

CC-10  
P.G SEM III  
THE SECOND COMING  
W.B YEATS

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**TEXT**

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 comes round at last,  
**Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?**

**W.B. Yeats** was an Irish poet born on the 13th of June, 1865. Yeats died in France in 1939, and his remains were moved to Sligo on his wishes in 1948. Yeats started his long literary career as a romantic poet and gradually evolved into a modernist poet. When he began publishing poetry in the 1880s, his poems had a lyrical, romantic style, and they focused on love, longing and loss, and Irish myths. His early writing follows the conventions of romantic verse, utilizing familiar rhyme schemes, metric patterns, and poetic structures. Although it is lighter than his later writings, his early poetry is still sophisticated and accomplished.

**Sources:**

1. Gradesaver.com
2. Encyclopaedia of Literary Devices

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Because of its stunning, violent imagery and terrifying ritualistic language, "The Second Coming" is one of Yeats's most famous and most anthologized poems; it is also one of the most thematically obscure and difficult to understand. (It is safe to say that very few people who love this poem could paraphrase its meaning to satisfaction.) Structurally, the poem is quite simple—the first stanza describes the conditions present in the world (things falling apart, anarchy, etc.), and the second surmises from those conditions that a monstrous Second Coming is about to take place, not of the Jesus we first knew, but of a new messiah, a "rough beast," the slouching sphinx rousing itself in the desert and lumbering toward Bethlehem. This brief exposition, though intriguingly blasphemous, is not terribly complicated; but the question of what it should signify to a reader is another story entirely.

### **Summary**

"The Second Coming" is narrated by a speaker who is observing the world around him with horror. The poem begins with the phrase "Turning and turning in the widening gyre," a sentence that evokes an occult symbol that perpetually fascinated William Butler Yeats: interlocked circles. A gyre is a spiral or vortex, and Yeats believed that the universe was comprised of interlocked circles, which together make up individual lives that coalesce to form the whole of existence.

Essentially, this first line is just a complex way of saying that something is happening in this world. Something is churning and awakening; some new existence is rising out of the current haze of life that we all live in, expanding it and enlarging the scope of what life is and altering how the world works on a fundamental level.

The whole first section finds the speaker observing a world that is losing touch with order and morality. Violence is destroying innocence, people have become detached from their leaders, something fundamental is dissolving, and people who believe in goodness are being silenced, while the loudest speakers are the villains and chaos-bringers.

The second section, beginning with the line "Surely some revelation is at hand," finds the speaker sure that some major shift is happening around him. All this chaos cannot be an accident, certainly. Something vast is coming, some distorted version of the Christian apocalypse is descending upon the land; some ending is approaching.

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The third section describes the speaker's vision for what this Second Coming, this new world redefined by all the violence and chaos that occurred in the past, might look like. He thinks about the "Spiritus Mundi," which is a Latin term meaning "World Spirit," and begins to visualize images within this "World Spirit," including desert sphinxes and shadowy birds.

By the end of the poem, the speaker is sure that something even worse is coming. Some nightmare—some "rough beast"—is rising, approaching the earth at a rapid pace. He doesn't know what this creature is, but he can sense its approach—and it is the ominous core of "The Second Coming," that mysterious tide of evil and mystery approaching the world in the form of a modernity full of violence, war, and the loss of traditional meaning and values.

### **Form**

"The Second Coming" is written in a very rough iambic pentameter, but the meter is so loose, and the exceptions so frequent, that it actually seems closer to free verse with frequent heavy stresses. The rhymes are likewise haphazard; apart from the two couplets with which the poem opens, there are only coincidental rhymes in the poem, such as "man" and "sun."

### **Themes**

#### **The Relationship between Art and Politics**

Yeats believed that art and politics were intrinsically linked and used his writing to express his attitudes toward Irish politics, as well as to educate his readers about Irish cultural history. From an early age, Yeats felt a deep connection to Ireland and his national identity, and he thought that British rule negatively impacted Irish politics and social life.

#### **The Impact of Fate and the Divine on History**

Yeats's devotion to mysticism led to the development of a unique spiritual and philosophical system that emphasized the role of fate and historical determinism, or the belief that events have been preordained. Yeats had rejected Christianity early in his life, but his lifelong study of mythology, Theosophy, spiritualism, philosophy, and the occult demonstrate his profound interest in the divine and how it interacts with humanity. A **Tone** of historically determined inevitability permeates his poems, particularly in descriptions of situations of human and divine interaction.

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## **Motifs**

### **Irish Nationalism and Politics**

Throughout his literary career, Yeats incorporated distinctly Irish themes and issues into his work. He used his writing as a tool to comment on Irish politics and the home rule movement and to educate and inform people about Irish history and culture. Yeats also used the backdrop of the Irish countryside to retell stories and legends from Irish folklore.

### **Mysticism and the Occult**

Yeats had a deep fascination with mysticism and the occult, and his poetry is infused with a sense of the otherworldly, the spiritual, and the unknown.

### **Irish Myth and Folklore**

Yeats's participation in the Irish political system had origins in his interest in Irish myth and folklore. Irish myth and folklore had been suppressed by church doctrine and British control of the school system. Yeats used his poetry as a tool for re-educating the Irish population about their heritage and as a strategy for developing Irish nationalism.

## **Symbols**

### **The Gyre**

The gyre, a circular or conical shape, appears frequently in Yeats's poems. He chose the image of interlocking gyres—visually represented as two intersecting conical spirals—to symbolize his philosophical belief that all things could be described in terms of cycles and patterns. The soul (or the civilization, the age, and so on) would move from the smallest point of the spiral to the largest before moving along to the other gyre. Although this is a difficult concept to grasp abstractly, the image makes sense when applied to the waxing and waning of a particular historical age or the evolution of a human life from youth to adulthood to old age.

### **The Swan**

Swans are a common **Symbol** in poetry, often used to depict idealized nature.

### **The Great Beast**

Yeats employs the figure of a great beast—a horrific, violent animal—to embody difficult abstract concepts. The great beast as a symbol comes from Christian iconography, in which it represents evil and darkness. In “The Second Coming,” the great beast emerges from the

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**Spiritus Mundi, or soul of the universe**, to function as the primary image of destruction in the poem. Yeats describes the onset of apocalyptic events in which the “blood-dimmed tide is loosed” and the “ceremony of innocence is drowned” as the world enters a new age and falls apart as a result of the widening of the historical gyres. The speaker predicts the arrival of the Second Coming, and this prediction summons a “vast image” of a frightening monster pulled from the collective consciousness of the world. Yeats modifies the well-known image of the sphinx to embody the poem’s vision of the climactic coming. By rendering the terrifying prospect of disruption and change into an easily imagined horrifying monster, Yeats makes an abstract fear become tangible and real. The great beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be born, where it will evolve into a second Christ (or anti-Christ) figure for the dark new age. In this way, Yeats uses distinct, concrete imagery to symbolize complex ideas about the state of the modern world.

### **Themes**

Violence, prophecy, and meaninglessness are the major themes fore-grounded in this poem. Yeats emphasizes that the present world is falling apart, and a new ominous reality is going to emerge. The idea of “the Second Coming” is not Biblical. To him, the Second Coming is not a savior that is going to restore the business of humanity, but a sphinx that will add more to the agony and destruction of the world. He argues that people are moving away from the center and there is no hope in the future due to the chaos. And those, who wish for any spiritual guidance, are living in fool’s paradise.

### **Analysis of Literary Devices in “The Second Coming”**

1. **Metaphor:** There are several metaphors used in this poem such as, “the Falcon” and “the falconer,” which stands for the world and the controlling force that directs humanity. Similarly, “the blood-dimmed tide” stands for waves of violence, while “the rough beast” stands for “the Second Coming.”
2. **Hyperbole:** Hyperbole is a device used to exaggerate a statement for the sake of emphasis. The poet has used hyperbole in the tenth line where it is stated as, “Surely the Second Coming is at hand,” as if the beast is about to enter the world in just a few hours or days.

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3. **Consonance:** Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line such as the sound of /r/ in “Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.”
4. **Allusion:** Allusion is an indirect reference to a person, place, thing or idea of a historical, cultural political or literary significance in a literary piece. The use of illusion in the fourth line of the second stanza is “the spiritus” It is an illusion to the Latin phrase meaning the world’s soul. “The Second Coming” is also a biblical allusion to the return of Christ.
5. **Alliteration:** Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line such as the sound of /s/ in “Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the” and /n/ sound in “The darkness drops again; but now I know.”
6. **Symbolism:** Symbolism is using symbols to signify ideas and qualities, giving them symbolic meanings that are different from the literal meanings. Yeats has used multiple symbols such as, “falcon” as the symbol of the world, “desert birds” are the symbols of approaching death and “the Second Coming” symbolizes the indifference.
7. **Assonance:** Assonance is the repetition of same vowel sounds in the same line such as the sound of /i/ in “Turning and turning in the widening gyre” and /e/ sound in “The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
8. **Imagery:** Imagery means the use of images of the five senses intended to make the readers understand the writer’s feelings and emotions. Yeats has used imagery to present the vivid and clear picture of the ominous beast such as, “A shape with lion body and the head of a man”, “somewhere in sands of the desert” and “Is moving its slow thighs.”

#### Analysis of Poetic Devices

Poetic and literary devices are the same, but a few are used only in poetry. Here is the analysis of some of the poetic devices used in this poem.

1. **Stanza:** A stanza is a poetic form of some lines. There are only two stanzas in this poem.
2. **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem follows ABBA CDDC throughout the poem with iambic pentameter.

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3. **Iambic Pentameter**: It is a type of meter consisting of five iambs. This poem comprise iambic pentameter For Example  
“**Turning and turning in the widening gyre.**”

**Q.1. What did Yeats mean by “Spiritus mundi,” in The Second Coming?**

The “Spiritus Mundi” is, according to the poet in “The Second Coming,” the source of the bizarre vision involving the sphinx with its slowly moving thighs, angry birds, and apocalyptic mood.

“This world-soul from which visions somehow appear?”

W.B. Yeats’s interest was in the occult, specifically in the idea of a collective consciousness, which he called an “over-soul.” Yeats believed that history operates in cycles, and so images of the apocalypse arising out of the "Spiritus Mundi" may actually be memories of a previous apocalypse surging back up to the surface of the speaker's mind. Perhaps this is "The Second Coming": a flashback to memories of an apocalypse, forgotten by the self, but remembered by the over-soul. Yeats believed that all are connected to forces much larger than us; all share in the same memories, and all know the same sacred symbols. Yeats was more interested in the ontological and poetic implications of these ideas—and out of these interests rose "The Second Coming."

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