



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 1. 2026 (Jan-March.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**Conflicts Between Revelation and Nihilism: Philosophical Anxieties in
W. B. Yeats' *The Second Coming***

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.1.143](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.1.143)



Article information

Article Received:18/01/2026
Article Accepted:15/02/2026
Published online:24/02/2026

Abstract

This study scrutinizes the philosophical clash between revelation and nihilism in W.B. Yeats' poem, *The Second Coming*, placing it exactly within the turmoil and intellectual upheaval of the post - World War I period. Through a detailed scrutiny of the text and engagement with Yeats' symbolic framework in *A Vision*, the study posits that the poem reveals a momentous tension between the hope for divine revelation and the looming sense of an existential void. While the poem draws upon Christian apocalyptic imagery and looks forward to a "Second Coming," it eventually undermines any redemptive expectations through the jarring image of the "rough beast," highlighting the anxieties surrounding the collapse of moral and spiritual certainties. By referencing modernist perspectives and nihilistic philosophies, particularly concerning the fading of conventional belief systems, the research demonstrates how Yeats reinterprets apocalyptic revelation as a symbol of uncertainty instead of salvation. In the end, the poem conveys the continuing struggle of modern humanity to balance the longing for transcendence with the harsh reality of meaninglessness.

Keywords: Nihilism, Existentialism, Anxiety, Philosophy, Christianity, Conflicts.

This research delves into the philosophical conflict between revelation and nihilism in W.B. Yeats' poem, *The Second Coming*, situated within the disorder and intellectual mayhem following World War I. Through a thorough scrutiny of the poem and its connections to Yeats' symbolic ideas presented in *A Vision*, the investigation highlights a prominent tension between the yearning for celestial revelation and the pervasive sense of existential emptiness. The poem integrates Christian apocalyptic imagery, anticipating a "Second Coming," yet in due course subverts redeeming hopes with the conspicuous image of the "rough beast." This depiction underscores the anxieties tied to the erosion of ethical and spiritual certainties. By drawing on modernist perspectives and nihilistic philosophies, mainly regarding the decline of conventional beliefs, the scrutiny exemplifies how Yeats

changes apocalyptic revelation into a depiction of vagueness rather than salvation. Eventually, the poem effectively reflects the ongoing resistance of contemporary humanity to reconcile the wish for transcendence with the desolate reality of meaninglessness. "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself" (Sartre 22).

To fully comprehend the philosophical tensions, present in "The Second Coming," it's essential to consider the poem's historical background. Composed in 1919, this work reacts to the consequences of World War I, the Irish War of Independence, and the wider societal commotion in early twentieth-century Europe. The exceptional devastation of the First World War shattered Europe's confidence in development, humanity, and ethical reliability. Events like the Easter Rising and the consequent struggles in Ireland highlighted the collapse of the old imperial order. Yeats wrote during a time when many felt that "things fall apart" and "the centre cannot hold," phrases that summarized a growing disenchantment and cynicism with established structures and values.

In "The Second Coming," Yeats captures this disintegration as not just an issue of political anarchy but as a philosophical catastrophe of meaning - one where divine and ethical certainties are unsecured. The consistent idea of anarchism - signified by phrases like "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" - reflects both peripheral disorder and the fragmentation within the human psyche. In this circumstance, an omnipresent sense of historical nihilism emerges, as long-established beliefs in religion, ethics, and rational domination falter under the weight of modern conflict.

Modernist critic Cleanth Brooks asserts that "The opening lines, 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,' are not merely political observation but metaphysical diagnosis. The poem dramatizes the disintegration of a unifying principle" (Brooks 189). From the very start, "The Second Coming" represents a world where notions of revelation - particularly within the outline of Christian eschatology - clash with nihilism. The title itself alludes to the Christian faith in Christ's ultimate come back to redeem the world; nonetheless, Yeats challenges this belief by presenting not a vision of salvation but one of impending devastation.

"Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out" (Yeats 187)

At the heart of Yeats' apocalyptic mental picture lies an influential concept of revelation. Within Christianity, revelation presents a divine unveiling of definitive truths and a magnificent rationale that goes beyond human intellectual capacity. The speaker in Yeats' poem persistently recommends that "some revelation is at hand" and "the Second Coming is at hand," obviously depiction from the biblical Book of Revelation and the prospect of Christ's come back. Northrop Frye construes Yeats' apocalyptic images in mythic terms and he states that "Yeats' imagery in 'The Second Coming' is not merely personal symbolism but part of a larger myth of historical recurrence, where civilization moves through gyres toward inevitable revelation and catastrophe" (Frye 213).

Nonetheless, Yeats' explanation of revelation is laced with satire, irony and ambiguity. What follows this optimistic invocation is a strident vision emerging from the *Spiritus Mundi* - Yeats' notion of the "World Soul" or collective cataleptic. This image presents a creature with a "blank and pitiless" stare advancing in the direction of Bethlehem, not Christ himself. In this situation, revelation fails to get intelligibility, rationale, or salvation; rather, it unveils a world marked by unresponsiveness and devastation. The eagerness of heavenly revelation morphs into a resource of dismay, as the ominous fall down of the world hints at something outlying more terrifying than emancipation. "Yeats' poetry

is a poetry of phases, of cycles, in which the end is always implicit in the beginning; it is a vision of history as a pattern of recurring catastrophe" (Eliot 265).

The poem eventually redefines revelation - a happening characteristically associated with meaning and celestial order - as something that is vague and possibly detrimental. Instead of offering a reassuring sight into extraterrestrial reason, the revelation presented here shakes the very foundations of faith. This reimagining of revelation echoes with the overarching challenges of modernization, where conventional religious frameworks no longer give concrete grounding among the disorder of civilization.

Nihilism is fundamentally the trust that life does not come with any built-in meaning, value, or rationale. This point of view often emerges when conventional sources of meaning, such as religion, ethics, and societal norms, lose their reliability or break down. Though Yeats would not in shape the mold of a nihilist in the strictest logic, his poem wrestles with existential anxieties that resonance nihilistic thought.

Modern philosophical arguments, principally those of Friedrich Nietzsche and later existentialist thinkers, outline nihilism as arising from the "death of God." This notion advocates that when the metaphysical certainties that once supported our perceptive of life are shown to be unsubstantiated, we are left facing a null and void where meaning is not present. Nietzsche demonstrated this fall down of pious structures, revealing a chasm in which no deeper consequence can be found. "What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer.... Nihilism is the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability" (Nietzsche 9 - 10).

In Yeats' poem "The Second Coming," this philosophical meaninglessness is unambiguous. The images - of disrupted historical cycles, a loss of center, and the apathetic appearance of a new creature - illustrate a truth where conventional sources of meaning have failed. The proposal that "the best" lack conviction while "the worst are full of passionate intensity" underscores an ethical turmoil, suggestive of that without objective values, unprocessed impulses and disordered instincts govern.

Yeats' depiction of nihilism goes beyond a simple existential claim; he does not state that life is innately meaningless. Instead, the poem vibrantly conveys the anxieties surrounding a world where conventional revelations no longer guarantee us of meaning. The collapse of divine and ethical certainties leaves humanity perilously at the edge of a nihilistic empty space, where what we look forward to from revelation may end up being nothing more than another distressing dream.

Yeats' own metaphysical outline, which he developed in his occult writings like *A Vision*, guides the emblematic logic of *The Second Coming*. According to his mythopoeic structure, historical epochs are represented by overlapping gyres, which are symbolic cones that symbolize cycles of extension and reduction. Individual and collective conflicts are mirrored in these gyres, which embody the great endeavor between revelation and vagueness, order and commotion.

The "rough beast" slouching toward Bethlehem, the poem's fundamental metaphor, personifies this anxiety. It is a creature that is vague and unconcerned with its objective, neither entirely celestial nor totally evil. Instead of a redemptive second coming, as is the conventional Christian narrative, it proposes an unanticipated alteration of history.

This figurative vagueness emphasizes the tension between revelation and nihilism: while revelation once embodied striking structure of the universe, it is now tangled with doubt and change. The beast's indifference recommends not entire evil, but rather a subsistence devoid of ethical verdict, reflecting the impartiality related with nihilism - a reality in which meaning must be constructed instead of revealed. In this light, Yeats' symbolism joins heavenly revelation and the bareness of existentialism.

The modernist background of Yeats, develops the poem's philosophical apprehensions. As an intellectual occurrence, modernism recurrently scrutinized the collapse of belief the clash between convention and modern-day life, and the challenges of expressing lucid meaning in a speedily growing world. Yeats amalgamates religious themes with modernist hysteria to examine philosophical inquiries about what individuals can figure out and belief in a disordered milieu.

Critics have pointed out that *The Second Coming* articulates apprehensions about the endurance of civilization and the collapse of general ethical values. Both Yeats and his contemporary T.S. Eliot conveyed an "age of anxiety," in which established divine and humanistic principles appeared insufficient for supporting post-war society. The poem's preliminary imagery - of a falcon unable to hear its owner embodies extrication between humanity and guiding morals. This theme reveals existential ideas found in modern philosophy, where individuals countenance the repercussions of disenchantment and the loss of a metaphysical sagacity of path.

Yeats' apprehensions, thus, mirror larger philosophical arguments of his era: if religious revelation no longer supplies a foundation for meaning, how should we tackle the impending menace of nihilism? The poem does not tender a solution but instead highlights this resistance as an elemental tension of modern-day life.

The major philosophical conflict in *The Second Coming* lies not in an uncomplicated opposition of faith versus skepticism, but rather in two approaches to facing a disorganized world:

1. Revelation as a foundation of Meaning: Yeats employs Christian apocalyptic imagery to advocate a higher resolution - an unveiling that could bring back universal implication. Nonetheless, this unveiling remains unsteady, vague, and may be undermined by the anarchy it seeks to confront, illustrated by the violent reverse of the anticipated Christ figure represented by a "rough beast".
2. Nihilism as Bump into with the Abyss: The poem's turbulent depiction of societal and spiritual collapse demonstrates veracity where conventional systems of meaning have diminished in power. In this milieu, nihilism transcends mere despondency; it becomes a challenge to the bareness that compels a reevaluation of the prospective for meaning in a world beyond convention.

The two impulses - toward revelation and toward the void - are consistent in the poem. Revelation cannot simply reaffirm preceding certainties in a world altered by aggression and disintegration; it must deal with nihilism's challenge to the very idea of meaning.

Yeats' poetic approach is therefore less about providing an obvious respond and more about illustrating how overwhelmingly these opposing philosophical concerns influence modern thought. The poem's concluding query "what rough beast..." does not resolve the apprehension but rather leaves it vague, encouraging readers to reflect on the importance of both revelation and nihilism in their own existential circumstances.

The Second Coming retains its significance as the philosophical apprehension it illustrates - between the search for meaning and the face of nihilism's bareness - continues to influence ideas in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Whether viewed through holy, existential, or cultural viewpoints, the poem's imagery of decay and change reflects relentless worries regarding the trajectory of civilization, ethical integrity, and metaphysical fundamentals.

Modern crises - such as societal division, political commotion, and technological change - have prompted readers to turn to Yeats' imagery as a symbol of present-day despondency and enduring hope. The conflict between disclosure and nihilism provides a view for examining how we seek meaning during chaotic periods. Richard Ellmann rightly opines that "The poem derives its symbolic

structure from Yeats's theory of the gyres, in which history proceeds in widening spirals, each twenty centuries bringing the collapse of one civilization and the birth of another" (Ellmann 257).

"The Second Coming' is Yeats's most powerful vision of a world abandoned by transcendent meaning, where the falcon cannot hear the falconer and authority dissolves into violent energy" (Bloom 345). William Butler Yeats' *The Second Coming* tenders a deep reflection on the existential uncertainties of modern society. By contrasting religiously infused hopes of revelation with vibrant imagery of anarchy and existential barrenness, Yeats conveys a struggle that goes beyond his time. The poem not only exemplifies the disintegration of certainties following warfare but also raises the crucial question of meaning: can revelation - whether divine or artistic - endure in a backdrop where conventional structures have been undermined? Or must we face the philosophical bareness that nihilism suggests, forging our own routes toward meaning? **Albert Camus** illustrates as the conflict between human longing and celestial stillness: "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 28).

In *The Second Coming*, Yeats presents this apprehension through a disturbing apocalyptic vision that offers no uncomplicated soothe. It encourages readers to confront the conflict between the yearning for meaning and the acknowledgment of vagueness - a multifarious interplay that is crucial to both literature and philosophy.

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