



# The Second Coming

Study Guide by Course Hero



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## 👁 Book Basics

### AUTHOR

W. B. Yeats

### YEAR PUBLISHED

1920

### GENRE

Religion, War Literature

### PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

The perspective of "The Second Coming" is first person. However, the first-person pronouns *my* and *I* appear late in the poem, in the second stanza. The unnamed speaker is someone with deep religious convictions who envisions the end of days.

### TENSE

The poem "The Second Coming" is written in the present

tense.

### ABOUT THE TITLE

The title "The Second Coming" refers to the return of Jesus Christ in the Last Judgment prophesied in the biblical Gospels and Book of Revelations.

## 🕒 In Context

## Modernist Poetry

"The Second Coming" by W.B. [Yeats](#) is an example of a modernist poem. In broad terms, modernist poetry demonstrates dissatisfaction with the aesthetic and cultural values of the past and strives to break away from them. In Yeats's poem, this is reflected aesthetically in the use of strange imagery that may surprise or even shock the reader. Additionally, "The Second Coming" is built around concepts of disillusionment with contemporary culture and society. World War I (1914–18) was an important catalyst for the development of modernist literature. The war destroyed societal norms and cultural values of the prewar era and opened a path for art that offered new ways of interpreting the world. Another hallmark of modernism at work in "The Second Coming" is that it requires interpretation from the reader to understand its allusions and message. In this last regard, the poem is similar to one of the foundational modernist poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) by Anglo American poet T.S. Eliot (1888–1965).

Of course there is no one exact moment when modern poetry began, but "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" did signal the beginning of a new era in English-language poetry. Modernist poetry was in many ways a rejection of Romantic poetry and its values. Romantic poetry, part of the late-18th to mid-19th-century Romantic movement, celebrated nature and the

imagination. Modernists believed that the Industrial Revolution, which had transformed English society from agrarian to industrial, had changed culture so profoundly that literature must change to remain relevant. Instead of celebrating the beauty of nature, modernist poetry should underscore the challenges of living in an industrialized society. Instead of glorifying the human spirit, modernist poetry should train a glaring spotlight on the damage industrialization was doing to the Western psyche. Instead of providing steady rhymes and rhythmic meters, modernist poetry should reflect actual human speech patterns. American writer Ezra Pound (1885–1972), another founding modernist poet, insisted that a poem's rhythm must "correspond exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed." "The Second Coming" uses an irregular rhythm, constructing its lines in modulating lengths between 12 and 13 syllables, incorporating but ultimately rejecting iambic pentameter (stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable in a line of 10 syllables). In this way the poem's use of meter reflects its content: showing the corruption and dissolution of old values that the modernists witnessed.

A key aspect of modernism was its emphasis on universal experience. When English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) wrote, "I wandered lonely as a cloud," he was talking about himself. In "The Second Coming" the "I" speaker is almost entirely undefined and without a specific personality. A line from another English Romantic poet, John Keats (1795–1821)—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—would not have fit into the modernist viewpoint either. The modern world in which Yeats lived was defined by bloody global warfare, massive outbreaks of disease (such as the influenza pandemic of 1918–19), and sweeping social and technological changes.

When World War I broke out in 1914, issues of poetic terminology must suddenly have seemed less important. As critic Martin Gilkes later wrote, "Modern poetry, as it happened, chose a very awkward moment to be born ... No sooner had the modern infant found its feet and uttered one loud intelligible cry than there came the War."

## World at War

Yeats wrote "The Second Coming" shortly after the conclusion of the First World War. World War I (1914–1918)—also called the Great War—was at that time the largest armed conflict in history. In terms of the high number of deaths (21 million), the

number of nations involved, and the global geographic scope, it was unprecedented. Apart from the high death toll, World War I also introduced startling new military technologies that made warfare deadlier and more brutal than ever. The war destroyed older, romanticized ideas about warfare, with new weapons such as poison gas, landmines, and machine guns, changing military tactics and making older polite ideals obsolete. In addition to the incredible loss of life, the war redrew the map of Europe following the disintegration of four major empires. Europeans (and the rest of the world) were forced to reevaluate the values of prior generations. The aftermath of the war saw political and social changes in many nations. These included the woman suffrage movement in the United States that led to American women receiving the right to vote in 1920.

Yeats's writing of "The Second Coming" encompasses not only World War I, but also the Easter Rising (1916) and the Russian Revolution (1917). Early drafts explicitly mentioned such historical events, but Yeats stripped all of these contextual clues from the poem, suggesting that he believed the imagery and symbols could have multiple interpretations. One such interpretation is that the poem is an apocalyptic religious vision that can be read as an allegory for war. Yeats was horrified by the destruction and carnage wrought by modern warfare. In 1915 Yeats wrote to an American friend that World War I was "the most expensive outbreak of insolence and stupidity" in history and that he tried not to think about it. When asked by American author Henry James (1843–1916) to write a poem about the war, he penned "On Being Asked for a War Poem" (1915). The poem expressed his belief that poets had no place speaking of the war because poets couldn't hope to influence the politicians who start and end wars. World War I also coincided with the first battle of the Irish War of Independence: the Easter Rising of 1916, an Irish rebellion that was brutally suppressed by the British. During the Russian Revolution of 1917, the imperial government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks, a wing of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party led by the future prime minister of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924). These conflicts also deeply troubled Yeats. Despite not writing much of substance about warfare while it was ongoing, in 1919 Yeats may have expressed his horror at the violence and immorality of the modern world in "The Second Coming."

"The Second Coming" describes the destruction of old values and innocence: "the ceremony of innocence is drowned." "Mere anarchy [is] loosed upon the world" and a "rough beast"

brings about the end of days. By describing catastrophe in terms of religious allegory, Yeats captures its horror indirectly. He imagines war and other calamities facing modern society as the birth of a terrible monster, the creature described in the poem's later lines.

## Christianity versus Paganism

Yeats was born into a devoutly Christian society, but his personal faith was more shaped by occultist beliefs and reverence for traditional Celtic mythology. These values can be seen, for example, in his book on Celtic myths and folklore, *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), and his involvement in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an occult society that practiced ritual magic. Both Yeats's Christian background and his enthusiasm for the occult are on display in "The Second Coming."

The poem's title references the Christian belief in the return of Jesus Christ foretold in the New Testament's Gospels and in its last book, Revelation. In Christian theology the Second Coming of Christ is the event said to precipitate the end of the world. According to most Christian sects, the Second Coming is the time when the resurrected Christ will reward the faithful and punish the wicked and nonbelievers. In the poem the speaker remarks on the terror and "anarchy" threatening the world and wonders whether it's the Second Coming. The poem suggests that such terrible calamities can only mean the end of the world. In addition to the Christian allusion in the title, Yeats also uses specific Christian imagery in the poem. The poem's final line references Bethlehem, the Palestinian city that was the birthplace of Jesus Christ. However, this reference subverts the Christian tradition, replacing the Son of Man referenced in the Bible with a horrible monster similar to the beasts described in Revelation.

Yeats does not limit the "Second Coming" depicted in the poem to the traditional Christian idea of the resurrection. Instead, the poem suggests a return to the pagan spirituality he espoused, a subversion of the Christian end of days. Yeats references the *Spiritus Mundi* in line 12, literally the "world spirit," which Yeats sometimes also called the *Spiritus Anima*, or "world soul." Yeats defined this idea as "a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit." For Yeats, this "storehouse" is a repository of universal memory shared by all people, and it is the source from which poets draw inspiration—in "The Second

Coming" the poet's vision of a beast comes from this collective "storehouse." The notion of a collective world spirit is akin to the common pagan belief that divinity is found in rather than beyond nature, and that people belong to the same universal plane as the divine. This imagery contrasts with the mainstream Christian idea of God as a being separate from and having dominion over the natural world. At the same time, the creature Yeats envisions being birthed—a sphinxlike entity with the body of a lion and the head of a man—does seem to represent an Antichrist. By describing the entity as "slouch[ing] towards Bethlehem," Yeats perhaps suggests that this monstrous beast will symbolically destroy Christianity and bring an end to the Christian epoch. In this reading, the end of the Christian epoch will bring about a new epoch—one defined by the creature that brings it into being. He describes "twenty centuries of stony sleep / ... vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle." In this context, the reference may be to a pagan world made dormant by the advent of Christianity.

## Author Biography

### Early Life

Born in Dublin, Ireland, on June 13, 1865, William Butler Yeats was the eldest of the four children of Susan Mary Pollexfen and aspiring law student John Butler Yeats. In 1867 John Yeats left his studies to become a portrait artist, teaching his children, including young William, to love the fine arts. After finishing high school, William Yeats enrolled at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, hoping to become a painter. To support himself at school, Yeats became a newspaper correspondent. When his first poems were published in the *Dublin University Review* in 1885, Yeats left his studies altogether.

### Early Career and Romance

After leaving school in the late 1880s, Yeats moved to London, where he began spending more time with his father's friends. These friends included the English poet and artist William Morris (1834–96) and the Irish writers George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) and Oscar Wilde (1854–1900). Yeats also cofounded a dining and poetry club, the Rhymers' Club, in London with Welsh-English writer Ernest Rhys (1859–1946).

Through Yeats's literary circle, he met and fell in love with Irish actress Maud Gonne (1866–1953), an ardent Irish nationalist. Yeats pursued Gonne relentlessly, proposing marriage many times, which she always refused. Instead, Gonne married a fellow revolutionary, Major John MacBride (c. 1865–1916). Yeats continued to write plays in which Gonne would star, and he even dedicated his 1892 play, *The Countess Cathleen*, to her. Gonne's marriage was stormy and violent, which broke Yeats's heart. In his poem "Easter 1916," he immortalizes Major MacBride as a "drunken, vainglorious lout" who has "done most bitter wrong / To some who are near my heart."

## Inspiration

Many sources inspired Yeats's writings, most notably the supernatural, mythology, and Irish history. In 1890 Yeats became a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an organization focused on the study and practice of mysticism and the occult. In 1917 Yeats married English heiress Georgie Hyde-Lees (1892–1968), who was also a member of the Golden Dawn. They practiced automatic writing together, in which Hyde-Lees wrote down words and messages received from spirits from a supernatural realm. Yeats later gathered these automatic writings in his book *A Vision* (1925). The ideas and symbols generated by these episodes of automatic writing had a profound effect on Yeats's work after 1917, particularly on his sense of history as a recurring cycle of events.

Yeats was deeply enmeshed in the Irish nationalist movement, partly as a consequence of his complex relationship with Irish patriot Maud Gonne (1866–1953). He was a founder of the Irish National Theatre Society, which soon opened the Abbey Theatre in Dublin to promote native Irish drama. Yeats quickly became closely identified with Ireland, as the majority of his works featured Irish characters and landscapes or were based on traditional Irish songs and tales. He wrote many nationalistic plays during his tenure at the Irish National Theatre Society, including *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), cowritten with Irish writer Lady Gregory Augusta (1852–1932), which featured Gonne as a personification of Ireland itself. Despite his nationalism, he was not overtly political, though this changed after the Easter Uprising of 1916 (a rebellion against British government in Ireland).

Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" was written in 1919 and published in 1920. The poem reflects his belief in the cyclical nature of history, foreseeing the catastrophic end of an era.

This apocalyptic vision was likely influenced by events such as Ireland's struggle for independence, the Russian Revolution (1917), and World War I (1914–18).

## Death and Legacy

After Ireland gained independence from England, Yeats was appointed senator of the Irish Free State in 1922, which further cemented his position as a cultural leader. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923, which Yeats characterized as a recognition of Irish culture. Yeats continued to write politically influenced poetry until his death on January 28, 1939, at age 73.

Yeats was heralded as the national poet of Ireland and has also been called one of the greatest English-speaking poets of the 20th century. Critic James Longenbach credited Yeats with inventing the modern lyric poem, which incorporates robust rhythms with rich historical and mythological symbols. Anglo American poet T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) said of Yeats, "[H]e was one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them."

## Plot Summary

## Structure

"The Second Coming" is structured in two stanzas of unequal length. The first stanza is made up of 8 lines and the second of 14 lines. Most of the lines are between 9 and 11 syllables long, so the poem approximates iambic pentameter. (The term *iambic pentameter* refers to a poetic structure in which each line consists of five two-syllable feet with the stress on the second syllable.) Thus, "The Second Coming" has no set rhythmic pattern. There also is no rhyme scheme, so the poem is an example of free verse.

## Stanza 1 (Lines 1–8)

The poem begins with the unnamed speaker's description of a "widening gyre"—a *gyre* is a spiral or circle—that is turning. A

falcon is caught inside the turbulence of the gyre and can't escape. The falcon is "unable to hear the falconer." The speaker goes on to say that "things fall apart" and "the centre cannot hold," indicating a rapidly deteriorating situation. The speaker then states that "mere anarchy" has been "loosed upon the world." The apocalyptic tone continues as he alludes to terrible violence and loss of life across the world, destroying innocence ("the ceremony of innocence is drowned"). The speaker then remarks on the quality of people, saying "the best" of people lack the conviction to make things better. At the same time, evil people are energized and active, "full of passionate intensity."

## Stanza 2 (Lines 9–17)

The speaker, grasping for meaning in this strange vision, remarks that "surely some revelation is at hand." He then surmises "the Second Coming" (of Jesus Christ) is "surely" imminent. However, the speaker's impression swiftly changes when a troubling new vision emerges. From the desert a gigantic creature rises from the sand: "a shape with lion body and the head of a man." The creature's expression is "pitiless as the sun" as it moves slowly across the desert. Around it whirl the shadows of desert birds disturbed by its passage.

## Stanza 2 (Lines 18–22)

The speaker's vision ends as "[t]he darkness drops again." Yet, the speaker has gained enough understanding to interpret his vision's meaning. He realizes that the creature has been sleeping for 2,000 years and is now awake, enraged and ready to cause destruction. "What rough beast," the speaker asks, "[s]louches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

## 🔍 Plot Analysis

### Free Verse versus Metrical Poetry

The poem straddles the line between traditional poetry and free verse poetry. "The Second Coming" features no set

metrical pattern and no rhyme scheme, qualifying it as "free verse" poetry. However, the lines are of a fairly uniform length, most of them varying between 9 and 11 syllables in length, approximating the line lengths in traditional iambic pentameter, which features 10-syllable lines. Furthermore, within the lines many of the syllables are iambs—bisyllabic feet, each comprising an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. This lends the poem the feel of iambic pentameter. The reason Yeats chose to do this may have been to allow form to mirror content. In a poem about corruption and the collapse of society and society's rules, a subversion of the traditional metrical pattern makes perfect sense.

Free verse is simply defined as poetry without any set meter or rhyme. The first experiments in free verse began with American poet Walt Whitman (1819–92). Free verse as a distinct movement originated in 1880s France with the so-called *Vers Libre* (literally "free verse") movement. From France the concept of free verse spread into English poetry around the start of the 20th century. In the early 20th century, with the advent of modernism, free verse rapidly gained prominence over more traditional metrical forms. Today, free verse is the default, making it easy to forget that in 1919 free verse poetry was still a relatively recent innovation.

Yeats preferred poetry to have distinct rhythms, and as a result much of his poetry was written with meter. However, he chose poetic forms to fit each poem's content. His choice of free verse for "The Second Coming" underlines the poem's meaning. As mentioned above, the poem's irregular line lengths fit the poem's narrative of a world gone wrong.

## Similes and Metaphors

On several occasions in "The Second Coming," Yeats makes use of figurative language, including similes and metaphors. His use of figurative language in the poem is more thematic than imagistic. That is, he uses them more to advance theme than merely to describe or compare. Similes and metaphors are similar devices but can be clearly distinguished from one another by their construction. A simile is a comparative device in which two dissimilar things are compared with the use of the word *like* or *as*. An example of a simile in "The Second Coming" appears in line 15. The speaker describes the creature arising from the desert, saying its gaze is "blank and pitiless **as** the sun." This comparison works on multiple levels, ascribing not only the qualities "blank" and "pitiless" but also bestowing other



qualities associated with the sun, such as immensity and intensity.

Metaphors are distinguished from similes in that they don't use the word *like* or *as* to signal comparison. Metaphors are broken up into two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor is the concept being compared, while the vehicle is the thing that bears the weight of the comparison. Sometimes, as is the case with metaphors in "The Second Coming," the tenor isn't spelled out. In the example "the falcon cannot hear the falconer" (line 2), the tenor is "mankind" or "humanity" for the falcon and "spirituality" for the falconer. Yeats uses the metaphor of a falcon lost and unable to hear its master's commands to represent humanity cut off from its traditional spirituality. Alternatively, the falcon and falconer can be read as representative of human logic and its breakdown. When the falcon cannot hear the falconer, human logic fails. The second metaphor Yeats employs comes late in the poem, in line 20. Yeats writes of a "rocking cradle." The rocking cradle is a metaphor for the birth/advent of Jesus Christ.

## Near Rhymes, Alliteration, and Consonance

Although "The Second Coming" doesn't feature a regular rhyme scheme, Yeats made use of near rhymes and the sound devices alliteration and consonance to lend musical sounds to the poem. A near rhyme (alternatively referred to as a "slant rhyme") is any instance in which words in close proximity sound similar but don't precisely rhyme. An example of near rhyme in the poem comes in lines 3 and 4: "hold" and "world" don't rhyme perfectly but share two similar sounds, the "o" and "ld" sounds. Another example is the repetition of the words "is at hand" in lines 9 and 10. Strictly speaking, the same word can't be rhymed with itself, thus it is a near rhyme. These near rhymes suggest discordance and disorder, as in "things fall[ing] apart."

Yeats makes heavy use of the sound device alliteration throughout the poem. Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words in proximity to one another. The first example of alliteration in "The Second Coming" is in line 1: "turning and turning." In line 2, Yeats writes, "the falcon cannot hear the falconer." Later examples of alliteration crop up in lines 13 ("my sight, somewhere in the sands"), 18 ("darkness drops"), 19 ("stony sleep"), and 22 ("Bethlehem to

be born"). The heavy use of alliteration in the poem accomplishes two purposes for Yeats. Apart from the aforementioned musical quality, the heavy repetition of sounds also creates a trancelike effect, suggestive of the vision the poem purports to be.

But the most consistently used sound device in the poem is consonance. Consonance is similar to alliteration (and alliteration is a kind of consonance) in that it involves the repetition of consonant sounds. However, the repetition can come in any part of the words, not just their beginning. The most striking example of consonance in "The Second Coming" appears in line 1—"turning and turning in a widening gyre"—where the /t/, /r/, /n/, and /ng/ sounds are all repeated in rapid succession. They form a swirl of sound that heightens the concept of a swirling gyre, or vortex. Another notable example of consonance in the poem occurs in line 5: "blood-dimmed tide is loosed." In this instance the repetition of the heavy /d/ sound creates a thumping cadence, not unlike the pounding of war drums.

## References to "The Second Coming" in Other Works

"The Second Coming" is arguably Yeats's most famous work of poetry, and as a result it has been widely referenced in literature and popular culture. A 2015 essay published in the *Paris Review* entitled "No Slouch" went so far as to say that the poem "may well be the most thoroughly pillaged piece of literature in English." The same essay highlights how news media and journalists frequently use (and misuse) the poem's language to describe current events in international affairs. One example given is "Europe is slouching toward war."

The most prominent of the literary references to the poem is Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's (1930–2013) novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), whose title is a direct quotation from line 3 of "The Second Coming." American author Joan Didion (1934–) also referenced "The Second Coming" with the title essay of her 1968 collection, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. American filmmaker and writer Woody Allen (1935–) entitled his 2007 essay collection *Mere Anarchy*, referencing the line "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Meanwhile, pop culture references to the poem vary widely, ranging from Batman comic books to musical references by bands such as U2.

## “” Quotes

*"Turning and turning in a widening gyre."*

— Narrator

The "widening gyre" the speaker references is time itself, or more specifically a section of time that's now changing over, being replaced by a different gyre. This line can also be read as describing a whirlwind.

*"The falcon cannot hear the falconer."*

— Narrator

Taken literally, this line describes a lost bird unable to hear its master's commands because it is caught in a powerful vortex of wind. The image is a powerful metaphor. The falcon represents humanity, which is lost in the changing tides of time. The falconer represents humanity's spiritual compass, or alternatively the disconnect between the falcon and falconer may represent the failure of human logic and wisdom.

*"Things fall apart; the center cannot hold."*

— Narrator

History is falling apart, and the balance between the two interchanging gyres has become fragile. Alternatively, this line can be read more conventionally to simply describe the breakdown of societal order.

*"Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."*

— Narrator

With this line, the speaker describes the chaos war brings. Here, the word *mere* doesn't refer to "slight" but rather to the word's older definition—"total." Thus, the line actually reads "total anarchy is loosed upon the world."

*"The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."*

— Narrator

The speaker bemoans how good people have been rendered powerless and indecisive, while bad people have taken control and are dictating events.

*"Surely the Second Coming is at hand."*

— Narrator

Here, the speaker theorizes the chaos can only mean the Second Coming of Christ foretold in the Christian Bible—and thus the end of days—is approaching.

*"A vast image out of the Spiritus Mundi / Troubles my sight."*

— Narrator

The *Spiritus Mundi* is a pagan religious concept. The phrase is Latin for "world spirit" and, like the similar phrase *Anima Mundi*, describes the concept of Earth being alive and divine. While *Spiritus Mundi* can also describe the attitudes of a particular time period, for Yeats, the phrase referred to a "storehouse" of human memory that belongs to no one person. When Yeats says the image arises from the *Spiritus Mundi*, he means that it comes from this collective human memory.

*"The darkness drops again; but  
now I know."*

— Narrator

With this line the speaker reveals he was experiencing some kind of vision or dream, and now it is over. However, while the vision may have ended, the speaker has come to an understanding.

*"Twenty centuries of stony sleep /  
Were vexed to nightmare by a  
rocking cradle."*

— Narrator

After seeing the vision, the speaker understands its meaning. The monster he saw rising from the desert has been sleeping for two thousand years, tormented by Christianity—the "rocking cradle," which symbolizes the birth of Jesus.

*"What rough beast ... / Slouches  
towards Bethlehem to be born?"*

— Narrator

The word *slouch* doesn't describe weakness or laziness; rather, it describes the slow, deliberate, and thunderous way the monster moves. By moving "towards Bethlehem to be born," the monster is going to the birthplace of Christianity to put an end to the Christian world.

## Symbols

## The Falcon

The falcon described in "The Second Coming" is symbolic of the human race, specifically in modern times, as it has become disconnected from its roots. When [Yeats](#) writes, "[t]he falcon can't hear the falconer," he means that humanity has lost touch with its original values. This corruption is what leads to terrible hardships like World War I. The falcon being unable to hear the falconer could also represent what Yeats perceived as a collective loss of religious faith across the world. Thus, people (the falcon) are disconnected from their spirituality (the guiding falconer). There are alternative interpretations as well regarding what the falcon symbolizes. The falcon could also represent logic, and thus the falcon losing contact with the falconer suggests humanity abandoning logic.

## The Gyre

The "gyre" [Yeats](#) writes of in "The Second Coming" can be understood literally as a vortex of air so powerful that it consumes whatever is lost inside it. It should also be understood figuratively as a representation of Yeats's concept of time. Yeats believed time to be cyclical, broken up into epochs. The end of one epoch brings about a new epoch, and over time epochs repeat.

## The Sphinx

The sphinxlike creature described in the poem symbolizes both destruction and rebirth. It also symbolizes the pagan world that predated the Christian era. This is typified by the ancient Egyptians, who built the actual Sphinx. The Sphinx rises up to "slouch" toward Bethlehem. There, it will presumably destroy the birthplace of Christianity and in so doing end the Christian epoch and the values that define that epoch. This end will also be the beginning, however, of an era defined not by Christ but by the Sphinx. Depending on interpretation, this could be positive or negative, as it would destroy everything modern



humanity believes and values, but it might also purge humanity's corruption. Alternatively, the sphinx can be interpreted as symbolic of World War I, which [Yeats](#) believed destroyed the old order of the world.

## Themes

### Humanity and Its Loss of Spirituality

Perhaps the most important theme in "The Second Coming" is explored in the poem's second line: "The falcon cannot hear the falconer." On its surface this line merely refers to the physical impossibility of a bird lost in a "widening gyre" hearing the instructions of its falconer. Yet, the line really signifies how time and change have disconnected humanity from traditional spirituality. The falcon represents modern humanity, while the falconer represents the spiritual compass that in [Yeats](#)'s mind used to guide humanity. Indeed, the early 20th century, when Yeats wrote the poem, was a time of unprecedented and rapid secularization of European society. While at least one recent study published by *Scientific Advances* argues that this secularization preceded and perhaps caused rapid economic development, at the time traditionalists would have seen the trend negatively. Yeats, however, would have had a more ambivalent reaction to secularization.

Although born into a Protestant Christian family, Yeats never formally adopted or personally held Christian beliefs. Instead, he sought a belief system founded on empirical values, which concern evidence and experimentation. This quest for experience-based spiritualism led Yeats to partake in occult activities like the demonic ritual he describes in the chapter "The Sorcerers" from *The Celtic Twilight* (1893). His interest in traditional Celtic folklore would lead him to explore folkloric and occult themes in much of his writing, including "The Second Coming." In "The Second Coming" Yeats presents a subversion of the traditional Christian concept of the Second Coming of Christ, depicting instead the return of older, pagan values. This change is brought about by the movement of time itself but also by the weakness of humanity. "The best lack all

conviction," Yeats writes, "while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." Those who still follow old spiritual worldviews "lack conviction" and are unable to act upon their values, while those who have abandoned old mores are taking power.

The end of spirituality (or at least of the Christian spirituality Yeats was familiar with) is signaled in the poem by the rise of the monster. This "rough beast" is modeled after the Sphinx of Egypt. Once humanity (the falcon) has lost contact with its spirituality (the falconer), the beast arises to destroy the world and make a new one in its place.

### Evil Flourishes in Times of Crisis

[Yeats](#) perhaps wrote "The Second Coming" as an allegory for modern warfare. World War I (1914–18) had been a conflict of unprecedented bloodshed and scope that radically altered the world map and also altered Western thinking. Other conflicts around the same time, as well as concurrent disasters such as the global influenza outbreak that killed millions, would have influenced Yeats. A key theme of "The Second Coming," then, is the way Yeats perceives war and disaster as bringing out the worst in humanity, empowering the wicked and bloodthirsty and disempowering good people.

In "The Second Coming," Yeats describes a moral dichotomy between good people ("the best") and bad people ("the worst"). The former, he writes, "lack all conviction," and the latter are "full of passionate intensity." Sensitive poets and gentle people would have been swept aside by a conflict such as World War I, while the more violent and ambitious would rise to prominence. However, it should also be noted that Yeats's sense of causality in the poem goes both ways. While the people described in the first stanza are made more destructive by events in the world, they are also the cause of them in the first place. The emergence of the monster in the poem's second stanza is preceded by humanity's corruption in the first. Yeats seems to suggest, then, that humanity's wickedness will bring about the world's end. In describing the monster that rises from the desert, Yeats writes that "its hour [has] come at last" after "twenty centuries of stony sleep." The monster then

arises from slumber, awoken by the terrible, bloody chaos of the Great War and other calamities. It is not the monster who destroys human society, but rather human society that destroys itself, allowing the monster to be born.

## Time Is Cyclical

Central to understanding the poem's meaning is [Yeats's](#) concept of cyclical time represented by his vision of overlapping "gyres." These gyres could be physically described as interpenetrating cones. The gyre is mentioned in "The Second Coming" in the poem's first line, where Yeats describes the metaphorical falcon (humanity) becoming lost in a widening gyre. The falcon is lost and unable "to hear the falconer" because of the interchange between gyres. Time and history are changing, and everything the falcon understands is being altered.

Yeats's personal model of history can be boiled down to a few core concepts. First, history is necessarily cyclical. Events and epochs repeat themselves over the course of time. Second, these repeating gyres, or epochs, each last roughly 2,000 years—the "twenty centuries of stony sleep" mentioned in the poem. Third, as one gyre degrades and gives way to the next, the endings of each epoch are cataclysmic. As such, the ideal time to live would be at the midpoint of an epoch, for example, 1000 CE. Finally, although one gyre/epoch supersedes another, the earlier one still exists—subdued but exerting its own quiet power. Thus, although Yeats believed he lived in the Christian epoch, he also recognized elements of the preceding pagan epoch still existed.

The "rough beast" Yeats describes "slouch[ing] towards Bethlehem" is moving to destroy the "rocking cradle" of Christianity. This would end the Christian epoch and bring about a new one, likely more similar to the preceding pagan epoch. In presenting this scenario, Yeats is subverting the traditional Christian, biblical view of history. The biblical view of history is more linear and has a definite ending: the victory of Christ over evil and the effective, permanent end of the world. Yeats's more pagan attitude toward history, however, would argue that Christianity has had its time. Now the pagan beast rises again, "its hour come around at last."

## Narrative Voice

"The Second Coming" is written in the first person, but this perspective isn't made clear until line 13 in the second stanza. Until that point, the poem is narrated in an impersonal way, the speaker bearing witness to a strange vision. The speaker in "The Second Coming" is never identified or given much in the way of personal development. From his (the speaker's gender is also never identified, but [Yeats](#) likely intended a male speaker) reactions to his visions, however, certain traits can be determined. The speaker is clearly religious or at least spiritually inclined, as he sees horrible atrocities and surmises they can only signify the Second Coming of Christ.

Through most of the poem, the speaker manages to maintain a calm and eloquent voice, though at certain moments he becomes more agitated and exclamatory. An example appears in line 11: "The Second Coming!" From his syntax and word choice, the speaker is a well-educated person who is well versed in religious symbolism and history. Nevertheless, he fails—or chooses not—to directly draw the connection between the "rough beast" he sees awakening and the Great Sphinx of Giza it resembles. Notably, in line 18 the speaker reveals that the poem up to this point has been a vision or trance, possibly a dream. However, rather than dismissing what he's witnessed, the speaker affirms the vision was meaningful, interpreting it as an omen of what is to come.

It's also worth noting that while the poem may have been written partly in response to World War I, the Easter Rising, and the Russian Revolution, the speaker never references these conflicts directly. He indirectly alludes to possible warfare with descriptions of large-scale violence and chaos. This strategy perhaps makes the poem an allegory, using a parallel narrative—"The Second Coming" of a terrible monster—to represent violent modern conflict.

Overall, the ideal adjectives to describe the narrative voice of the speaker in "The Second Coming" would be *eloquent*, *visionary*, *apocalyptic*, *mystical*, and *confused*.