

W.B. Yeats

The Second Coming

- William Butler Yeats wrote his visionary poem, *The Second Coming*, in January 1919 when he was 44 years old.
- 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.
- The poet had seen atrocities, mass killings, diseases and deaths around him. This made him believe that there is no concept of morality in the world. Instead, the one who believes in doing the wrong things is the one who gets more benefitted
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- 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.
- 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, no Saviour.

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- 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.
- This could manifest as war, huge social and political change, climate change and environmental disaster.
- The poet believed that the world history is cyclical. One era is replaced by the other which is quite opposite to the first.

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- The image of Falcon depicts the Christian era that came around 2000 years ago and now it is **“turning and turning in the widening gyre”** i.e. coming to its end and will be soon replaced by a new era which does not have any humanity and kindness but is dark and Barbarian.
- It is in the desert (like Sphinx at Giza) and has a head of man and body of a lion. It is pitiless and has no sympathy for humans. The poet is explaining the condition of men during the World War II. At that time the people had seen so many murders and killings that they were not affected by seeing others in misery and sorrow.

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“The *twenty centuries of stone* is *sleep*” probably refers to the Barbarianism that existed before Christianity. During the Christian Era, it was in deep sleep, according to the poet. Now as the Christian Era is about to end it is moving **“*towards Bethlehem to be born*”** i.e. a new era is about to begin which is characterized by barbarianism, hypocrisy, murder etc.

The end of the poem is on contrary to the biblical belief. According to the Christian mythology, it was believed that Christ will be born when the world would be in disorder. He would do justice to both alive as well as dead. The poet goes against it and shows us that the new era will be that of Barbarianism.