

Epochal Echoes: Unraveling “The Second Coming”

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Abstract:

The poem "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats has fascinated readers for more than a hundred years due to its vivid imagery, profound symbolism, and prophetic foresight. This article delves into the profound echoes of the age that are intricately woven within Yeats' masterwork. It examines the themes of spiritual turmoil, social disintegration, and the culmination of a historical period. By using historical context, literary analysis, and cultural interpretation, we explore the profound depths of significance in "The Second Coming," investigating its pertinence to the period after World War I. "The Second Coming" provides significant insights on the human condition and the search for meaning in a world filled with uncertainty and misery, including the breakdown of traditional values, the emergence of authoritarianism, and the growth of ideological extremism. As we navigate the intricacies of the contemporary world, Yeats' timeless reflection on the recurring patterns of history and the vulnerability of human civilization serves as a poignant reminder of the lasting influence of art in shedding light on the human experience and expressing profound truths about the human spirit.

Keywords: historical context, World War I, imagery, spiritual turmoil, social disintegration

Introduction

"The Second Coming," written by William Butler Yeats in 1919 and released in 1920, captures a turbulent era characterised by significant disruption and ambiguity. In order to completely comprehend the historical background of this renowned poem, it is necessary to explore the intricate occurrences and socioeconomic intricacies of the early 20th century, namely those related to World War I and its consequences. In the early 1900s, Europe was at the height of its industry and imperial expansion. The continent had fast technical progress, significant urbanisation, and intense geopolitical rivalry among the great countries. Yet, hidden under the surface of seeming advancement and wealth, there were underlying tensions that would eventually escalate into the most devastating battle in human history. The eruption of World War I in 1914 shattered the perception of stability and threw Europe into a whirlwind of bloodshed and devastation. The Great War, recognised as such, included the Allied Powers, including Britain, France, and Russia, in opposition to the Central Powers, commanded by Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. Over the course of four arduous years, troops experienced the hardships of trench warfare, chemical assaults, and unprecedented levels of misery, beyond anything seen in the annals of human history. When the cannons ceased firing in 1918, the war had inflicted a catastrophic toll on all parties involved. Countless casualties occurred, whole cohorts annihilated, and once prosperous towns turned to rubble.

In reaction to the prevailing atmosphere of disillusionment and uncertainty, William Butler Yeats wrote "The Second Coming" under a background of turmoil and sorrow. Yeats, born in 1865 in Ireland, was profoundly shaped by the political and cultural disruptions of his day, such as the Irish fight for autonomy and the wider movements of European nationalism and romanticism. In "The Second Coming," Yeats grapples with the existential anxieties unleashed by the war and its aftermath. The poem opens with the iconic lines:

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."

Here, Yeats creates a feeling of decay and division, as established systems of power and organisation crumble in the face of disorder. The core of Yeats's perspective in "The Second Coming" is on the notion of historical cycles and the repetitive patterns of human civilization. He utilises images from the Book of Revelation and Celtic mythology to portray a world on the verge of an impending catastrophe. The title of the poem makes a reference to the biblical prediction of Christ's second coming to pass judgement on both the living and the dead. This implies a connection between the unrest of Yeats' day and the apocalyptic anxieties of the past. "The Second Coming" showcases Yeats' profound interest in the occult and the supernatural, which are recurring topics in his later writings. Throughout the poem, the author utilises vibrant imagery and profound symbolism to communicate a feeling of imminent danger and a sense of impending catastrophe. Yeats evokes a world plagued by dreams and visions of an uncertain future, symbolised by the "blood-dimmed tide" and the "rough beast, its hour come round at last." Aside from its apocalyptic implications, "The Second Coming" also addresses wider concepts of cultural and political turmoil after World War I. Yeats' prophetic language reflects the fall of empires, the emergence of authoritarian ideologies, and the degradation of conventional values. The poem's lasting significance stems from its capacity to encapsulate the spirit of a changing world, where established beliefs disintegrate and new truths arise from the remnants of the past. "The Second Coming" serves as a potent witness to the lasting influence of World War I and its effect on the shared awareness of the 20th century. William Butler Yeats uses vivid imagery and a prophetic tone to encourage readers to face the uncertainties of their present era and to come to terms with the timeless patterns of history. In our journey through the intricacies of the contemporary world, the poem acts as a painful reminder of the lasting influence of art in shedding light on the human condition and expressing the profound realities of the human experience.

Main Thrust

Post World War 1 Era

The literary, artistic, and cultural landscapes of the globe were forever altered by the events that followed World War I. The turbulent post-war era is reflected in William Butler Yeats' 1919–20

published poem "The Second Coming," which aptly expresses the prevailing feelings of disappointment, unease, and doubt of the time. Examining the unique ways in which the period immediately after World War I impacted both Yeats' writing and the larger cultural milieu is crucial for grasping the thematic resonance and relevance of the poem. The hopeful stories of advancement and enlightenment that had been popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s were destroyed by the Great War. As a result of the war's immense carnage, psychological toll, and loss of life, many people lost faith in contemporary society and its principles. Tales of anguish and misery carried home by returning soldiers posed a challenge to the idealised ideas of bravery and grandeur that had inspired the war effort. With his sorrow for the fall of conventional certainty and the breakdown of societal order in "The Second Coming," Yeats aptly depicts the prevalent sense of disappointment and hopelessness. As a result of the fall of ancient empires, the rise of new states, and the spread of revolutionary forces around the globe, the geopolitical landscape underwent significant changes in the years after World War I. Leftist groups were inspired and the existing order of aristocracy and monarchy was challenged by the 1917 Russian Revolution, which had a profound effect on world politics. All of these revolutionary currents, as well as the larger post-war movement of nationalism and anti-colonialism, had a profound impact on Yeats. In "The Second Coming," he suggests these revolutions by using symbols from Celtic mythology and the Book of Revelation to depict a society consumed by revolutionary and apocalyptic fervour. It was during the post-war era of economic uncertainty and political unrest that authoritarian governments and radical ideologies flourished. After Italy's social and political turmoil after WWI, Benito Mussolini's fascist organisation won support by promising national rebirth and stability. In Germany, Adolf Hitler was able to rise to power under the Weimar Republic and the Treaty of Versailles due to the economic problems. With its imagery of a "rough beast" slouching towards Bethlehem to be born, suggesting the spectre of tyranny and mass mobilisation, "The Second Coming" might be seen as a reflection of these gloomy trends. A warning tale about the perils of unbridled power and ideological zeal, Yeats depicts a society spiralling into anarchy and bloodshed. Spirituality, mysticism, and the occult provided comfort and purpose to many intellectuals and artists who sought them out among the ancient world's ruins. As a result of the horrors, they had experienced, many people over the globe had an existential crisis that made them wonder what their life was all about. In "The Second Coming," Yeats delves into these existential questions, using his fascination with the mystical and

paranormal to uncover the secrets of being human.

"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

These are the concluding words of the poem and capture the essence of humanity's quest for salvation and enlightenment as it faces the unknown ahead. A mystical figure heralds the entrance of a new age in Yeats' vision, which alludes to the eternal human need for knowledge and redemption.

Irish Nationalism and Identity

Despite the fact that William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming" has no direct allusions to the Irish independence struggle, it is vital to place the poem in its proper historical and cultural context. Many of Yeats' poems deal with topics of independence, nationalism, and self-discovery since the Irish poet was well aware of the social and political movements of his day. There was a strong nationalist movement in Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that wanted to break away from British domination on all fronts-cultural, political, and economic. Irish culture was deeply affected by the centuries-long history of English colonisation and oppression, which fueled a longing for self-determination and sovereignty. William Butler Yeats was a prominent figure in the Irish Literary Renaissance and the Celtic Revival, two terms that describe a period of cultural resurgence that Yeats helped to launch. Yeats, like other notable personalities like Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde, aimed to promote Irish literature, culture, and language as a way to affirm Irish cultural identity and challenge the cultural dominance of the British.

The Easter Rising of 1916 was a watershed moment in the fight for Irish independence. The Irish Republican Brotherhood and other nationalist organisations planned and executed the uprising, which aimed to depose the British and create an Irish republic. The rebellion was quickly put down by British soldiers, but it was a watershed moment in Irish history that inspired generations of activists and rallied support for the nationalist cause. The themes of revolt, upheaval, and the quest for purpose in "The Second Coming" connect with the greater currents of Irish nationalism,

even though it precedes the Easter Rising. The prophetic tone and apocalyptic images of the poem convey the confusion and unpredictability that swept across Ireland and the rest of Europe after WWI.

Yeats, despite his strong dedication to the regeneration of Irish culture and nationalist principles, had a multifaceted and sometimes uncertain connection with the political forces of his day. Being a part of the Anglo-Irish Protestant aristocracy, he navigated the conflict between Irish nationalist feeling and British imperial devotion, a tension that is evident in his poems and prose. Yeats explores the intricate nature of identity and the sense of belonging in a fragmented society plagued by competing loyalties and ideologies in "The Second Coming." Although the poem does not explicitly discuss the Irish independence movement, it might be seen as an allegorical representation of Ireland's fight for freedom via its examination of topics such as fragmentation, disintegration, and the need for spiritual rejuvenation.

"The Second Coming" is still being analysed and understood in many settings, such as its connection to Irish history and the fight for independence. Although the poem does not directly mention particular events or individuals in the Irish nationalist movement, its overarching themes of upheaval, turmoil, and rejuvenation strongly connect with the experiences of those who fought for Irish independence. Yeats' lasting impact on Irish literature and culture guarantees that his work continues to serve as a benchmark for successive generations of authors, researchers, and activists who strive to comprehend the intricacies of Irish identity and history. Ireland is still dealing with the effects of colonialism and strife. "The Second Coming" is a strong reminder of the ongoing pursuit of justice, freedom, and self-governance. While "The Second Coming" does not explicitly mention the Irish independence movement, its examination of concepts like revolution, disorder, and the need for significance may be understood within the framework of Ireland's fight for independence. William Butler Yeats' profound involvement with Irish culture and politics imbues his poetry with a compelling and significant quality that continues to strike a chord with readers worldwide. As Ireland grapples with the intricacies of its past and sense of self, Yeats' literature continues to serve as a guiding light of profound understanding and motivation, providing timeless contemplations on the nature of humanity and the unyielding pursuit of liberty.

Fascism and Communism

The rise of fascism and communism after World War I had a tremendous impact on the political, social, and cultural aspects of the twentieth century. William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming," a prophetic reflection on the repercussions of ideological extremism and tyranny, encapsulates the fears and doubts of that turbulent era and was published in 1920. Looking at the poem's historical setting and thematic resonances in relation to the emergence of fascism and communism might help us understand how these ideologies impacted Yeats' work. With millions dead, businesses ruined, and cultures traumatised by the horrors of war, Europe was left in a condition of deep chaos following World War I. After this kind of destruction, political radicalism flourished among many who had lost faith in liberal democracy and felt the post-war settlement had treated them unfairly.

Fascism arose as a reactionary response to the perceived dangers posed by socialism, communism, and liberal democracy. Fascist groups were distinguished by their authoritarianism, nationalism, and a devotion to a single leader. They offered the promise of restoring order, stability, and national rejuvenation in response to perceived dangers from inside and beyond the country. In Italy, the National Fascist Party led by Benito Mussolini gained political dominance throughout the 1920s, while in Germany, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party) under Adolf Hitler's leadership took hold of power during the 1930s. Communism, in contrast, arose as a radical alternative to the capitalist system, promoting the elimination of private ownership, class conflict, and the creation of a society without social classes. The Russian Revolution of 1917, spearheaded by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks, served as a catalyst for leftist groups globally and instilled apprehension of proletariat revolution among conservative elites. The emergence of fascism and communism presented a direct threat to the fundamental values of liberal democracy and personal liberty. The totalitarian governments in Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union aimed to establish complete control over all aspects of society, by repressing dissent, prosecuting political adversaries, and undermining the principles of legal governance.

"The Second Coming," Yeats grapples with the consequences of totalitarianism and the collapse

of democratic norms. The poem's imagery of a "rough beast" slouching towards Bethlehem to be born evokes the specter of authoritarianism and mass mobilization, while its depiction of a world "full of passionate intensity" reflects the polarizing effects of ideological extremism. Yeats's use of apocalyptic imagery in "The Second Coming" can be interpreted as a response to the cultural and existential crisis precipitated by the rise of fascism and communism. The poem's vision of a world in turmoil, where "the centre cannot hold" and "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," speaks to the pervasive sense of uncertainty and fear that characterized the interwar period. The poem's reference to the "blood-dimmed tide" and the "ceremony of innocence" being drowned suggests the human cost of ideological conflict and the erosion of moral values in a world consumed by violence and fanaticism. Yeats' prophetic tone underscores the urgency of the moment and the need for vigilance in the face of existential threats to civilization.

The poem "The Second Coming" does not directly mention fascism or communism. However, its underlying themes of upheaval, anarchy, and the breakdown of societal structure might be understood symbolically in relation to the political events of Yeats' poem. The poem depicts a planet on the verge of an apocalypse, which strongly connects with the concerns of a generation dealing with the emergence of tyranny and the decline of democratic principles. Yeats' complex attitude towards nationalism and his apprehensions over the perils of ideological radicalism are clearly reflected in his poetry and works. Being an Irish poet living in a politically turbulent period, Yeats had a keen understanding of the dangers presented by authoritarianism and the need to oppose the appeal of simple resolutions to complex societal issues.

Conclusion

William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming" is a powerful and symbolic poem that captures the passing of a time. It captures the contemporary era's existential fears while reflecting the post-war period's disillusionment and uncertainty (written after WWI). An examination of the historical and cultural setting in which Yeats wrote the poem is necessary for comprehending its explanation of the end of an era, as is delving into the rich symbolism, vivid imagery, and prophetic vision that define his work. The poetry's title, "The Second Coming," alludes to a

religious prophesy about Christ's return to judge the living and the dead. This symbolism alludes to the conclusion of one era and the start of a new one, as well as the full circle of human events. On the other hand, the apocalyptic imagery and ominous tone of the poem show that Yeats' picture of the "Second Coming" is one of chaos and destruction, not of redemption and deliverance. Throughout "The Second Coming," Yeats employs biblical allusions and imagery to convey a sense of cosmic turmoil and existential crisis.

The poem opens with the lines:

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."

The biblical idea of the "gyre," a spinning vortex symbolising the ebb and flow of history, is invoked by Yeats in this passage. When people lose touch with their spiritual selves and flounder aimlessly in this meaningless world, the falcon and falconer become symbols of helplessness and hopelessness. A major idea in "The Second Coming" is how established norms and standards are crumbling. As Yeats puts it, "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." He mourns the collapse of social order and moral authority. This sentence encapsulates the post-war era's moral decline and subsequent surge in fanaticism and extreme ideology. It embodies Yeats' view that moral relativism and anarchy have supplanted the ancient certainties and moral absolutes that once governed human conduct. The historical setting of "The Second Coming" adds depth to the poem's examination of a bygone age. After WWI, fascism, communism, and nationalism were among the extreme ideologies and totalitarian governments that emerged. In response to internal and external dangers, these groups advocated for stability, order, and a rebirth of the country. On the other hand, they paved the way for the repression of minority groups, the silencing of critics, and the dilution of personal liberties.

"The Second Coming," Yeats paints a picture of a new world order rising from the ruins of the previous one. The poem's description of a "rough beast, its hour come round at last" alludes to the rise of a new oppressive regime marked by an increase in brutality, anarchy, and moral decline. In this "rough beast" we see the powers of evil that are about to consume the planet in

anarchy and misery. It marks the beginning of a dark and dangerous period, marking the end of an age of illumination and advancement. William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming" is a profound reflection on the passing of a time and the unknowns of the contemporary world. The poem portrays the existential crisis and ethical grey area of a planet lost in a sea of doubt and hopelessness by its vivid imagery, symbolic language, and prophetic vision. Despite all the challenges we face in today's society, Yeats' profound contemplation on the human condition has stood the test of time and still speaks to readers today, helping them make sense of the big questions about our past, present, and future.

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