

# The paradox of conflict and beauty in yeats' poetry

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Although the world has evolved in many ways since Yeats was around, his poetry remains significant in the modern era. By simply scrolling through social media, flipping through T. V channels or listening to the radio, we are constantly reminded that we live in a chaotic and corrupted world. Through his poetry, Yeats explores the contradictory existence and nature of beauty within this world as both a catalyst and consequence of conflict. In particular, Yeats explores man's desire for truth and man's desire for spiritual transcendence.

In 'The Wild Swans at Coole' Yeats portrays his personal longing to transcend man's temporal nature. This poem was written during a time of great melancholy for Yeats. After facing rejection a second time from the woman he loved, he visited an old friend where he observed swans on the lake. Through this poem, Yeats depicts a clear separation between himself and the swans, representing them as "brilliant creatures" whose "hearts have not grown old" and that "passion or conquest... attend upon them still". This personification depicts an immortality about the swans as they remain youthful and passionate, juxtaposing Yeats' faded youth. His envy of the swans and longing for eternal youth is emphasised in the irony that his "heart is sore" rather than full after seeing the beauty of the swans. In stanza two, Yeats describes how the swans "suddenly mount and scatter" symbolising how he cannot control change just as he cannot control his mortality nor resist old age. This suggests Yeats' perspective of beauty as a catalyst for tension as he recognises eternal beauty, yet due to his mortality, can never achieve it.

Similarly, Yeats explores man's desire for spiritual transcendence through 'The Second Coming'. Composed in 1919, the poem was closely influenced by the great political and social change following World War One, the Russian Revolution and the Irish War of Independence. Yeats illustrates a world where "the falcon cannot hear the falconer", suggesting through this metaphor that man has turned away and rejected a higher being. He highlights a longing for a holy revelation through Biblical allusions, saying "Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand". But this isn't the redemptive 'second coming' as we know it. Instead, Yeats ironically portrays this revelation as destructive where "darkness drops" and "things fall apart". This enforces the contradictory nature of beauty, that man can never accomplish it because of the destruction in the world, but also because of man's imperfect, mortal nature.

Through his poetry, Yeats also explores man's desire for truth and understanding. However, he suggests that absolute truth can never be achieved, due to the changing world. But if there is no truth, where does that leave our ideologies and convictions? This is exactly what Yeats addresses through his poem 'Easter 1916'. Written as a response to political and social unrest caused by the Easter uprising, Yeats questions whether it is honourable or foolish to die for one's convictions. He reflects the paradox of ideologies which create a sense of relative truth yet cause conflict as time shifts. This is clearly depicted through the motif of change, followed by the phrase "A terrible beauty is born" closing the first, second and final stanzas. This oxymoron illustrates the tragedy born out of beliefs, which were inherently good.

Yeats mentions five key characters, four by name, who died in the uprising. By naming them, he mythologises their actions but at the same time critiques them for having “ ignorant good will”. This oxymoron reflects Yeats’ ambivalent view of convictions in a changing world. However, naming them in the final stanza saying that “ now and in time to be, wherever green is worn,” they “ are changed, changed utterly”, Yeats acknowledges their heroic act for Ireland and implies they changed the course of history. This proposes the alternate perspective, that elements of beauty can be created through conflict. ‘ The Second Coming’ also presents a desire for truth in a conflicted world. However, this truth is inaccessible, which is represented by the deconstructed form of the poem. Yeats claims that “ the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity”. This paradoxical statement highlights the danger of conviction, reiterating his view that ideologies in this transient world result in catastrophe.

In a world where conflict dominates headlines, it’s so easy to overlook the speckles of beauty. Yeats not only defines a universal relationship between conflict and beauty, but he addresses tensions at the very heart of human existence. This treatment of conflict and beauty has ensured the significance of his poetry throughout time, and continues to engage modern audiences.