



## Oneness of 'Rough Beast' in W. B. Yeats' *The Second Coming* and Lord Vishnu's Narasimha Avatar

Dr. Subrata Halder

Assistant Professor in English, Sivanath Sastri College, 23/49 Gariahat Road,  
Kolkata - 700029, India

Email: [subratahalder7878@gmail.com](mailto:subratahalder7878@gmail.com)

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.2.258](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.2.258)



### Article info

Article Received: 19/04/2026  
Article Accepted: 23/05/2026  
Published online: 29/05/2026

### Abstract

W.B.Yeats (1865- 1939), a poet of Ireland, is one of the famous erudite poets of the English literature. His poems are full of mythological allusions and legends. He was familiar with various religious and philosophies of various cultures and customs of various people all over the world. His famous poem *The Second Coming* is not an exception. In this poem, we can see that a rough beast (in the form of a mythological sphinx, whose head is of a man, and the body is of a lion) is ready to take over the ruling power over the world, when people have lost faith on religion. The incarnation of the rough beast can be compared to the fourth incarnation or avatar of Lord Vishnu in the guise of Narasimha, (head of a lion and the body of a man) in respect of similarities and dissimilarities. The syllogistic study in my paper brings the conclusion that the rough beast is nothing but the other self of Lord Vishnu's Narasimha avatar or incarnation.

**Keywords:** rough beast, Narasimha, righteousness, non-religion, loss of faith, incarnation

### Introduction

In his poem *The Second Coming*, W.B.Yeats has mentioned the sudden appearance of a rough beast, which was walking through the desert towards Bethlehem, the birth place of Jesus Christ. Its look was without any pity, and it was heartless. The blank gaze speaks of its cruelty. However, in *The Bhagavata Purana* and *The Vishnu Purana*, the stories of ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu in ten different

shapes have been narrated in detail. The fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu was Narasimha (man-lion) avatar or incarnation who will kill the oppressive ruler Hiranyakashipu to bring back religion in Kasyapapuri (present name Hindaun in Rajasthan, India). The rough beast and Narasimha avatar have little differences in their look, because the rough beast's head is of a man, whereas Narasimha's head is of a lion; on the other side, the rough beast's body is of a lion,

and the body of Narasimha is of a man. Though, dissimilarities are there in their look, they have common qualities between them in their aims and objectives in their life, and the reason behind their origin. The present discussion has the purpose to point out in detail where they have common qualities.

This paper tries to make a comparative analysis on the rough beast of W. B. Yeats' *The Second Coming* and Narasimha avatar of Lord Vishnu, focussing the following the objectives-

- to find out similarities and dissimilarities between the rough beast and Narasimha avatar
- to make everyone aware of the importance of the rebirth of Jesus Christ, and to impart the knowledge of Hindu mythology, related to ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu
- to search the link between Christian religion and Hindu religion

#### Relevance of this research paper in present time:

Due to the rapid progression of science, the present world is changing into more and more machine shabby. Using science and technology, men have changed their lives from easy to easier. The progression of science can be looked upon as a good sign. However, the alarming matter is that men are losing faith on religion proportionately to progression of science. Due to their loss of faith on religion, men themselves have been modified into beast. They have become pitiless, quarrelsome, greedy for wealth and power, oppressive, tyrannous etc. They do not follow the principles of religion. They always support and follow what is non-righteous. Ultimately peace and happiness are missing from this world. However, this cannot move on continuously. The only hope of emancipation from this perilous situation is the appearance of an incarnation or avatar either be in the shape of a man or be in the shape of an animal. The Christian people believe the rebirth of Jesus Christ, who was looked upon as the saviour of humanity. Similarly, as discussed in

Hindu mythology, Lord Vishnu appeared in the world in the shape of Narasimha- half man and half lion to save the world from the grip of non-righteousness. Whether it is in Christian belief or in Hindu mythology, the objectives of the incarnation are same i.e. to re-establish the religion. My paper tries to make everyone aware that righteous has always been the winner over non-righteous. My paper also tries to make everyone know the necessity of acquiring knowledge on their own culture, custom, mythology, religion, history etc. to lead happy and peaceful life.

#### Review of related literature

Before writing this paper, I have gone through selected areas of *The Bhagavata Gita*, *The Bhagavata Purana*, *The Vishnu Purana*, and few critical writings and research papers. For example, I can mention the paper "A mythical interpretation of Yeats' *The Second Coming*", written by Shweta Saxena. Here she has discussed the mythological connection with the rough beast, mentioned in the poem. Karan Kumar and Prof. Viraj Shah in their paper "Incarnations of Vishnu" have discussed the importance of the appearances of Vishnu's ten avatars. In my paper, I shall make a comparative study between the rough beast of W. B. Yeats and Narasimha avatar of Lord Vishnu.

#### Research methodology

To analyse my paper in detail, I have gone through W.B. Yeats' poem *The Second Coming* and selected areas of *The Bhagavata Gita*, *The Bhagavata Purana* and *The Vishnu Purana*, where Lord Vishnu's ten incarnations have been discussed in detail. I have also read few research papers, where they have discussed either by comparative study of rough beast and Narasimha avatar or separately. As this analysis is theoretical, there is no scope of practical analysis, field work or data collection. Though in my paper I have analysed the necessity of the fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, I have also studied rest nine incarnations of Lord Vishnu so that I can find out the root reason of the

appearance of Narasimha avatar. I have seen various imaginary images of Sphinx and Narasimha avatar of Lord Vishnu, which were drawn by various artists and uploaded in Google images.

### Analysis

*The Second Coming* is one of the famous poems of W. B. Yeats, who was a poet of Ireland. This poem was composed in 1919, and was published first in *The Dial*. In 1921, this poem was added to the collection of verses bearing the title *Michael Robartes and the Dance*. This poem speaks of the apocalyptic vision of the rebirth of Jesus Christ in the shape of a sphinx (half human and half beast).

*The Second Coming* was written after the end of First World war (1914-1918), keeping the horror and devastating power of war in the background. This poem also speaks of Irish revolution, which resulted the Irish people fighting for freedom from shackles of British Government. This poem also hints the flu pandemic of 1918-19, which snatched many Irish lives.

*The Second Coming* consists of two stanzas. In the first stanza, Yeats speaks of the critical condition of not only Ireland but also whole world. Due to the advancement of science, men gradually lost faith in Christianity. People began to question the superiority of religion, and the shadow of doubt over religion began to grow. Briefly speaking, after the death of Jesus Christ, people began to lose faith on religion. The gap between the god and human beings began to be widened: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer" (*The Second Coming*, lines 1-2). Here 'falcon' is considered as human beings, and the falconer as the god. With the passing of time, the relationship between the god and the human beings began to be loosed. Men kept less faith on the religion; lawlessness, non-righteousness, unjust, disorder began to be prominent, which is not the symptom of a healthy society. We can assume that the god also

expects complete faith from the human beings. On the contrary, men began to doubt the existence of the god. The ultimate result is chaos everywhere. W. B. Yeats indirectly had spoken of the first World War in his poem *The Second Coming*, where we see that almost all the countries of Europe engaged themselves in the World War.

Using the line, "the centre cannot hold", the poet wants to mean that immense hatred and wrath grew so high that men began to fight with one another like mad dogs. There was nothing but death and destruction all over Europe. Uncountable soldiers from each country lost their lives. Even the innocent people lost their lives due to the violent first World War: "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned." (*The Second Coming*, lines 6-7) Sympathy and innocence were quite missing from the lives of human beings. In this era, poetic justice was not implemented. Yeats has exposed his deep concern in his poem: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." (*The Second Coming*, lines 7-8). The good, honest and virtuous people were not given the honour or proper justice. Everywhere the wicked, dishonest and evil-minded people began to be prominent in power. Virtuous people were not rewarded and wicked people were not punished. As the wicked people were rewarded, the world became full of corruption at the brim. Yeats wants to highlight that the world was at the edge of doom or complete destruction as the tide of violence was rising everywhere without reasonable reason.

William Blake, in his poem *The Tyger*, has tried to express that, when social injustice, oppression and disorder seek to devour the joy and happiness of the society, a ferocious strength is needed to restore the joyous rhythm of the society. Blake's the tiger is the symbol of the ferocious strength. Yeats has also spoken of the necessity of similar ferocious strength in his poem *The Second Coming*. In the second stanza of this poem, the poet speaks of a divine revelation.

In his vision, the poet clearly sees the appearance of a gigantic beast, whose head is of a man and the body of a lion. The beast is moving slowly through the desert. However, its look and expression were pitiless, like that of a sun: "A shape with lion body and the head of a man, /A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun." (*The Second Coming*, lines 14-15) The appearance of the horrible-looking beast makes the desert birds frightened and indignant at the approaching of the rough beast. The poet can see that the horrible incarnation was, as if, in sleep mode for nearly two thousand years. The poet imagines that the whole world is likely to be under the control of the beast, which is going to rule the world with iron hand.

The appearance of the rough beast may be acknowledged as the rebirth of Jesus Christ. Though Yeats himself was not strong believer in Christianity, we can take the beast as an incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the Bible, the rebirth of Christ has clearly been mentioned in the Old Testament: "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." (Act 1:11) So, it is trustworthy that the rough beast is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Again, the half man and half beast will punish the wicked people, and also restore peace and happiness for the righteous people. In *the Bible*, the hint is clear: "They that are wise and have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide, and have not been deceived—verily I say unto you, they shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire, but shall abide the day." (Doctrine and Covenants, 45). In the *Book of Revelation* (5:5), the incarnation of Christ in the shape of a lion has been mentioned: "He is coming as a lion of the tribe of Judah" and in his second coming "He shall judge the devil at His second coming." (Revelation 19: 20 – 21) We all know that Jesus Christ was very kind and sympathetic to everyone in his first coming. When he was being crucified, he just prayed the god to forgive his punishment-givers because he thought that they did not know what they were

doing then. However, "men shall tremble at His second coming" (Revelation 1: 7). In his first coming, Christ was judged by the Roman emperor, but in his Second coming (as discussed in the Book of Judah), he will judge the people with iron hand.

In the *Bhagavata Purana* and *the Vishnu Purana* the incarnations of Lord Vishnu have been elaborately discussed. Before the discussion of ten incarnations, we have to know first who Lord Vishnu is. The triple deities of supreme divinity or triple Murti is consisted of three principal deities- Bramha, Vishnu and Maheswar or Lord Shiva. Lord Bramha is the creator of this universe. Lord Shiva is the destroyer and Lord Vishnu is the preserver. He protects the universe. When the world is full of chaos, lawlessness and non-righteousness, Lord Vishnu applies his power to restore the universe in proper condition.

The word 'incarnation' or 'avatar' has a close connection with Lord Vishnu. To protect the universe from the grip of the evil, he has appeared in various Yugas or eras in various guises or figures. Lord Krishna, one of the ten incarnations or avatars, has beautifully explained to Arjuna the former's role as an avatar. In *the Bhagavata Gita*, Chapter 4, text 7 and 8, the matter has been discussed: "Whenever righteousness wanes and unrighteousness increases, I send myself forth. For the protection of the good and for the destruction of evil, and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being age after age." (*The Bhagavata Gita* 4.7-8) Now let us narrate the ten avatars of Lord Vishnu briefly.

In his Matsya (Fish) avatar, Lord Vishnu is depicted as half fish (lower part of the body) and half man (head of the body). Here the fish warns Manu, who is the leader of the human beings, to prepare a gigantic boat so that the flora and fauna can be saved from the upcoming great flood. Manu does so accordingly, and the world is saved from destruction.

Kurma (tortoise) avatar is the second incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Here he looks like a tortoise with the upper portion of a man and lower portion of a tortoise. At the time of churning the Milky Ocean in search of nectar, Lord Vishnu in the shape of a tortoise balances Mount Mandara on his shell. In this way, he saves the world from the effect of poisoning.

Varaha (boar) avatar, formed of half boar (head) and half human (rest of the body), is the third avatar of Lord Vishnu. He kills Hiranyaksha to save Bhudevi. Here he lifts the earth out of the ocean with his task and keeps it to proper place. Baraha avatar symbolises the victory of the goodness over evil forces.

The fourth avatar of Lord Vishnu is Narasimha (man-lion) avatar. This incarnation has been discussed in detail after the brief discussion of rest avatars of lord Vishnu.

Vamana (dwarf) avatar is the fifth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Here he appears as a dwarf Brahmin to fathom the power of king Mahabali, who was too proud to acknowledge the power of the god. He sends Mahabali to Patal (underworld) as punishment. Vamana avatar is symbol of dragging the uncontrollable pride into dust.

In his sixth avatar, Lord Vishnu appears as Parashurama (Rama with an axe). He has a huge axe in his hand. He banishes the corrupt Kshatriya and reestablishes the Brahmins in power. By doing so, he brings back justice and balance in this world.

Ram avatar is the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He kills Ravana, who abducted Sita. By killing the oppressive demon king Ravana, Lord Ram restores order and righteousness.

Krishna avatar is the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He appears as Lord Krishna and killed the oppressive ruler Kamsa, the maternal of Lord Krishna himself. By killing Kamsa, Krishna brings back order and peace in this world. He also takes an important role in the

great battle of Kurukshetra, which has been narrated in detail in the great epic *The Mahabharata*. He takes the side of righteousness, which is represented by the Pandava brothers. He is successful in restoring the power of righteousness. He also tries to prove that religion is always the winner in the battle against non-religion.

Buddha (Gautam Buddha) avatar is the ninth avatar of Lord Vishnu. Here Buddha spreads the message of peace, love, friendship, spiritual liberation, compassion and non-violence. This avatar also symbolises enlightenment, and rejection of materialistic value of anything.

Kalki (the future and final avatar) is the tenth avatar of Lord Vishnu. He will appear in Kali Yuga (modern time). In this incarnation, he will defeat demon Kali, who is the embodiment of all evil and unruliness. By doing so, Lord Vishnu will establish order, discipline and righteousness in this world.

My paper has highlighted the fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. In this incarnation, we see that Lord Vishnu takes the guise of half human and half beast. His head is of a lion and the rest portion of the body is of a man. To know more about Narasimha, let us rewind a little bit. In the Satya yuga, sage Kashyap and his better-half Diti had two sons, whose names were Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu. Both brothers were oppressors. All the deities were worried, and requested Lord Vishnu to take necessary steps against two brothers. In his third avatar, Lord Vishnu, taking the guise of Baraha (boar), kills Hiranyaksha who hid the earth or Bhudevi in the depth of the ocean. Having lost his brother, Hiranyakashipu determined to take revenge on Lord Vishnu, who is responsible for the death of former's brother Hiranyaksha. To get the boon of immortality from Bramha, he begins to pray. Being satisfied with the devotion of Hiranyakashipu, Bramha blesses him with the boon that no man, deity or animal will be able to kill him in the earth or

heaven using any weapon. Being overjoyed, he returns home. He decides to take revenge first on Indra, because the latter attacked his fellow asuras (demons) and took his pregnant wife as a prisoner of war, when he was engaged in meditation for getting the boon of immortality from Bramha. By defeating Indra, he wanted to be the ruler of heaven. However, Narad objected Indra's action of keeping Kayadhu, the wife of Hiranyakashipu, as captivated. Narad kept her under his care as his daughter as the later had no place to go. When Kayadhu was living in the hut, Narad narrate the stories often, related to the life of Lord Vishnu. The unborn baby also heard the stories. After his birth, Prahlada, the son of Hiranyakashipu became the worshipper of Lord Vishnu.

Hiranyakashipu took back his wife and son in his kingdom. However, he was surprised to see that his son has been turned into a devotee of Lord Vishnu, whom he despises most. He first gives punishment to the teacher of Prahlada and orders him to keep watch on him. With the passing of time, Hiranyakashipu becomes more furious and orders his soldiers to kill his son. The reluctant soldiers are in vain after their several attempts to kill him, as Lord Vishnu always protects his devotee. Being angry, Hiranyakashipu drags his son out and asks him whether his Vishnu is present with them. Prahlada believes in the omnipresence of Lord Vishnu, and gives the positive answer promptly. His father then asks again whether Lord Vishnu is present inside the stone-pillar, near him. This time also, he gives the positive answer. Hiranyakashipu hits the pillar with his club. Having made surprised everyone, Narasimha avatar emerges out of the pillar and kills him with his sharp claws, taking him in lap. The man-lion roars high to frighten the fellow asuras of Hiranyakashipu. Narasimha blesses Prahlada and makes him the king. He rules his kingdom with honesty. Righteousness is restored in the kingdom of dead Hiranyakashipu.

Lord Vishnu is known as the saviour deity. For ages, he has saved the earth from its destruction. The fourth incarnation of Narasimha can be considered as the best example. Here he kills Hiranyakashipu for few reasons, mentioned below:

**I. To restore faith in religion:** Prahlada was a believer in the omnipresence of Lord Vishnu. He says that the deity is in the pillar. Almost everyone, present there, was unwilling to believe so. However, the deity really comes out of the pillar and kills Hiranyakashipu. People's faith on religion is re-established. If Narasimha would not emerge from the pillar, people might have doubted the omnipresence of deity everywhere.

**II. To reward the virtuous people:** The killing of Hiranyakashipu by Narasimha avatar assures that virtuous people are always rewarded. Narasimha selects Prahlad as the next ruler of Kasyapapuri. If Hiranyakashipu himself or his soldiers were successful in killing Prahlada, people might believe that poetic justice was not implemented.

**III. To establish the righteousness:** Lord Vishnu's Narasimha avatar appears as a protector of righteousness. If he would not kill Hiranyakashipu, non-righteousness would be in power. The existence of the world might be doubtful, if the asura was not killed by Narasimha avatar.

**IV. To bring back order, peace and happiness:** Hiranyakashipu was a major concern for the cause of lawlessness, disorder, unhappiness and anxiety in everyone. Narasimha was successful in restoring law, order, peace and happiness by killing the tyrannous ruler, Hiranyakashipu.

**V. To save the worshipper:** Prahlada was a worshipper of Lord Vishnu. When his life was in danger, Lord Vishnu in the guise of Narasimha saves him. To establish the faith in everyone, Lord Vishnu saves the life of Prahlada.

The rough beast in W.B. Yeats' poem *The Second Coming*, and Lord Vishnu's fourth avatar i.e., Narasimha avatar is different from each other in respect of look. They are also different in respect of religion- one is from Christian mythology and other from Hindu mythology. Nonetheless, the target of both incarnations is same i.e., to restore order and righteousness. As if, there is no difference at all in between them in respect of their aims and objectives. If they are compared to the same coin, two sides are like two incarnations.

### Conclusion

From the origin of the universe, we know that nothing is permanent. The god has created this beautiful world. Few people, having wrong intention, have assayed to strip of its beauty by oppression, corruption and misusing of power. As a result, honest men become hopeless and pessimistic. However, Lord Vishnu in Hindu religion or powerful man other religion has appeared in various incarnations or avatars to protect the universe from destruction. If we judge the incarnation of rough beast and Narasimha avatar of Lord Vishnu minutely, we can assume that there is no difference at all between Christian religion and Hindu religion in respect of incarnation. So, it is desirable that we all shall welcome the incarnations or avatars with our prayer, if we are in threatened situation.

### Limitations of the study

The paper has highlighted on the role fourth avatar of Lord Vishnu i.e. Narasimha, and the rough beast of Yeats' poem *The Second Coming*. This paper is a comparative study. For doing so, only one incarnation of Lord Vishnu has been taken for comparing to the rough beast. I have not discussed in detail rest nine avatars of Lord Vishnu for making a comparative study.

### Future research scope

A comparative study can also be done on the analysis of P.B. Shelley's poem *Ode to the*

*west Wind* to the ten incarnations or avatars of Lord Vishnu.

### References

- Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, A. C. (Trans.). (1972). *The Bhagavad Gita as it is*. Collier Macmillan Publishers.
- The Bible: The International Version*. (1989). International Bible Society.
- Vyāsa, K. D. (1866). *The Vishnu Purana* (H. H. Wilson, Trans.; F. Hall, Ed.). Trubner and Co.
- Vyāsa, K. D. (2013). *The Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana* (A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Trans.). The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.
- Saxena, S. (2013). A mythical interpretation of Yeats' *The Second Coming*. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 4(1), 17-18. <https://doi.org/10.5897/IJEL12.171>
- Poetry Foundation – The Second Coming
- Sri Ranga Pankajam – Ten Avatars of Lord Vishnu
- Wikipedia – The Second Coming (poem)