

The Second Coming

In the face of the growing sceptical spirit of modernity, the poem embodies the poet's (and probably everybody's) longing to the simple belief in religion. The poem ends with the speaker in the poem showing compassion and expressing willingness to believe again whether with or without physical evidence.

William Butler Yeats wrote his visionary poem, *The Second Coming*, in January 1919 when he was 44 years old. Already established as a poet, theatre director, politician and esoteric philosopher, this poem further enhanced his reputation as a leading cultural figure of the time.

In a 1936 letter to a friend, Yeats said that the poem was 'written some 16 or 17 years ago and foretold what is happening', that is, Yeats poetically predicted the rise of a rough beast that manifested as chaos and upheaval in the form of Nazism and Fascism, bringing Europe to its knees.

Yeats had lived through tough times - World War 1 had seen unprecedented slaughter; several Irish Nationalists had been executed in the struggle for freedom; the Russian revolution had caused upheaval - and *The Second Coming* seemed to tap into the zeitgeist.

'My horror at the cruelty of governments grows greater' he told a friend. His poem seems to suggest that world affairs and spirituality undergo transformation from time to time. Humankind has to experience darkness before the light can stream in again through the cracks.

Things might fall apart, systems collapse and spiritual refreshment can only be achieved through the second coming: a Christian concept involving the return of Jesus Christ on Earth. Except that this second coming would be no holy birth of an infant Christ in a lowly manger.

Something far sinister is in prospect; an antithetical creature, sphinx-like in nature, a rough beast, slouching its way, about to be born en route to a symbolic Bethlehem.

The Second Coming is a disturbing poem with memorable lines that have been used by modern writers, rock bands and others as titles for their work. It's a highly visual two stanza creation, ending in a long, deep question.

The speaker describes a nightmarish scene: the falcon, turning in a widening "gyre" (spiral), cannot hear the falconer; "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold"; anarchy is loosed upon the world; "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned." The best people, the speaker says, lack all conviction, but the worst "are full of passionate intensity."

the speaker asserts, the world is near a revelation; “Surely the Second Coming is at hand.” No sooner does he think of “the Second Coming,” then he is troubled by “a vast image of the Spiritus Mundi, or the collective spirit of mankind: somewhere in the desert, a giant sphinx (“A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun”) is moving, while the shadows of desert birds reel about it. The darkness drops again over the speaker’s sight, but he knows that the sphinx’s twenty centuries of “stony sleep” have been made a nightmare by the motions of “a rocking cradle.” And what “rough beast,” he wonders, “its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

The poem, in summary, prophesies that some sort of Second Coming (traditionally, this is the return of Christ to Earth, as was promised in the New Testament) is due, and that the anarchy that has arisen all around the world (partly because of the events of the First World War, though the tumultuous events in Yeats’s home country of Ireland are also behind the poem) is a sign that this Second Coming cannot be far off.

But what sort of Second Coming will it be? It’s almost been ‘twenty centuries’, or 2,000 years, since Christ came to Earth in human form and was crucified; what ‘rough beast’ will reveal itself this time? Perhaps it will not be a Christ in human form, but something altogether different. The reference to *Spiritus Mundi*, literally ‘spirit of the world’, is, like the ‘gyre’, another allusion to Yeats’s beliefs: for Yeats, the *Spiritus Mundi* was a sort of collective soul containing all of mankind’s cultural memories – not just Christian memories, but those from other societies. ‘A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun’ suggests something altogether different from Jesus Christ – it’s got more in common with the Sphinx, that giant stone sculpture of a human-cat hybrid found near the Pyramids at Giza (Yeats’s word ‘gaze’ even faintly suggests ‘Giza’), which belongs to a different civilisation from the Christian one, and indeed predated it.

It is worth noting that Yeats believed that poets were privy to spiritual ‘after images’ of symbol and memories recurring in history, and especially available to souls of a sensitive nature such as poets. Here, the Spiritus Mundi is the soul of the Universe, rattling in the wake of the coming apocalypse, delivering to Yeats the image of the beast that will destroy the world, and him with it. The beast will come, Yeats is assured of this, but not yet; by the end of the poem, the veil has dropped again, the monster is no longer, and Yeats writes that ‘twenty centuries of stony sleep / were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle’, implying that whatever is coming for the world, whatever monster, will be here

soon. It is not yet born, but the world is right for it, and waiting for it, and Yeats is certain that the rough beast 'its hour come round at last' is only a few years away from wracking the world into a state of complete destruction.

Links

<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Summary-and-Analysis-of-Poem-The-Second-Coming-by-William-Butler-Yeats>

<https://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/yeats/section5/>

<https://interestingliterature.com/2016/01/11/a-short-analysis-of-yeatss-the-second-coming/>

<https://englishsummary.com/second-coming-wb-yeats-analysis/>

<https://poemanalysis.com/second-coming-william-butler-yeats-poem-analysis/>