The Second Coming

In this poem, we see Yeats' interest in synthesizing several different world views into one global theory of human history. Towards this end, Yeats studied Hinduism, Celtic history, Christianity, Buddhism, and the occult. Like many of his contemporaries -- Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce, for example -- Yeats sought to discover and create a unified theory of world history. We can understand this goal if we consider the historical context: in the wake of World War I, most Europeans and Americans found their world views badly shaken. Yeats sought to put the pieces of European culture back together by discovering their origins in world literature and religions.

Yeats came to believe in a cyclical theory of history as he studied comparative history and religion. Indeed, circles are a repeated motif in "The Second Coming" and in his other publications. The title of "The Second Coming" suggests that the poem will depict the Apocalypse, described in Revelation. But biblical history is linear, not cyclical: it has a beginning (Genesis), a turning point (the birth and crucifixion of Christ), and an ending prophesied by the Revelation of St John the Divine. Thus, although the title and much of the poem's language and imagery echo biblical descriptions, its connection to the vision of St John remains obscure. The speaker of the poem seems, at best, doubtful of what he sees: he is a visionary who is unable to understand his vision. The reader shares this confusion in part because the poem begins in medias res: we are plunged into the speaker's vision without any preparation. We do not learn, for example, that the poem describes a vision until line 18, when we learn that the vision itself has vanished. As you read the poem, consider first the images the speaker describes. What do they have in common? How can we interpret them? What do they seem to foretell? Then consider the speaker's commentary on his vision: what explanation -- if any -- do the final four lines offer?

1. Does the poem have a regular rhyme scheme? If not, what near rhymes can you identify? What is the effect of this form, or lack thereof?

2. Does the poem have a regular meter?

3. Define the following words and phrases as they are used in this poem (don't just copy a dictionary definition). Write a sentence or two on each one: "gyre", "anarchy", "Spiritus Mundi", "pitiless", and "slouch".

5. After you have read the poem to yourself, read it aloud to another person or have someone read it aloud to you. Comment briefly on the ways in which hearing the poem read aloud affected your understanding of it.

6. Several important words appear twice in the poem: "turning" (1), "is loosed" (4;5), and "Surely" (9;10). Write a brief paragraph in which you discuss one of these repetitions. Make an argument for its significance: why does the poem want to emphasize this word? Provide at least two quotations to illustrate your discussion.
The Second Coming

Summary

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, 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?"

Commentary

"The Second Coming" 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."

Commentary

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. (It is safe to say that very few people who love this poem could paraphrase its meaning to satisfaction.) 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.
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).

*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...*

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.

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.

**Context**

William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin in 1865 to a chaotic, artistic family. His father, a portrait painter, moved the family to London when Yeats was two, and William spent much of his childhood moving between the cold urban landscape of the metropolis and the congenial countryside
of County Sligo, Ireland, where his mother’s parents lived. An aesthete even as a boy, Yeats began writing verse early, and published his first work in 1885. In 1889, Yeats met the Irish patriot, revolutionary, and beauty Maud Gonne. He fell immediately in love with her, and remained so for the rest of his life; virtually every reference to a beloved in Yeats’s poetry can be understood as a reference to Maud Gonne. Tragically, Gonne did not return his love, and though they remained closely associated (she portrayed the lead role in several of his plays), they were never romantically involved. Many years later, Yeats proposed to her daughter--and was rejected again.

Yeats lived during a tumultuous time in Ireland, during the political rise and fall of Charles Stuart Parnell, the Irish Revival, and the civil war. Partly because of his love for the politically active Maud Gonne, Yeats devoted himself during the early part of his career to the Literary Revival and to Irish patriotism, seeking to develop a new religious iconography based on Irish mythology. (Though he was of Protestant parentage, Yeats played little part in the conflict between Catholics and Protestants that tore Ireland apart during his lifetime.) He quickly rose to literary prominence, and helped to found what became the Abbey Theatre, one of the most important cultural institutions in Ireland, at which he worked with such luminaries as Augusta Gregory and the playwright John Synge. In 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

One of the most remarkable facts about Yeats’s career as a poet is that he only reached his full powers late in life, between the ages of 50 and 75. Indeed, after reaching his height, he sustained it up until the very end, writing magnificent poems up until two weeks before his death. The normal expectation is that a poet’s powers will fade after forty or fifty; Yeats defied that expectation and trumped it entirely, writing most of his greatest poems--from the crushing power of The Tower to the eerie mysticism of the Last Poems--in the years after he won the Nobel Prize, a testament to the force and commitment with which he devoted himself to transforming his inner life into poetry. Because his work straddles the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Yeats is stylistically quite a unique poet; his early work seems curiously modern for the nineteenth century, and his late work often seems curiously un-modern for the 1930s. But Yeats wrote great poems in every decade of his life, and his influence has towered over the past six decades; today, he is generally regarded as the greatest poet of the twentieth century.

"An Irish Airman foresees his Death"

Summary

The speaker, an Irish airman fighting in World War I, declares that he knows he will die fighting among the clouds. He says that he does not hate those he fights, nor love those he guards. His country is "Kiltartan’s Cross," his countrymen "Kiltartan’s poor." He says that no outcome in the war will make their lives worse or better than before the war began. He says that he did not decide to fight because of a law or a sense of duty, nor because of "public men" or "cheering crowds." Rather, "a lonely impulse of delight" drove him to "this tumult in the clouds." He says that he weighed his life in his mind, and found that "The years to come seemed waste of breath, / A waste of
breath the years behind."

Form
This short sixteen-line poem has a very simple structure: lines metered in iambic tetrameter, and four grouped "quatrains" of alternating rhymes: ABABCDDEFEFGEHH, or four repetitions of the basic ABAB scheme utilizing different rhymes.

Commentary
This simple poem is one of Yeats's most explicit statements about the First World War, and illustrates both his active political consciousness ("Those I fight I do not hate, / Those I guard I do not love") and his increasing propensity for a kind of hard-edged mystical rapture (the airman was driven to the clouds by "A lonely impulse of delight"). The poem, which, like flying, emphasizes balance, essentially enacts a kind of accounting, whereby the airman lists every factor weighing upon his situation and his vision of death, and rejects every possible factor he believes to be false: he does not hate or love his enemies or his allies, his country will neither be benefited nor hurt by any outcome of the war, he does not fight for political or moral motives but because of his "impulse of delight"; his past life seems a waste, his future life seems that it would be a waste, and his death will balance his life. Complementing this kind of tragic arithmetic is the neatly balanced structure of the poem, with its cycles of alternating rhymes and its clipped, stoical meter.