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Research Paper

Prophetic and Catastrophic Voices in "The Second Coming" and "The Waste Land"

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Abstract

Eliot and Yeats were widely considered two of the most influential Modernists. They demonstrate the crisis of modern society in their poetry. This paper examines how poets' voices in their particular works transform private feelings into prophetic proclamation regarding approaching human condition. Merit of Yeats and Eliot are linked as they wrote poetry that has been described both as prophetic and catastrophic in the same historical period. The purpose of this paper is to survey their perception of the impending days, comparing "The Second Coming" and "The Waste Land". Both poems present a rebirth process, but each one focuses on different goals and subjects. They yearned for the more humane, cultured and promising times of the past, as the prevailing contemporary chaotic-world endangered peace, happiness, and solidarity. Both poets were concerned about the disorderly and fragmented social condition of their time – which is still relevant as mankind is undergoing a time of turmoil, anarchy and chaos. It is a narrative research that follows descriptive-cum analytical method and the relevant textual references are given as evidence to support the argument of this study.

Keywords

Anarchy, disillusionment, prophetic and catastrophic, impending days of mankind, good sense

> *"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,*
> *Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"* (Yeats, p. 883)

An inadvertent reader might wonder why in Yeats's "The Second Coming," the 1919 poem, the mankind of the world has such terrible position; is it that the earth is slouching towards Bethlehem? Have things fallen apart? Yes, Yeats's beast, it must be perceived, isn't deteriorating or disappearing in its slouching and, it slouches in steady, dedicated progress toward a goal (Harrison, 1995). It is actually a terrifying sight: the poem's narrator perceives that the beast is coming to inflict some indefinable disaster. The only thing not doing any slouching these days is the "rough beast" itself. On the other hand, in "The Waste Land", Eliot feels that the imminent

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catastrophe was a result of the decadence of civilization, a direct result of mankind's rejection of the God of the Anglican faith, a failure that implies a more personal responsibility. Since Eliot's view implies freedom of choice, he found that humanity held the ultimate responsibility for its own salvation or desolation (Leavis, 1962, pp.103-104). Eliot differs from Yeats in that he describes an entirely internal, spiritual destruction. In this paper, the researcher examines Yeats' "The Second Coming" and Eliot's "The Waste Land" as examples of their voices regarding the impending future.

The relationship between literature and the social environment is one of the writers' matters of primary concerns, and summons up the writers' emotion and imagination. The horrors of First World War, with its accompanying massacres and absurdity became the catalyst for the Modernist movement in literature and art. Modern literature disillusioned with morals, religion and tradition attempted to portray mankind as it really was; questioning morals, consciences and the human soul. The Modernists were looking for a new vision and challenged the Modern Era (Matthews, 2015). Eliot and Yeats were widely considered two of most powerful Modernists. Both of them keenly felt this disillusionment, and expressed it in their poems. They also saw the continuing anarchy in Europe, such as the Russian Revolution and the Irish Rebellions, as confirmation of their fear of man's nature and expanded their disillusionment in "The Waste Land", and "The Second Coming."

In the wake of the WW1, Yeats began writing the poem, and political turmoil in his native Ireland. But the first stanza captures more than just political turbulence and ferocity. Its anxiety disquiets the social ills of modernity: the loss of communal religious faith, and with it, the shared sense of purpose; the feeling that the old rules no longer apply and there's nothing to substitute them (Tabor, 2015). We find almost similar form of despair in Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1881) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

Of course, twentieth-century history did turn more horrific after 1919, as the poem predicts. The speaker suggests something like the Christian notion of a "second coming" is about to befall, but rather than earthly peace, it will bring horror for the mankind. As for the slouching beast, the best explanation is that it is not a particular political regime, or even fascism itself, but a broader historical force, comprising the technological, the ideological, and the political. A century later, we can see the beast in the atomic bomb, the Holocaust, the regimes of Stalin and Mao, and all manner of systematized brutality that still continues in various forms at the different levels of our lives in different countries (Matthews, 2015).

We know, Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* borrows a line from "The Second Coming," which cleverly reflects the prophetic tone of the poem. In the novel we see African civilization is the one under threat, and the rough beast is the West. Achebe's Nigerian warrior Okonkwo commits suicide not being able to adopt with the changes. In doing this he feels that he saves his honor and heritage. He also kills himself to dodge the pain and suffering that Christianity brought to his culture. What makes the poem so synonymous to the novel is that in either case it is not possible to stop the changes from happening. And, this is what exactly happening in every corner of the world to bring a catastrophic extinction to mankind.

Eliot and Yeats shared a disbelief in the goodness of man's nature; they also both had religious experiences that colored their thoughts. Eliot was an atheist at the start of his life, and converted to Christianity, coming to believe in it with zeal. Eliot also toyed with Buddhism during one stage of his writing "The Waste Land" (Southam, 1994, p.132). Because of the importance of religion in both of their lives, they used many mythological and religious allusions in their poems to comprehend human nature. Eliot saw the future as redeemable, while Yeats believed it could get more confused before the Second Coming. These opposing views are seen in their title choice, images, and allusions. The objective of this paper is to examine the view of the coming days of

these two poets, Yeats and Eliot, comparing "The Second Coming" and "The Waste Land" from their perspectives.

These two poets differ from each other thematically on their views of the impending days. "The Second Coming" depicts the approach of a new world order, selecting into the concept of the gyre. The gyre is one of Yeats's favorite motifs, the idea that history occurs in cycles, specifically cycles "two thousand years" in length. In this poem, Yeats predicts that the Christian era will soon give way apocalyptically to an era ruled by a godlike desert beast with the body of a lion and the head of a man. It means the age of Christ is over and a new, more horrible age is approaching. On the other hand, Eliot sees the future as redeemable. He feels that life in the present is an emotional wasteland that is empty and filled with mechanisms. To counteract the emptiness of life, Eliot sees hope for a fuller life by following examples of varied myths from the past and myths of present religions such as Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Yeats's personal mythology also holds that the coming days before new 'cycle' of history will be more disorderly than the present, because life will become a repetition of the distant past. Eliot, on the other hand, uses "The Waste Land" to reflect the emotional emptiness of humans in the present, and the individual titles, such as "The Burial of the Dead" and "What the Thunder Said," to show a path that people must follow the advice to get rid of them from this misery. Yeats's choice of the title, "The Second Coming," shows the double meaning of his philosophy, his blend of personal mythology and Christian beliefs. Yeats uses the poem to express his personal belief that the future of man will be a retreat to man's darker past.

Like Yeats, Eliot carefully chose the title, "The Waste Land", for its symbolic meaning. "The Waste" implies fruitlessness and emptiness, accurately describing the way Eliot perceived mankind's psyche after the devastation of WW1. Eliot believes that people who lack emotions are neither living nor dead and thus have emptiness where a spirit once inhabited. Section three of *The Waste Land* takes its title directly from Buddha, "The Fire Sermon" was given by Buddha being against the fires of lust, anger, envy and other desires that demolish men, reflecting the evil passions that men are engulfed in when they have emotions at all (Southam, 1994, p.165). The title of section four, "Death By Water," brings to mind the ancient fertility rituals in which men would be drowned only to be reborn later (Vickery, 1973, p.264,). When the poem reaches fourth section, the narrator wants to escape the empty, evilness of life and be reborn into a full life. The final section, "What the Thunder Said" has a clear meaning. It is taken from the *Upanishads* and the 'thunder' is the voice of God who utters "Da" three times. The "Da" is taken to mean "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" or in English, to give alms, have control, and have compassion. Eliot tells humans how to live in order to come out of "The Waste Land" (Southam, 1994, p.192). Thus, each individual section becomes a step in the journey that man must take to save himself from the empty waste s/he is living in.

Yeats uses circles and other images, and there is no hope for the future in "The Second Coming"; in contrast, Eliot sees the coming days as more hopeful, that can be better than the past or present.

Circles, with no end and no beginning, are the symbol of perpetual repetition. Yeats uses a "gyre" to show both confusion and repetition. "Gyre" in the first line symbolizes history, or the life cycles of men. As a gyre turns bigger and bigger while keeping its original shape, which is round, it means that even though everything, like technology keeps on improving, human nature and the lives that we live never do. History keeps on repeating itself, and human never learn from their mistakes. In a spiral man cannot tell which way is up and which is down, but travel still goes in the round, repetitive path of a circle.

Conversely, Eliot uses physical setting and photographic descriptions to convey his idea of human condition in "The Waste Land". The physical setting varies from the London business sector to a typist's apartment, from a bar to a luxurious room; yet, all of the scenes are soulless. The river Thames, which was the common way in and out of London for centuries, is empty; the nymphs are

departed. The word 'empty' to Eliot means emotionally dead, making London, a wasteland. The city of London is crowded, but its people are like those who in life knew neither good nor evil (Southam, 1994, p.151). London becomes an "Unreal City" with hollow men. This city is "an intense but, meaningless horror" exemplifying that the city's people are so emotionally dead as to be meaningless, thus making the city terrifying (Leavis, 1962, p.104). Another setting Eliot uses is that of a room. People have the room may be, but its dwellers are gone, leaving only the memories and beauty behind. Typical of all of Eliot's scenes in the poem, these three settings depict everyday places lacking all soul because the people who occupy them are both spiritually and emotionally empty.

The differences in theme are most notably reflected in the poets' varying allusions of "The Waste Land" and "The Second Coming." Yeats uses the falcon and the sphinx to interconnect the past and the future, invoking his idea of the repetition of history. He also uses the falcon to show the confusion and disorder that are in the world today (Harrison, 1995). On the other hand, Eliot uses religion and ancient myths to show that the past can instruct us on a way to escape the man-made waste land.

One of Yeats's major symbols, the "widening gyre," is used analytically to show the annihilation of the current civilization and the beginning of a new one. The continuing "turning and turning" of the gyre exemplifies the last breath of a period of history and its plunge into a new tyrannical world. And the "falcon," a bird of nobility, brings many images to mind. The "noble" falcon "represents the order Yeats saw in the world in the Middle Ages" (Harrison, 1995). From the Middle Ages, Yeats jumps to the modern period, reminding people of the Russian Revolution and other recent bloody events, such as the Irish Rebellions. "The Second Coming," foretells how the Second Coming brings horror and repression to the world. In the last two lines of the first stanza of the poem we see that the logical order of things is reversed;

"The best lack all conviction while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity" (Yeats, p.883).

Everything is turned in an opposite direction since a new order of things is introduced. According to some interpretations 'the best' referred to the traditional ruling classes and intellectuals of Europe who were unable to protect the traditional culture of Europe from materialistic mass movements. When he separates the bird and its keeper, Yeats reveals "their disruption of the order and cohesion," that he believes exemplifies the modern world (Harrison, 1995).

"The Second Coming" is viewed as a prophetic poem that envisions the close of the Christian era and the violent birth of a new age. The poem's title makes reference to the Biblical reappearance of Christ, prophesied in Revelation of the Bible, which according to Christianity, will accompany the Apocalypse and divine Last Judgment. Whereas, Eliot develops his theme by allusions to religion and mythology. In "The Waste Land" Eliot mentions to the Bible and to Eastern Religions. For example, he employs Sanskrit which is the language of the Hindu religion, to give the answer to escaping "the wasteland": "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" (Southam, 1994, p.192). Eliot explicitly offers the solution in "What the Thunder Said." Eliot weaves in a Hindu story in which gods, devils, and humans each ask their common father, Prajapati, for advice. Prajapati replies to each with the single syllable da, which is interpreted as Datta, Dayadhvam, and Damyata−Hindu words meaning "to give alms," "to sympathize with others," and "to practice self-control." Eliot proposes these three practices as cures for the ills afflicting the wasteland. We see references from the Bible, such as God having Moses bring water from a rock, the effects of the death of Christ, and many direct quotes like "Son of Man" suggest the resurrection and rebirth. Eliot's references to religious imagery give a sense of truth to his claim of there being a chance of a better future (Southam, 1994, pp.193-194).

The mythological allusion that Eliot considers most important is that of Tiresias. Tiresias is a character who, in Greek mythology, spent time as a man and as a woman. He was blinded for spite and had the gift of prophecy. In Tiresias, Eliot makes all the sexes one. Tiresias unites all the people in the poem into one person. Each individual person in the poem represents a type of human, and by uniting the characters Eliot makes the "wasteland" a universal human condition. Tiresias understands the wasteland, and because of his having prior experience with desolation in "Thebes", he also offers hope for improvement to all. "The Waste Land" and "The Second Coming" see the present in the same light but the future differently. Both poets see the same terrible present because they experienced a similar disappointment with man's inherent goodness after First World War. Their visions of the approaching days differ because of the way that their religious beliefs have developed.

As a modernist poet, Eliot struggled to get rid of the voice of the author from his work but the work is still a reflection of the author's analysis. He paints the image as he sees it for the readers to view and interpret from their own perspective. "The Waste Land" could be viewed as a chronicle of Eliot's difficult and not quite successful journey to confront his own unconscious or spiritual reality. In his poem, Eliot employs a water motif, which represents both death and rebirth. This ties in with the religious motif, as well as the individual themes of the sections and the theme of the poem as a whole, that modern man is in a wasteland, and must be reborn. The poem, however, does not answer its own question, maybe because the presence of water would make things right. Still, the end of the poem seems to hold some comfort, some hope that the unfairness in the world need not be continued (Southam, 1994, p.198).

Both Yeats's "Second Coming" and Eliot's "The Waste Land" present a renewal of process, but each one focuses on diverse goals and subjects. Eliot focuses on a person's alteration, whereas Yeats predicts a turn of the whole world as a result of an amplification of chaos. Eliot, on the other hand, uses ambiguity to support and develop his theme: death is the way to rebirth. In contrast, Yeats maintains a pessimistic tone created by his futility on the bleak situation of mankind.

Yeats also focuses on the loss of control of a higher power over a lower power. In "The Second Coming" the loss of control is symbolized by the line "the falcon cannot hear the falconer". Here the falcon is the symbol of the lesser power and the falconer the symbol of the higher power. The line says that after time passes the powers change. Another reflective idea that dominates the poem is about the power of the superior force. The superior force in "The Second Coming" was not the apocalypse but it was time. Time cannot be paused or turned back so whatever is done may never be changed. Time does not allow the world to prepare for "The Second Coming", so all hope is lost since the superior powers are not using good sense. Similarly, our world changes from day to day. Everything we do now reflects on how the future will be. In "The Second Coming" there is no way to stop the apocalypse from happening. So, the world becomes helpless and falls victim to "The Second Coming". The story that the poem told were of life's end – a horrific vision of life.

In this regard, here the researcher would like to cite the text *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) – a collection of essays by Joan Didion that mainly describes her experiences in California during the 1960s. Interestingly, it takes its title from the poem "The Second Coming", by W. B. Yeats. The title essay mirrors the basic structure of the poem as well. Didion stands in the same position as Yeats's speaker, describing a social disaster, feeling the center start to give out. Didion reported the piece from San Francisco, "where the social hemorrhaging was showing up," "where the missing children were gathering and calling themselves 'hippies'" (as cited in Tabor, 2015). She tells of the confused youth she met there, including a five-year-old named Susan whose mother feeds her acid and peyote. She muses that the hippies are dealing with "society's atomization," for which their parents are responsible: "At some point between 1945 and 1967 we had somehow neglected to tell these children the rules of the game we happened to be playing," (as cited in Tabor, 2015).

It seems the world is on a nonstop express ride to trouble—trouble that is deep, wide and deadly and it is a never-ending process. Both Eliot and Yeats keenly felt this disillusionment, and demonstrated it in their poetry. In addition to the war, Eliot and Yeats also saw the continuing turmoil in Europe, such as the Russian Revolution and the Irish Rebellions, as confirmation of their fear of man's nature and expanded their disillusionment in "The Waste Land" and "The Second Coming." The poets shared more than a disbelief in mankind's innate quality. Both of the poets afraid that the grotesque creature or evil minds are going to rule the next historical era – since the world turns a place of chaos and disaster (Matthews, 2015).

Eliot also believes that humans find it hard to communicate; they are separated by misunderstanding or selfishness. People betray each other. Sometimes they live in their own world. This theme is well portrayed in one of his famous works "The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock" too. Mankind is depicted as a hapless victim of impersonal forces that he can neither affect nor control, the cycles or gyres of civilization.

Yeats and Eliot wrote poetry that defined the needs and desires of their era which are still applicable. They wrote of chaos and confusion and of a need for order; however the very dissimilar underlying causes that they hypothesized for the problems of world make it clear that they illustrated same issue regarding the future of mankind and expanded their disillusionment on man's nature in "The Waste Land" and "The Second Coming" along with visionary voices as the guidance for the mankind to follow.

In Yeats' vision of the future, concrete changes manifested in the physical world would occur. Because of the force of an outside agency, the historical cycle of the gyres, Yeats believed that this civilization would end. Mankind could not affect this process. Whether the system was, in fact, real is irrelevant; the author believed it to be so. Yeats, in "The Second Coming," documented and celebrated what he felt would be a necessary change in the physical world. On the other hand, Eliot viewed the chaos as a direct result of humankind's lack of connection to God through the Anglican religion. Since this view implies freedom of choice, Eliot found that humanity held the ultimate responsibility for its own salvation or destruction. When Eliot speaks of the world crying or ending, he refers to what to him was most significant, his inner spiritual world. His catastrophes were emotional and spiritual.

What is clear here is that there is no peace in the world now. Sleep is ruined by nightmares. Bloodshed is everywhere. The trained soldiers and crazy leaders are safe and sound even after murdering millions of people without any reason. This is a time of terror. People cannot but sweat and tremble due to the panic happenings all around. No man is any longer a man rather s/he becomes a beast or a stone – the symbol of cruelty. The complexity of modern life creates crisis and this world is "full of weeping" (Matthews, 2015). The theme of crisis through the oppositional binary between the noble past and the ignoble present is also revealed in the poems. Their lamentation over lost peace and lost hope is obvious. The complexity of modern life creates crisis and this world is full of lamentation. What is obvious in this era, is that there is no peace in the world now:

"The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
[…] the worst
Are full of passionate intensity" (Yeats, p.883).

The above excerpt describes the exact state of the present world as well – its political upheavals, the chaos and cynicism of modern civilization and the haphazard brutality of contemporary culture. Things are indeed falling apart in the present world too.

These two poets uphold that what once was in a harmony, gathering all together, has burst out into fragments. The poets are unhappy because the modern world is not favorable to equality, fraternity, and solidarity – values essential to foster a sense of well-being, wholesomeness and harmony in society. In modern society, like Eliot nobody– including Yeats– can connect anything with anything. Everything is disjointed:

"I can connect
Nothing with nothing" (Eliot, 1008).

So, a world is seen which is disintegrating and witnessing blood being shed and where mortal existence is in crisis. Anarchy is everywhere, and chaos has taken over. Violence and hatred have spread, evil advances and the only law the world knows is disorder. An atmosphere of fanaticism and violence has spread and the best lack all conviction and the worst are overburdened with fanatical intensity. And, we all know that there are global risks with a potentially infinite impact where in extreme cases all human life could end. Catastrophic climate change, Nuclear war, Synthetic biology, Nanotechnology, Artificial Intelligence, Future bad governance, Unknown unknowns are some of the risks that are capable of either causing human extinction or leading to a situation where civilization collapses to a state of great suffering and does not recover (Matthews, 2015).

Both Eliot and Yeats portray a miserable world where anarchy, uncertainty, absurdity and turmoil reign and reveal a dark and foreboding atmosphere to serve as a warning to what may lie ahead for mankind if we continue on our current path. Yet, it seems that - they suggest it is good sense what mankind need to avoid catastrophic end and there is a chance of a better future for this world if people sympathize with others and practice compassion and self-control.

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