Student Essay

Doomsday Poetry: Yeats's "The Second Coming"

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In his poem The Second Coming, W.B. Yeats predicts a frightening scene which he sees as the coming of the end of the world. Yeats utilizes a combination of elements to create a horrifying backdrop for his poem. He uses powerful images, symbols and allusions to communicate his message of an impending apocalypse.

Yeats employs a lot of images that convey the overall dark tone of the poem. He employs a simple structure, dividing the poem into two stanzas. In the first stanza, Yeats uses imagery to describe the deterioration of the world around him. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (1.3-4). It is apparent that Yeats is referring to the unraveling of society. The "centre" representing the foundation of order and reason, has broken down and has given way to chaos and turmoil. In his following lines, Yeats further expresses his fears: "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (1.5-6). Yeats' imagery draws up a horrifying picture of death and destruction. In these lines, he is referring to the devastation and bloodshed brought on by war. While the first stanza describes the state of decline of the world, the second stanza predicts the end result; a second coming and the downfall of humanity. In the lines: "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" (2.6-8), Yeats is making a reference to the Sphinx. He also hints that the Sphinx is slowly making its way towards Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ. "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born"" (2.13-14). Yeats illustrates a powerful image in the Sphinx only to return the dark tone in which he started. "Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it/ Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds/ The darkness drops again ..." (2.8-10). Yeats successfully uses imagery to set the dark mood of the poem and as a result, he communicates his message much more effectively.

Yeats also employs many symbols in his poem to further reinforce his prediction of an impending apocalypse. In the opening lines of the poem he states "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer" (1.1-2). The falcon in this line a symbol for mankind and the falconer is a symbol for "God." The falcon is flying in circles, spiraling in a widening gyre away from the falconer. The falcon losing contact with its master is a metaphor for mankind losing its righteous path with God and turning to a dark path of sin. Yeats also mentions "the centre cannot hold." In this instance, the centre is a symbol for all law and order residing over the mankind. A world without order results in the eventual breakdown of society. In line five Yeats reveals the release of a "blood-dimmed tide." This tide is a symbol for the conflict and destruction brought on by war. The "drowning of innocence" in the line that follows further supports the idea that the wave like war is a destructive force resulting in death. Yeats' use of symbolism is even more apparent in the second stanza of the poem. The multiple repetition of the words "second coming" reinforces its importance as a symbol in his poem. The second coming is a symbol for the apocalypse, which is the title and subject of the entire poem itself. The mention of the Sphinx in the second stanza is also a powerful symbol. The Sphinx in the poem is a symbol for the antichrist. It is an association that is never usually linked to the Sphinx. Yeats also uses birds as symbols twice in his poem. The first bird symbol being the falcon and, the second is the mention of "indignant desert birds." The birds in this second stanza are a symbol for followers of the Christian faith (priests, bishops etc.) who are trying to prevent the apocalypse to no avail. The most powerful of symbols in the poem appear in the final lines. The "rocking cradle" mentioned is of great significance since it is a symbol for Jesus Christ, the son of God. The symbol is powerful because it is a spiritual one. It has different levels of meaning depending on the interpreter. Yeats uses symbols in his poem as a means of communicating to the reader. With symbols the interpreter can associate aspects of the poem and understand the greater meaning that Yeats is trying to get across.

Yeats uses many allusions in his poem, most of which are religious in nature. The title of the poem itself is an allusion from the bible. The second coming according to Christianity is "a reference to the return to earth of Jesus Christ, when the world will end, the dead will be raised, and the final judgment will occur" (St. Francis). This allusion of the second coming is obviously important since Yeats' entire poem is centered on the subject. Yeats also refers to the "Spiritus
Mundi", Latin for spirit of the world. It refers to "the spirit or soul of the universe, with which all individual souls are connected through the 'Great Memory,' which Yeats held to be a universal subconscious in which the human race preserves its past memories" (Norton). The image Yeats sees out of Spiritus Mundi is that of the Sphinx, another allusion in the poem. The Sphinx has a head of a human with the body of a lion. Its immense size and grandeur is one reason Yeats chose to use the Sphinx as a symbol for the antichrist. Its presence is certainly intimidating and it has lasted as long as Christianity itself which makes it an appropriate choice. Yeats makes several other religious allusions in his poem. The mention of Bethlehem and the rocking cradle are allusions of Jesus Christ. The holy city of Bethlehem was the birthplace of Christ and the cradle representing the manger in which he was born. As Yeats describes it, the Sphinx is slowly approaching Bethlehem suggesting that it is to be born in place of Christ. What Yeats is trying to say with this description is that mankind's loss of its righteous path with God ultimately results in the apocalypse. Using religious allusions, Yeats can resonate to a larger audience and can make his poem more profound to the interpreter.

Yeats effectively employs images, symbols and allusions in his poem "The Second Coming." As a result his poem embodies a dark tone that is a prefect setting for communicating his message of an impending apocalypse. The three elements combined helped Yeats to create a much more powerful poem that also truly resonates with the reader.

Works Cited


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