

Learning to Appreciate Poetry

Presented by Paul Rogers

William Butler Yeats



The Second Coming

A few words in advance

W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939, is one of the great Irish poets. He is considered a key member of the “Irish Literary Renaissance” which started in the late 19th century and includes George Bernard Shaw, J. M. Synge, Bram Stoker, Sean O’Casey, Oscar Wilde and James Joyce. A second group in the later 20th century includes Samuel Beckett, Brendan Behan and Seamus Heaney.

His early work is sometimes referred to as the “Celtic Twilight” in which he writes poems featuring characters from Irish mythology. These poems owe much to the Romantic movement, or at least an Irish nationalist version of it. They made him a popular literary figure on both sides of the Irish sea as well as in the States. However, he was deeply affected by major events of the early 20th century such as the struggle for Irish independence and the Great War. He got to know figures from the Modernist movement, and while never exactly part of it, their influence is apparent in his later work.

Yeats was a mystic and became interested in a variety of cabalistic and numinous organisations which separates him from most Modernists. He became a leading Irish statesman and a founder of the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin. He is buried near Ben Bulman in County Sligo having written his own epitaph for his tombstone:

*Cast a cold eye on life, on death,
Horsemen, pass by.*

The Poem

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Rhyme Scheme

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The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
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This is written entirely in blank verse and the rhythm is irregular.

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Imagery

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One of Yeats' mystical beliefs is that history runs in cycles or gyres. The fact that this gyre is "widening" and that "the centre cannot hold," suggests that the cyclical nature of what he is proposing is no mere repetition but something far worse. "The falcon cannot hear the falconer" implies that a nominal master or ruler is powerless to influence what is about to happen.

Yeats rejected Christianity *per se*, but was conscious that in less than 100 years, the millennium since Christ's crucifixion would come about. Because of the horrors of war and other atrocities, his image of a second coming is not the holy, blessed one of a returning redeemer, but of something far darker and more grotesque. The Great Sphinx of Egypt, his symbol for the Second Coming, is found in Giza. It's interesting to note the simile "A gaze blank and pitiless as the son," is almost an anagram of Giza.

Other religious images such as the rocking cradle and Bethlehem as the birthplace of horror not salvation are very powerful.

Basic Meaning

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
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Yeats wrote a famous poem about the doomed Easter Rising when the Irish rose up against the English in 1916. The rising and its bloody aftermath, coupled with the continuing nightmare of trench warfare in WW1, form the backdrop to this poem. It has been widely quoted as an indictment of ineffectual politicians and fanatical revolutionaries in the lines: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

"Spiritus Mundi," or the spirit of the world, is another image from Yeats' mystical studies, giving the overall impression when "things fall apart," and that "the centre cannot hold," that the time is ripe for radical and potentially horrendous "solutions" to be found. Consequently, although it was written in 1919, some critics have suggested it foreshadows the horrors of Hitler and Stalin: the final solution and the gulags.

It is a poem of immense power but also of great foreboding and bleakness.

Concluding Remarks

Yeats has a foot in both the 19th and 20th centuries. In the former, he follows in the footsteps of the Romantics, while in the latter, though he flirts with Modernism, he creates his own mystical world which often links directly to our own.

You don't have to share or sympathise with Yeats' metaphysics to appreciate what a truly great poet he is. Not many poets have reinvented themselves (and their styles) during the course of a lifetime and become greater as a consequence. More than anything else, Yeats' humanity leaves the deepest and most lasting impression. He is horrified at what he has witnessed but does not withdraw from the world – if anything, he seeks to engage more directly with it. He became a senator in the newly independent Ireland and his work with the Abbey Theatre helped to establish it as one of the world's great stages.

His private life is as tormented as any Romantic could wish for. He pursued the Irish actress, Maude Gonne, for years, despite the fact that she couldn't return his affections. It is no exaggeration to say that he remains a towering figure in both Irish and world literature.

Preparing for the Next Unit

