

William Butler Yeats: “The Second Coming”

I. Background

- A. William Butler Yeats was an Irish poet who was the son of a struggling painter
- B. He immersed himself in the myths and legends of Ireland, but was aware of the struggles of his own day, such as the Easter Rising of 1916
- C. His influences include Shelley, Keats, and Blake, as well as the earlier Edmund Spenser
- D. He was also influenced by the pre-Raphaelite paintings of his father and father's colleagues
- E. Yeats studied poetry and Asian drama with Ezra Pound in 1912-1913

II. “The Second Coming” and Yeats's view of history

- A. Yeats envisioned history as a series of cycles in 2000-year increments
- B. Each new cycle represents a reversal of values from the cycle before
- C. He imagined history as two three-dimensional cones lying on their sides, each penetrating the other, the point of one at the center of the widest part of the other
 - 1. History spirals around the outside of each cone, from the point to the widest part, and then starting a new cycle
 - 2. This is the explanation of “the widening gyre,” where *gyre* means spiral or circle
 - 3. Each new age that emerges is antithetical to the previous one
 - 4. The inspiration comes from William Blake's notion of *contraries*

III. Interpretations

- A. Yeats saw one age extending from 2000 B.C. to the time of Christ
- B. In the year 1919, he is looking ahead to the end of the Christian era
- C. The new era is heralded by the birth of something very un-Christ-like, a “rough beast” with the body of a lion and head of a man
 - 1. The beast is sphinx-like and had existed prior to the birth of Christ
 - 2. It is not the second coming of Christ, but of something very different
 - 3. This creature's “hour has come round at last” and it “Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.”
- D. Yeats suggests that we see signs of this in the anarchy and chaos around us (the Great War and the Irish uprisings)
- E. “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity” depict humanity's malaise

IV. Influences

- A. This is Yeats's most apocalyptic poem, and the most modern
- B. There are many famous and often quoted lines
 - 1. “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” is perhaps the most famous
 - 2. *Things Fall Apart* is the title of a 1958 novel by the Chinua Achebe
 - a) It is probably the most widely read African novel
 - b) It depicts the clash between Nigeria's white, colonial government and pre-colonial Nigerian tribal culture at a point when all begins to shift