

# Destination of the Ark of Art: Yeats's Christian Eschatology from "The Second Coming" to "Sailing to Byzantium"

Shenghua Yang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, China

Correspondence: Shenghua Yang, School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, China. Tel: 86-151-8178-9712. E-mail: yangshenghua2014@sina.com

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## Abstract

Yeats was one of the greatest figures in twentieth-century English and Irish literature. When discussing the rich content of Yeats's poems, most scholars intend to investigate the occult thought, the theory of circle and symbolism. It is noteworthy that biblical archetypes and Yeats's spiritual pursuit for harmony lie behind them. The Ark of Art in Yeats's two poems—"The Second Coming" and "Sailing to Byzantium" frees poet from the chaos in the Last Days and brings him to pursue the God of Art to harmonize himself, poetics, art and macrocosm.

**Keywords:** Yeats, Christian Eschatology, Recreation, Ark of Art

## 1. Introduction

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), winner of Nobel Prize for literature in 1923, ranks among the most widely admired and intensively studied writers of twentieth century. Yeats worked diligently and made important innovations in poetic writing. His poetic style is changeable, tinning from Romanticism in the early period, to Realism and Modernism in the middle period, to the mixture of symbolism and metaphysics in the last period of poetic creation. Being influenced by the studies of Occultism, metaphysics and Indian religion, Yeats explored symbolism and investigated origin and nature of the world in his last period of poetic creation. The Mask theory and Gyre theory are considered as Yeats' most typical philosophical achievement. Yeats's first poems appeared in the late nineteenth century and he continued writing until his death in 1939, aged 74. He began writing towards the end of the Victorian era when Browning and Tennyson were still alive and he finished writing in the world of Eliot and Pound. The influence of the Romantic Movement and the Pre-Raphaelites is clear in his early poetry, which is magic, full of mystery and the supernatural. Lyric poetry and Ballads draw on ancient Irish legends and folklore, and "The Lover" inhabits his work as important figure.

Yeats developed views about history and destiny which were based on the systems expounded in *A Vision* and were illustrated by one of the most important symbols—the gyres. The gyres are pictured as two cones which penetrate each other. These cones, or gyres, represent the opposites in the nature of each person or country or historical period. Each entity of the gyres contains elements of both opposites, categorized as lunar and solar, or subjective and objective, or moral and aesthetic. One gyre is the primary gyre, the other the antithetical gyre. One or the other becomes dominant through space and time. By this system, the past can be classified and the future predicted. In *A Vision*, the doctrine of the mask is also systematized in another symbol—the Great Wheel. The Great Wheel has 28 spokes, representing a year set out in lunar months. Each spoke represents the 28 possible selves, each being a mask of the one opposite, the 28 phases of each person's life and the phases of each cycle of world history, each cycle being approximately 2,000 years long.

As is known to all that Yeats's innovation and creation of his great works are rooted in well-established traditions. Yeats is very familiar with religious traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, not mention the classical wisdom of Pythagoras and Plato. Based upon most western philosophers, since the time of Descartes, Yeats is preoccupied with the relationship between the mind's subjectivity and the objective, the exterior world. (Holdeman, 2008, p. 70) By imagining a cosmos in which beings move between union with other spirits (at Phase 1) and absolute individuality (at Phase 15) until they are ready to escape into ultimate harmony, he balanced his longing for cosmic oneness against his fear of losing his selfhood. In this sense, Yeats always pursued his eternal harmony not only in the process of writing "The Second Coming" and "Sailing to

Bysantium”, but also in his personal relationship with Maud Gonne and his special attention to his nation and the Irish identity.

Yeats’s ultimate harmony is deep-rooted in the classical wisdom of Pythagoras and Plato, especially Pythagorean Cosmology. The Pythagorean doctrine believes that the universe is composed of two worlds: intelligible world and physical world. Plato’s *Timaeus* gives a comprehensive account about Pythagorean Cosmology. In *Timaeus*’s speech, there is a well-marked distinction between the world of being and the world of change. The intelligible world is apprehensible by intelligence with the aid of reasoning and remains eternally the same. Meanwhile, the physical world is never fully real and is visible, tangible and corporeal and therefore perceptible by the senses. *Timaeus* tells that the physical world is the fairest of all things, for it is constructed on the intelligible world. As for the motive for God’s creation, *Timaeus* says that the creator is good, so he wished all things to be as like himself as possible (*Timaeus and Critias* 40-42). The result is harmony and order. The purpose of the existence of the cycle of life-death-rebirth in Yeats’s works is to achieve eternal harmony in his pursuit for the God of Art by virtue of his own interpretation of Bible and other religious traditions. According to Pythagorean Cosmology, microcosm and macrocosm are everywhere in the system of the universe. It is noteworthy that the correspondence and harmony of microcosm and macrocosm are also the themes in Yeats’s works. “Yeats’s eternal harmony of life, of self, of art and of history could not exist unless there was an ordered and cohesive universe.” (Starup, 2008, p. 141) The ordered and cohesive universe exists in the movement of Yeats’s gyres and their Biblical sources.

There are not yet many critical studies concerning one of the most important thematic meanings in Yeats’s theory of the gyres—harmony brought by the God of Art from the perspective of biblical explanations. In this sense, the main purpose of the present article is to dig into Yeats’s two great poems “The Second Coming” and “Sailing to Byzantium” based upon biblical originals and to demonstrate the fact that the essence of Bible still plays a significant role in Yeats’s creative works although Yeats, to some extent, does not believe in Christianity. Biblical originals are basic elements for Yeats’s harmony existed not only in his poems, plays and letters, but also in his own state of being and his own nation. The article supplies some useful and important references to the study of the underlying argument of Yeats’s poems and of the relationship between his poems and his viewpoint towards universe, life and nation.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1 Christian Eschatology in “The Second Coming”

Yeats’s *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* embodies a remarkable achievement, in which “The Second Coming”, the lyric, has displaced “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” as Yeats’s single best known work. “The Second Coming” draws its imagery from Yeats’s developing theories concerning cycles of history and the gyres, which later become the focus in *A Vision*. Yeats’s theory of the gyres is the creation of Yeats’s magic imagination. In fact, this important theory is deep-rooted in Bible and it is not difficult for us to trace back to its originals—Christian Eschatology, the profound theme contained in Bible.

Christian Eschatology concerns that time will have an end in both the Old Testament and the New. What God has created will finally cease to exist: the stars will dim, the sun will burn out, the grass will dry up, and all of the created world will come to an end. In the Old Testament, And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth. And the waters prevailed and were increased greatly upon the earth; and all the high hills, that were under the whole heaven, were covered. And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth and every man. (Genesis 5-9) The people of the New Testament inherited this tradition of the coming apocalypse, the great Day of the Lord, when all the forces of justice would finally be unleashed. For all the disciples and many of those who followed Jesus, the Day of the Lord appeared to be at hand. They saw Christ as the Messiah, the Christian faith as the New Covenant, and anticipated the coming of the kingdom of God, and the Last Judgment. (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21)

“John’s Revelation is the great vision of the final days, the wars and rumors of wars, the sign of the beast, the whore of Babylon, the anti-Christ, and the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” (Tischler, 2009, p. 249) Some scenes occurred centuries earlier. Some happened in recent years. And others predicted the near future filled with destruction and fall. The Seven Great Signs include: the dragon’s war against the son, the woman, and the woman’s offspring, the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth, the lamb on Mount Zion, angelic

messages of judgment, the harvesting of the earth, and the reaping and judgment of the wicked. (Rev. 12-14)

*The Second Coming*, one of the most famous prophetic poems about the twentieth century, shows time and history as circular, turning in a widening gyre. Combined Irish folksong, Eastern mysticism with Bible, Yeats's own understanding of Last Days is well-elaborated.

"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;" (Yeats, 1943, p. 158) The centre cannot hold things together, so they fall apart. Ordinary life and the whole world are full of blood and chaos. These lines reflect the pains and chaos brought about by the First World War. Yeats was very disappointed with the disordered situation and held the opinion that the whole world would fall down and all the civilizations were in a state of disorder. Yeats's thoughts in *A Vision* correspond well to the Great Flood of Noah and Joel's prediction. The world is full of darkness and gloominess and God will recreate the world by using his destructive force. In the Day of the Lord, God will redeem his people and clear the way for their return to the Promised Land. Meanwhile, God will come to judge the just and the unjust. In Yeats's eyes, history has its own cycle as the gyres develop. After the first cycle of Christ's birth and death, another cycle appears. In twentieth century, facing the chaos of human society and civilizations, Yeats proclaims that the cycle of Christ has ended, civilization has decayed and the anti-Christ, standing for disorder and destruction, is coming.

Who is the anti-Christ? Where is he? "Somewhere in sands of the desert, a shape with lion body and the head of a man..." (Yeats, 1943, p.158) A beast, shared some similarities with the man bodied a lion in Egypt, is the anti-Christ, an important image in Yeats's descriptions of the Last Days. The beast corresponds to John's Revelation and one of the seven great signs. The appearance of the beast and its symbolic meanings are Yeats's prediction of the destruction and decay of the near future. In this respect, Yeats, to some extent, holds a pessimistic view towards the modern civilization, the First World War, the Russian Revolution and their influence, who strongly believes that history repeats itself well, which is evident of the looping spires of the gyres.

"Turning and turning in the widen gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer." (Yeats, 1943, p. 158) The falcon, generally, flies in ever-widening circles away from its trainer and returns when called back. But in the poem, the falcon can no longer hear the falconer's cry. The bird is lost from its return. This is a metaphor here. The falcon refers to human beings, human society and everything related to them such as civilization and culture. The falconer refers to the Lord of God and the Christ. That falcon cannot hear the falconer suggests a slackening of communication and a widening of distance between God and human beings. This metaphor also stands for the young people who have given up the standards of their parents and grandparents for the new art, the new literature, the new music, and the others of Yeats' time. This is the last day of art, of literature, of music, of civilization and of everything.

It is noted that Christian Eschatology has become a spiritual metaphor, which not only embodies the end of the chaotic world but also involves good wish of the coming of the new world or the new God. Based upon this, Yeats also holds a positive view towards the reality. Although he hates the chaotic reality and predicts the destruction and the end of it, he still preserves a good wish, the coming of the new world, by virtue of his theory of the gyres, and keeps his worship of the God of Art. For Yeats, the anti-Christ is doomed to come and the old world is destined to be ended, only the God of Art is the eternal savior, who will recreate a new world. Admittedly, Yeats's own understanding of Christian Eschatology is not explicit in "The Second Coming" and after several years, till his writing of "Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats has a clear thought about the question: apart from anti-Christ, who will redeem the world and human beings? In this respect, the two poems, belonging to different periods of Yeats's writing, are linked closely by Christian Eschatology.

## 2.2 Recreation in "Sailing to Byzantium"

"Sailing to Byzantium" opens Yeats's famous volume *The Tower*, in which Yeats has expressed his wish to visit. The poet's fascination with the early medieval city began during a trip to Italy in 1907, when he saw Bysantine mosaics in Ravenna. "I think that in early Byzantium... religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers... spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people. They could copy out of old Gospel books those pictures that seemed as sacred as the text, and ye weave all into a vast design, the work of many that seemed the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image." (Holdeman, 2008, p. 82)

The first two chapters of Genesis provide two concepts of creation. The first is that God created the world and things came into being. The second includes that God formed man out of the dust of the ground and made man a

living soul by breathing the breath of life into his nostrils. (Genesis 2) The Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping things, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. The Lord God commanded Noah make an ark for him, his family, the chosen animals, the male and the female. And the waters prevailed upon the earth. Noah and every living thing were with him in the ark. After the flood, Noah and every living thing may breed abundantly in the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth. (Genesis 6-9) The book of Job provides another Hebrew's view of Creation. Poor Job has been trying to understand why he is being tormented, finally challenging the great plan of creation itself. God responds: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" the Lord God also describes the day of creation, "when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy." God lists with obvious delight in his own creativity the wonders of the world, including the Behemoth and Leviathan. Poor Job is overwhelmed after the amazing acts of Creation. He responds "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 40-41) In Revelation, Bible promises a New Creation for all believers. In the Last Days, all of God's chosen will become new creatures, casting off their dusty flesh and putting on the sparkling white garments of the blessed. Meanwhile, John promises the coming of the New Creation, with a new heaven and a new earth after the first heaven and the first earth have passed away. (Rev.21)

When Yeats wrote *Sailing to Byzantium*, he was an aged man, who had received international reputation. So, the internal structure, artistic creation and the symbolic meaning of this poem are more precise and delicate, which have reflected the essence of Yeats's poetics and philosophy in his last years.

The image of Byzantium, the ancient holy city, is substantial in contents, which symbolizes recreation and the eternal. "It is also Yeats's holy city of the imagination as Golgonooza was Blake's. Byzantium is more effective for symbolic purpose than Golgonooza, for Yeats needs only to divert it from the traditional meaning it already has and is not required to explain it from the beginning." (Ellmann, 1948, p. 257)

It is difficult for the youth to have Byzantium's state of mind, for they are often addicted to sensual enjoyment and too young to understand the essence of life although they have strong body full of vigor. It is also not easy for the old to reach Byzantium, for they have decayed both in physics and in spirit. Having experienced spiritual torment of Last Days and profound thoughts about the reality and philosophy in "The Second Coming", Yeats began to explore the theme of recreation, of new life, greatly affected by Bible, in "Sailing to Byzantium". The theme of the recreation is shown clearly in the following:

The first two stanzas are rich in the conception of reproduction and recreation. "The young in one another's arms", the salmons swimming in the fall and the mackerels crowded in the sea stand for reproduction and recreation of life, and predict what is begotten and what is born. Youth is the golden period of life, which is filled with vitality and vigor. In the first three lines, the young just have sensual enjoyment and this sort of vitality cannot last forever. Yeats uses "birds in the trees-those dying generations" to imply his own meditation on life. We may consider the aged man in the second stanza as the poet Yeats himself. "A tattered coat" means that the poet has gone through quite a lot joys and pains. The poet's body, which is not strong, not full of vigor and vitality, has the similar experience as the tattered coat. Yeats, with "the tattered body" is eager to pursue the magnificence, the holy immortality represented by the holy city of Byzantium. In this sense, sailing to Byzantium is the effective way of recreation of body and repurification of soul, which are Yeats's essence of poetics and philosophy.

The protagonist of the poem is not Yeats but may be described as a symbol of Yeats and of the artist and of man. (Ellmann, 1948, p. 257) The symbol of Yeats and of the artist and of man, in the third stanza, can be regarded as Noah in the holy Bible from the point of Yeats's thematic meaning of recreation. There are some evident proofs. In the first place, Yeats uses "sailing" as part of the title, which signifies the protagonist of the poem is in an ark that has saved him from the destructive flood—the chaotic world and will bring him to the holy city—Byzantium. In Bible, Noah, guided by the Lord God, built an ark for the survival of the chosen creatures and for the existence of the faithful belief of God's magnificent power. Facing the destruction of the flood, Noah's ark preserved his family, the chosen animals, and most importantly, some immortal and eternal things. In this poem, Yeats, guided by the Lord God of Art, has built an ark of art and spirit for the survival of the chosen creatures and for the faithful belief of the eternal art, unity and harmony. So Yeats is brave enough and has strong desire to reach Byzantium and pursue the God of Art, by sailing with his ark of art and ark of spirit. Yeats is willing to consume his heart to achieve the new creation and eternity. Yeats's ark preserves himself, his belief and most importantly, the eternity and harmony represented by the pursuit for the God of Art. In the second place, a vivid painting can be pictured in terms of the phrase "sailing to Byzantium", in which an ark surrounded by water is

sailing in a broad sea with the purpose to reach Byzantium. Both “sea” and “water” are significant symbols of reproduction and recreation of life by virtue of Christian origins. An embryo is growing in mother’s womb, in which the water—amniotic fluid is fully filled with. So the womb is the origin of life. The ark itself has similar form and style with church, which stands for the Lord God and Christian belief. Combined with the meanings of womb and church, Yeats’s sailing with the ark of art and spirit is the holy process of recreation and reproduction of the God of Art.

Being similar to Job’s situation, Yeats considers himself to be tormented. His coat is tattered, his body had gradually decayed, and even his soul is also tormented. Yeats is willing to be Job, to be loyal to his Lord God of Art, to be faithful to the immortal things such as the eternal arts and the poetics of eternity contained in poet’s ideal holy place—Byzantium. Yeats once doubted Christian belief and was interested in the mysterious religions. However, the essential contents of Bible and Christian belief have still laid inconceivable influence upon Yeats’s poetics.

The image of golden bird in “Sailing to Byzantium” is a symbol of recreation and reproduction. Generally, “bird” refers to male’s reproductive organs. In Greek mythology, Zeus seduced Leda in the form of a swan, a symbolic bird. Rowland points out that “bird means the breast of mother to feed baby”. (Rowland, 1978, p. 56) Being tired of the chaos of the reality, which Yeats describes as the bad situation during the Last Days, Yeats chooses to leave from the world of chaos and confusion to his ideal place. In this poem, poet expresses the idea that he is willing to be a golden bird in Byzantium, setting upon a golden bough to sing. Yeats builds his own bodily form as a golden bird, symbolizing the reproduction and recreation of his body, his soul and his poetic art. Thus he can free himself from the restriction and the pain brought by his desire, his decaying body and chaos in reality. Although his body is doomed to vanish, his spirit and poetic art can be eternal in the form of golden bird.

### 2.3 Yeats’s Pursuit for Eternal Harmony from “The Second Coming” to “Sailing to Byzantium”

According to Yeats’s theory of the Gyres, at the point of one civilization’s death, new civilization arises. The new society, like its predecessors, lasts about 2000 years. Which civilization will arise after the decline of the present Christian era? Between the publication of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and *The Tower* (1928), the civil war ended, the Irish Free State was declared and Yeats was appointed as a Senator. He was not content with success and venerability, but wanted to change, by using his works, to move and affect people.

Yeats wants his work to express, as far as possible, the complete experience of a man throughout his life and a permanent form shaped by art and available to the present readers and the future generations. His works represent his life. Each poem, essay, story even letter contribute to his life and form a representation of himself and his times. Meanwhile, Yeats’s microcosm, in different periods of his lifetime, is the respective correspondence to the eternal world and the macrocosm. Therefore, “the search for harmony, to fuse life, work, and country into one dissoluble whole is the abiding theme of Yeats’s writing.” (Ellman, 1948, p. 119)

The representative work “The Second Coming” in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) has reflected the chaos and disorder in the external world and the macrocosm. The civil war continues and Irish identity is in a bad situation. Inevitably, it is difficult for Yeats to keep harmony in his own microcosm and in his poem. For him, Last Days and anti-Christ are coming and the present civilization is doomed to be destroyed. Who is the savior in terms of Christian Eschatology? Yeats gives his creative answer in his another representative work “Sailing to Byzantium” in *The Tower* (1928) several years later. Sailing with the ark of life and art, he pursues the savior of the world—the Lord God of Art in the destination named Byzantium. The process of sailing is the indispensable course of harmonizing poet’s microcosm and the macrocosm. In this respect, Yeats’s pursuit for eternal harmony is available not only in his poems, in his religious belief, but also in his corresponding microcosm when he creates his representative works in *Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and *The Tower* (1928).

Yeats first met Maud Gonne in 1889 and it changed his life and work forever. Physically striking, she was tall with a profusion of golden-brown hair. She was also an intelligent, passionate and deeply unconventional young woman. Maud hated the English and the British Empire and she turned her back on a privileged upbringing to become a revolutionary, campaigning vigorously for the Irish National Party and committing herself wholeheartedly to the cause of nationalism.

Yeats proposed marriage to Maud Gonne for the first time in 1891, only to be refused. She wanted his friendship, she wanted him to write poems and plays for her, but marriage to Yeats was not what she wanted. Yeats continued to propose to Maud Gonne and to be refused again and again. Nevertheless, what she and her presence symbolized for him was to be one of the abiding themes of his work.

“The Second Coming” was published in 1921. Yeat’s eternal love—Maud Gonne, finally, has refused his

proposal. Yeats married George Hyde-Lees and has a serious reflection on his love to Maud Gonne. In the beginning, it seems that Yeats's love for Maud Gonne is very similar to the profound theme in "The Second Coming". His love is doomed to be ended when the Last Days are coming. Maud Gonne's refusal declared the Last Days' Coming. Several years later, marriage has brought him love, children and comfortable family life. Yeats's attitude towards his love for Maud Gonne has changed gradually and he finds eventually his harmonious love existing in his wife, artistic works, the occult and his mythology.

### 3. Conclusion

"By and large, Yeats elicits admiration not because he worked systems of thought and belief his admirers would wish to share. Instead he teaches us and moves us mainly by virtue of his astonishing capacity for feeling and expressing both the universal contradictions that come with being alive and those particular contradictions that come along during the crucial period of his lifetime." (Holdeman, 2008, p. 2) Yeats is an interesting and difficult figure largely because of his way of life, his times, and his works gradually shaped and reshaped each other.

As has been discussed in the previous paragraphs, this article analyses Christian Eschatology existing mainly in Yeats's two representative and related poems—"The Second Coming" and "Sailing to Byzantium", and presents that Yeats's spiritual journey from deep dissatisfaction and disappointment facing the Last Days in the chaotic reality to faithful belief in the pursuit for the holy city with his ark of art and spirit where the God of Art lives. Harmony, Yeats's life-long goals and his eternal pursuit, have been achieved through his spiritual journey in the process of his writing the two poems—"The Second Coming" and "Sailing to Byzantium". It is also noteworthy that, in this period of writing the two poems, Yeats's own interpretation of Christian Eschatology also exists in his deep love for his eternal Goddess—Maud Gonne. He also experiences a gradual transition from depression to spiritual maturity. Yeats's *A Vision*, containing his clear explanation of the theory of the Gyres deep-rooted in the two poems and his profound philosophical thought about the occult and mythology appears in this period.

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