

Department of English

CCF, SEM 1, DSC 1

CBCS SEM 5, CC12

“The Second Coming” by W.B. YEATS (Summary)

Flying around and around in a widening spiral, a falcon can no longer hear the call of its owner. Things are breaking down, and their foundation is giving way. Pure destruction and lawlessness have spread across the world, and so has a tidal wave darkened by blood. All the rituals of innocence have been swallowed by this tide. The best people aren't motivated to act, but the worst people are impassioned and eager.

Some kind of revelation has to happen soon, and the Second Coming itself must be close. Excitedly, the speaker exclaims: "The Second Coming!" But just as the speaker says this, a vision comes to the speaker from the world's collective unconscious. The speaker sees a barren desert land, where a creature with a man's head and a lion's body is coming to life. Its expression is, like the sun, empty and without pity. Its legs are moving slowly, and all around it fly the shadows of disturbed desert birds. Everything becomes dark again, but the speaker knows something new: two thousand years of calm have been irreversibly disrupted by the shaking of a cradle. The speaker asks: what beast, whose time has finally come, is dragging itself towards Bethlehem, where it will be born.

“The Second Coming” Themes

Theme Civilization, Chaos, and Control

Civilization, Chaos, and Control

“The Second Coming” presents a nightmarish apocalyptic scenario, as the speaker describes human beings' increasing loss of control and tendency towards violence and anarchy. Surreal images fly at the reader thick and fast, creating an unsettling atmosphere that suggests a world on the brink of destruction.

Yet for all its metaphorical complexity, “The Second Coming” actually has a relatively simple message: it basically predicts that time is up for humanity, and that civilization as we know it is about to be undone. Yeats wrote this poem right after World War I, a global catastrophe that killed millions of people. Perhaps it's unsurprising, then, that the poem paints a bleak picture of humanity, suggesting that civilization's sense of progress and order is only an illusion.

With the above in mind, the first stanza's challenging imagery starts to make more sense. The "falconer," representing humanity's attempt to control its world, has lost its "falcon" in the turning "gyre" (the gyre is an image Yeats uses to symbolize grand, sweeping historical movements as a kind of spiral). These first lines could also suggest how the modern world has distanced people from nature (represented here by the falcon). In any case, it's clear that whatever connection once linked the metaphorical falcon and falconer has broken, and now the human world is spiraling into chaos.

Indeed, the poem suggests that though humanity might have looked like it was making progress over the past "twenty centuries"—via seemingly ever-increasing knowledge and scientific developments, for example—the First World War proved people to be as capable of self-destruction as ever. "Anarchy" was "loosed upon the world," along with tides of blood (which clearly evoke the mass death of war). "Innocence" was just a "ceremony," now "drowned." The "best" people lack "conviction," which suggests they're not bothering to do anything about this nightmarish reality, while the "worst" people seem excited and eager for destruction. The current state of the world, according to the speaker, proves that the "centre"—that is, the foundation of society—was never very strong.

In other words, humanity's supposed arc of progress has been an illusion. Whether the poem means that humanity has lost its way or never knew it to begin with is unclear, but either way the promises of modern society—of safety, security, and human dignity—have proven empty. And in their place, a horrific creature has emerged—a grotesque perversion of the "Second Coming" promised by Christianity, during which Jesus Christ is supposed to return to the earth and invite true believers to heaven. This Second Coming is clearly not Jesus, but instead a "rough beast" that humanity itself has woken up (perhaps, the first stanza implies, by the incessant noise of its many wars).

With this final image of the beast, the poem indicates that while humanity seemed to get more civilized in the 2,000 years that followed Christ's birth, in reality people have been sowing the seeds of their own destruction all along. This "rough beast" is now "pitilessly" slouching toward the birthplace of Jesus—likely in order to usher in a new age of "darkness" and "nightmare."

Theme Morality and Christianity

Morality and Christianity

"The Second Coming" offers an unsettling take on Christian morality, suggesting that it is not the stable and reliable force that people believe it to be. The poem clearly alludes to the biblical Book of Revelation from the start, in which, put simply, Jesus returns to Earth to save the worthy. According to the Bible, this is meant to happen when humanity reaches the end times: an era of complete war, famine, destruction and hatred. The poem suggests that the end times are already happening, because humanity has lost all sense of morality—and perhaps that this morality was only an illusion to begin with.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes the chaos, confusion, and moral weakness that have caused “things” to “fall apart.” In the second, the poem makes it clear that it’s a specifically Christian morality that is being undone. In describing this wide-ranging destruction, the poem asks whether Christian morality was built on weak foundations in the first place—that is, perhaps humanity was never really moral, but just pretended to be.

The first stanza's imagery develops this sense of morality being turned upside down: good and evil (the “best” and “worst”) are no longer the reliable categories that they once were, replaced by “mere anarchy” (“mere” means something like “pure” here). Humanity has drenched itself in blood—the “blood-dimmed tide”—suggesting that morality was only ever a “ceremony,” a performance that conjured the illusion that humankind was “innocent.”

What's more, the poem suggests that no one—not even Jesus—can remedy this bleak reality. The biblical Book of Revelation predicts a kind of final reckoning in which people essentially get what they deserve based on their moral behavior and religious virtues; it indicates that Jesus will come to save those who are worthy of being saved. But “The Second Coming” offers no such comfort.

Instead, in the first line of the second stanza the poem hints that a moment of divine intervention must be at hand after the chaos of the first stanza (“surely some revelation is at hand”). And, as it turns out, “some revelation” is at hand. But rather than returning the world to peace, this new revelation makes things worse: a new and grotesque beast heads toward Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, to be brought into the world. If Jesus was the figurehead for a moral movement, this new beastly leader is the figurehead of a new world of “anarchy,” in which the “best” people (likely the most moral people) lack the courage of their convictions and the “worst” are allowed to thrive. In other words, the poem portrays Christian morality and prophecy as weak, or even proven false, in the face of the violence and destruction that humans have created.

The “blank gaze” of this new creature provides further evidence of just how hopeless the situation is. This being might have the head of a “man,” but it doesn’t have moral sense—instead, it is “pitiless.” It is arriving to preside over “blood-dimmed tide[s]” and “drowned” “innocence”—not a world of kindness, charity, and justice. Its sphinx-like appearance is also deliberately at odds with Christian imagery, which further suggests a break with Christian morality. Meanwhile, the “Spiritus Mundi” mentioned by the poem is what Yeats thought of as the world’s collective unconscious, from which the poet could draw insight. This vision of the beast, then, is suggestive of a worldwide shift into “anarchy,” as the collective mind of humanity lets go of morality.

“The Second Coming” is a deeply ambiguous poem. Indeed, Yeats revised specific cultural references out of the poem before its publication. But there’s no mistaking that this is a bleak vision of the future of humankind, one which presents morality as a kind of collective dream that is now turning into a nightmare.