

## 12.4 Yeats' "The Second Coming"

**Background:** Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote "The Second Coming" in 1919, an especially troubling moment in European history. Europe was shell-shocked from World War I and people questioned whether peace could be restored and the world repaired. Yeats, himself, was deeply conservative. He questioned the efficacy of democracy and later embraced fascism.



### Questions

1. In line 3, Yeats writes: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold." What do you think he means by this statement?
2. Yeats writes: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." How does this statement reflect his views on democracy?
3. What does Yeats believe is happening in the world?
4. In your opinion, why did World War I contribute to such negative thoughts about the future of society?

### "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats (1919)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center 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 come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?