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Desert as an Idea and Setting in Some Major Poems of W. B. Yeats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Stephen Crane

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Abstract:

Desert is a word that captures imagination beyond the horizon, aridity and lack of water. It is exotic, otherworldly, treasure trove of marvel and opportunity for self-discovery. It is a habitat of devils, Jennies and monsters as well as a place of trial, revelation and apocalypse symbolizing death, ruins, wars, catastrophe, decline of power and monarchy as well as lack of emotion in human beings. This paper is an attempt to review some of such ideas that have inspired some major English poets, namely W. B. Yeats, the romanticism poet Shelly and the American poet Stephen Crane.

Key words: Desert, Apocalypse, Wasteland, Second Coming, Decline, Disaster

If desert is mainly "a place marked by infertility and the potential for fertility" as in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, it is also "a place with the potential for Revelation" (Whitworth 39). Almost all apocalypse, post-apocalypse, post-war and zombie ideas are connected somewhat to the theme and images of desert and its beasts, ogres, ghosts, devils and monsters.

Apocalypse is in general depicted as being because of a potentially existential disaster such as alien attack, zombie disaster, war and bombardment, ecological change, divine judgment, mystical and paranormal events, climate collapse, and technological calamity and so on.

For many poets, desert is a romantic place with pure air, golden sand dunes and clean starry nights – an ideal place for inspiration. The same desert was where Christ spent forty days, triumphed over hunger, beasts and all temptations of Satan and so our Lost Paradise, after Adam's Fall, regained. Nevertheless, there are two deserts in the setting of "The Second Coming", one of Yeats' notable poems, which both project utterly negative perspective. The first stanza of "The Second Coming", as in *The Waste Land*, depicts an urban desert of anarchy, disorder and bloodshed which shadowed the world and the modern civilization. Second stanza which is a response to the first one again uses the natural desert landscape and its fear-invoking nature to show the nest and dwelling place of a cruel god that will rule over the first desert. Notably desert is presented here as a place with the potential for revelations. Yeats wants to suggest that the modern people themselves are the real horrors turned into zombies and their living environment is the real desert and waste lands.

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?

W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Generally speaking, the whole poem is a set of different mental locations the poet moves about, without really landing in them. However, the first setting of desert in the first stanza seems more real for it is obviously tangible in today's world. The second desert seems more significantly as a dream for it indicates "a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi". Here, the desert's "location is somewhere", notes Michael H. Whitworth, "beyond the speaker" and it is primarily a mental image (38). In his critical introduction to Yeats, Stan Smith remarks:

> This 'Spiritus' or 'Anima Mundi' is, for Yeats, the repository from which all his most powerful symbols and images derive. Literally it means the 'spirit' or 'mind of the world' spoken of in early mythical writings. In the notes to a poem he speaks of it as 'a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit' (107).

To put it simply, Yeats believed that there is something like a universal spirit or a big database of memories encompassing all human history and civilizations, with which only someone like poets can get in contact when feeling truly inspired. In "The Second Coming", the poet, after being inspired by the first stanza, suddenly connects to this spirit and hence the revelation takes him "somewhere in the sands of the desert". Yet in a way, both desert settings are connected and correlated and thus both are real. To intensify the matter, Yeats made use

of the harsh and frightening beast of pitiless nature which is an animal human.

The desert setting in these perspectives opens the way for finding similarities between Yeats's "The Second Coming" and Shelley's romantic poem and sonnet "Ozymandias" (1818). In Shelley's poem the speaker tells us that once she met a traveller "from an antique land," who told him a story about the remains of a colossal statue in the desert of his land. As in Yeats's poem, we suddenly imagine ourselves in a remote desert landscape like Egypt. Instead of a rough beast "with lion body and head of a man", here we observe "two vast legs of stone stand in the desert" without a body, and near them a "shattered visage" of stone lies "half sunk" in the sand. A frown and "sneer of cold command" on the statue's face is observable. The traveller says that the sculptor has done his job well in expressing the emotions, "passions," and the personality of the statue which "stamped" and survived on those "lifeless things". On the pedestal of the statue there is an inscription, which introduces this ruler, "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" But around the fragmented wrecks of the statue, we see no awesomeness, "boundless and bare," only the "lone and level sands, stretch far away" as far as the eye can see.

This poem projects that all powers will one day turn to dust by the destructive power of time and history. In ancient times, Ozymandias was an alternative name for the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II. Instead of sand, the same theme has been shown in Eliot's *The Waste Land* by water of sea and ocean (see "Death by Water"). Shelley wrote the poem as a competing sonnet to challenge his friend Horace Smith on a common subject. Smith published his sonnet a month after Shelley's in the same magazine (*The Examiner*) and with the same title. However, despite many similarities, the second stanza of smith's poem turns to future and ruins of an annihilated London, yet with the same moral lesson. In this

regard, Michael H. Whitworth likewise illustrates similarities and dissimilarities in the settings of "Ozimandias" and "The Second Coming" pertinently in the following lines:

> In both cases the desert is a location for thinking about political change over a long duration. In Shelley's poem, the King's imperative, "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!," has been rendered ironic by the hand of time; in Yeats's, the coming of the rough beast to Bethlehem suggests that twenty centuries of Christianity are about to be reversed. While Shelley's poem implies despair only for tyrants, and cause for optimism among radicals, in Yeats's poem the desert reveals a troubled future for the whole of Christian civilization. (38)

It is worth mentioning two other short poems by American author, Stephen Crane (1871-1900): "In the Desert" (1895) and "I Walked in A Desert" (1895) in this context. They also, written about thirty years before, resemble significantly the setting of "The Second Coming" and that of *The Waste Land* and are among many examples that show Crane's influence on the Imagist Movement.

It is a remarkably successful attempt to convey such deep meanings instantly and effectively in just a couple of simple words and lines. Crane did not title the majority of his poems (or "lines" as he called them). David Lehman remarks:
Crane's poems – terse, dark, trenchant parables, in plain speech stripped of decorative elements – were anomalous in their time but have shown lasting power. John Berryman saw in Crane's poems the "sincerity of a frightened savage anxious to learn what his dream means" (203)

Crane's first short poem – poem III from *The Black Riders and Other Lines* – on the topic of our discussion is as follows:

> In the desert
> I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
> Who, squatting upon the ground,
> Held his heart in his hands,

And ate of it.
I said, "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;
"But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."

The use of words like desert and image of an inhuman creature which is squatting, naked and bestial, eating its heart, brings to mind the same scene as in "The Second Coming" and the image of the sphinx or the rough beast. When the narrator asks "is it good, friend?" it changes the creature to a type of human fellow, yet suggests loss of humanity as well. The desert is a sort of metaphor – a non-human, naked and bitter place which lacks water. The heart is bitter like desert but the creature eats it and used to it indifferently. This act shows absurdity and loss of emotions and feelings in human beings. The heart is dry and sterile like a desert and the creature accepted it as a fact. Patrick K. Dooley comments on the poem that "In the desert, Crane learns hard lessons from a beast: there are only truths and, therefore, the necessity of self-reliance" (121). The next short poem – poem XLII from *The Black Riders and Other Lines* – on the same theme is the following one. It was also among the notes of Almássy in Michael Ondatjee's *The English Patient*.

I walked in a desert.
And I cried,
"Ah, God, take me from this place!"
A voice said, "It is no desert."
I cried, "Well, But --
The sand, the heat, the vacant horizon."
A voice said, "It is no desert."

In this poem the language of paradox is evident. As far as the notion of desert is concerned, many deserts are not deserted at all. Such paradoxes have also been prominent in the works of great Hindu mystic poets, Kabir and Tagore and Persian noted sufi, Rumi.

Last but not least, desert as a mesmerizing landscape bears potentialities symbolically, aesthetically and in reality. In short, this paper discussed how the desert has been treated in poetry and what relationship they have had with one another. We have discussed theme of desert in some major poems of Eliot, Yeats, Shelley and Crane. Desert has been portrayed as having the potential for infertility, dullness, absurdity, revelation and apocalypse. In all these poems desert has been depicted by the language of imagination and dream. On the other hand, here the physical desert and its heat have not been experienced by the poets themselves, and their writings are related to ideas, images, metaphors and symbols which come from their mind and feelings of the heart.

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