructive and redeeming, Yeats' second coming is calamitous and condemning.

The poet further says that no sooner the words are out, a horrifying image arising out of Spiritus Mundi : a cosmic consciousness that pervades all living things and connects them in a way the body is connected to the soul, troubles his sight. The sight reveals a ravenous monster with the head of a man and the body of a lion amid the sands of a desert. The shape connects to the sphinx, a mythical creature of the Greek tradition also known as androsphinx which was notorious for its malevolence and ferocity. A man's head on a lion's body signify an intellect engrossed in savagery. The severity of the image of the beast disturbs a reader's faith in the benevolence of religion. The poet heightens a reader's sense of disorientation by portraying the gaze of the beast as "blank and pitiless as the sun". "Blank" refers to the absense of emotions and an indifference establishing the beast as a dispassionate apparation which would not distinguish between people. Also "pitiless as the sun" inverts the traditional image of the sun as a generous and compassionate



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care-giver. The beast is moving its slow thighs and is sorrounded by the shadows of the desert birds. The transferred epithet in "moving its slow thighs" makes a reader imagine the muscular thighs of a lion representing a blind brute force. The word "reeling" has a ring of chaos and confusion and "Indignant desert birds" create an atmosphere of terrifying hideousness which is intensified by the environs of a lifeless desert.

The complex imagery distinguishes Yeats' revelation with the biblical ~~relevn~~ revelation in that the believers and the virtuous had a fair chance of survival in the biblical Second coming whereas Yeats' vision pictures a ruthless beast impervious to and regardless of virtues and vices alike. Here the vision leaves the poet and darkness descends but ~~now~~ not without an understanding.

The "twenty centuries of stony sleep" suggest the beginning of Christianity about two thousand years ago and the premordial forces of destruction which the religion has managed to lull to a "stony sleep" by propogation of virtue and spiritual bliss. This "stony sleep" has been disputed and disturbed by a nightmare caused by the demented loss of innocence. The "rocking cradle" refers to the human civilization which in its frenzied lust for destruction has allowed space for the premordial forces to overtake and reign supreme. In other words, the mindless violence on the part of humans has created a nightmare - a delirious chaos and anarchy that is sure to emerge in the form of a pitiless beast threatening ultimate destruction of the civilization in future.

TURN OVER



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The last three lines presents the reader with a question. The "rough beast" asserts the frigid savagery of the animal. The use of "slouches" is loaded with meaning. First slouching is a terrible posture in which the head and the shoulders are hanging down. The posture heightens the ~~atmosphere of~~ haunting and portentous atmosphere as with the head hung low, the beast would loose his faculty for making distinctions. Also because slouching is an involuntary posture, it amplifies a sense of helplessness among the readers. Besides, slouching suggests a lazy gait impressing upon the reader that the beast is in no hurry as it does not have to charge to assert dominance. The humans are doing everything in their power to make it easy for the beast.

The refrence to Bethlehem in the last line connects the vision to Bible. The beast is sluggishly moving towards Bethlehem, like Christ to be born there. But this beast would be nothing like the redeemer. It would in essence be an anti-Christ.

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By Ankur Tripathi
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