

The Second Coming

The title and the central idea of the poem were inspired by Christ's words predicting a 'second coming' in the Bible. Written in 1919 and first published in 1920 in the literary magazine *The Dial*, the poem deals with Yeats's concept of history, based on the image of the gyre, and describes the coming of a new world order characterised by terror and war. The poem also contains a reference to the *Spiritus Mundi*, that is, the soul of the universe to which men are connected through the Great Memory, a sort of universal subconscious where the memories of the human race are preserved.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; → society lacks solid foundations

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide¹ is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned; → humanity supposed one of progress as being a pure illusion

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity. → this line suggests a dislocation between best people (intellectual) and the crowd

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 pitiless² 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 → refers to the Christian age (the poem is almost the disintegration of Christian age)

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle³,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards⁴ Bethlehem to be born?

→ describes a creature which is half human and half beast (lion)

BODY OF A LION and HEAD OF A MAN

This creature appears to the desert → in its eyes it is a blank and pitiless look

Poignantly that has the intellect of a man and the fierce emotions of a beast

1 The blood-dimmed tide. La marea velata dal sangue.

2 A gaze blank and pitiless. Uno sguardo vuoto e spietato.

3 rocking cradle. Culla a dondolo.

4 Slouches towards. Avanza pigramente verso.

It's a puzzling line because the "rocking cradle" suggests the manger where Jesus was laid