

# **In "The Second Coming" By W.B. Yeats, The Speaker Asserts That The Best People "lack All Conviction,"**

**In "The Second Coming" By W.B. Yeats, The Speaker Asserts That The Best People "lack All Conviction,"** a profound statement that encapsulates the poem's exploration of societal upheaval, moral decay, and the disillusionment of the modern world. Yeats's renowned poem, written in 1919 against the backdrop of World War I and the upheavals of the early 20th century, presents a vision of chaos and transformation. Central to this vision is the idea that those who are morally upright, knowledgeable, or well-intentioned often find themselves paralyzed by uncertainty and a loss of conviction, rendering them ineffective amid the tumult. This article delves into the thematic significance of this assertion, analyzing how Yeats articulates the decline of moral certainty and the rise of a new, unsettling era.

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## **The Context of "The Second Coming"**

### **Historical and Cultural Backdrop**

- **Post-World War I Disillusionment:** The devastation of WWI shattered illusions of progress and human goodness, prompting writers like Yeats to question the stability of civilization.
- **The Rise of Modernism:** The early 20th century saw a shift toward experimental literary forms and a focus on fragmentation, chaos, and subjective experience.
- **Societal Unrest:** Political upheavals, revolutions, and the decline of traditional authority further fueled the sense of instability reflected in the poem.

### **Yeats's Personal Perspective**

- As a seasoned poet and observer of societal change, Yeats was deeply concerned with the decline of spiritual values and the emergence of barbarism.
- His fascination with cyclical theories of history influences the poem's imagery and themes, especially the idea that history repeats itself in destructive cycles.

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# **The Theme of Lost Conviction in the Poem**

## **The Meaning of "Lack All Conviction"**

- Definition: The phrase suggests a state of moral, spiritual, or intellectual indecision—people no longer possess firm beliefs or unwavering principles.
- Implication: Such individuals are unable to take decisive action or stand firmly for their values, especially in times of crisis.
- Context in the Poem: Yeats implies that even the most capable or morally upright are hampered by doubt, making society vulnerable to chaos.

## **Contrast with Traditional Moral Certainty**

- In earlier eras, individuals and societies often held strong convictions rooted in religion, tradition, or shared moral codes.
- Yeats's depiction reveals a shift where these certainties are eroding, replaced by skepticism and relativism.

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## **Analysis of Key Imagery and Symbols Related to Conviction**

### **The Sphinx and the Gyre**

- The Sphinx: Represents mystery, ancient wisdom, and sometimes destructive forces. It symbolizes the unclear and ambiguous moral landscape.
- The Gyre: A central symbol in Yeats's poetry representing cyclical history and chaos. The expanding and contracting circles depict the disorientation caused by lost conviction.

### **The "Things Fall Apart" Motif**

- Borrowed from Yeats's own writings and other literary sources, this phrase underscores the disintegration of societal and moral order.
- The loss of conviction leads to societal breakdown, as individuals and institutions no longer uphold steadfast beliefs.

### **The "Wild Ride" of the Beast**

- The image of a wild, uncontrollable creature symbolizes the chaos unleashed when people lack conviction to restrain destructive impulses.

- It reflects the fear that without firm moral grounding, society might be overtaken by primal forces.

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## **The Role of Fear and Anxiety in the Assertion**

### **The Fear of Anarchy and Barbarism**

- Yeats's assertion about lack of conviction is intertwined with fears of societal collapse into barbarism.
- The "rough beast" described in the poem embodies this fear, envisioned as a symbol of a new, chaotic epoch.

### **Impact on Society and Individuals**

- The collective anxiety fuels the sense that without conviction, society drifts aimlessly.
- Individuals, unable to stand firm, become passive or complicit in destructive trends.

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## **The Consequences of the Absence of Conviction**

### **Societal Implications**

- Moral Relativism: The erosion of absolute truths leads to instability.
- Leadership Vacuum: Leaders and thinkers lack the moral authority or clarity to guide society effectively.
- Cultural Decay: A decline in shared values results in fragmentation and chaos.

### **Personal Impact**

- The individual's inability to hold firm beliefs causes paralysis in decision-making.
- A sense of disillusionment and alienation pervades, leaving people vulnerable to manipulation by forces of chaos.

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# Yeats's Perspective on the Future

## The Prediction of a New Era

- Yeats foresees a transformation driven by chaos, where old certainties are replaced by new, possibly darker realities.
- The "rough beast" slouching toward Bethlehem symbolizes this impending upheaval.

## Relevance to Contemporary Society

- The assertion that the best people "lack all conviction" resonates today amid political polarization, moral ambiguity, and societal unrest.
- The poem encourages reflection on the importance of moral steadfastness in turbulent times.

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## Conclusion: The Significance of Conviction in Yeats's "The Second Coming"

Yeats's declaration that "the best people lack all conviction" underscores a critical concern about the fragility of moral and spiritual foundations in the face of societal upheaval. The poem warns that when individuals and societies abandon unwavering principles, chaos and barbarism are likely to follow. Through vivid imagery, symbolic complexity, and prophetic tone, Yeats captures a moment of profound transition—one where humanity must grapple with the loss of conviction and its potentially catastrophic consequences. As we interpret "The Second Coming" today, the importance of maintaining moral clarity and steadfastness remains as relevant as ever, serving as a cautionary reminder of the perils of complacency and the necessity of conviction amidst uncertainty.

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Keywords: W.B. Yeats, The Second Coming, lack of conviction, societal chaos, moral decay, symbolism, modernism, poetic analysis, societal upheaval, cultural decline

## Frequently Asked Questions

## **What is the central theme of W.B. Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming'?**

The central theme is the chaos and disintegration of societal and spiritual order, symbolized by a falconer's failure to control the falcon and the emergence of a new, ominous era.

## **How does Yeats depict the 'best people' in the poem as lacking conviction?**

Yeats suggests that the most capable and noble individuals are spiritually and morally adrift, lacking the firm beliefs and convictions needed to lead and uphold societal values during turbulent times.

## **What is the significance of the 'rough beast' mentioned in the poem?**

The 'rough beast' symbolizes an ominous, destructive force or new epoch emerging from chaos, representing a dystopian future or the arrival of a new, unsettling age.

## **How does Yeats's concept of 'conviction' relate to the poem's overall message?**

Yeats implies that a lack of conviction among the best people contributes to societal decline, emphasizing the importance of firm beliefs and moral strength to withstand chaos.

## **In what ways does 'The Second Coming' reflect Yeats's views on historical cycles?**

The poem reflects Yeats's belief in cyclical history, where civilizations rise and fall in recurring patterns, often marked by chaos and the disintegration of old orders.

## **Why does Yeats describe the current leaders as lacking conviction, and how does this impact society?**

Yeats views current leaders as indecisive and morally uncertain, which weakens societal stability and paves the way for destructive forces to take over.

## **How has modern relevance been attributed to the**

## **themes in 'The Second Coming'?**

The poem's themes of chaos, societal upheaval, and the failure of moral conviction resonate with contemporary issues such as political instability, moral decay, and global crises.

## **What literary devices does Yeats use to emphasize the idea that the best people 'lack all conviction'?**

Yeats employs vivid imagery, symbolism, and a tone of foreboding to underscore societal decline, along with Biblical and mythological allusions to deepen the sense of impending doom.

## **Additional Resources**

### **Introduction**

W.B. Yeats's poem *The Second Coming* is widely regarded as one of the most profound and prophetic works of 20th-century literature. Written in 1919 amid the chaos of post-World War I Europe, it captures a sense of disillusionment, upheaval, and the impending collapse of old orders. Central to the poem is the speaker's bleak observation that "the best lack all conviction," a line that has resonated deeply with readers, scholars, and critics alike. This assertion encapsulates the paradox of moral and intellectual paralysis among those who are most capable or virtuous, and it prompts an exploration of the complex social, political, and spiritual implications embedded in Yeats's verse.

In this review, we will delve into the meaning behind the phrase "the best lack all conviction," analyze its context within the poem, and interpret its significance both in Yeats's time and in contemporary understanding. We will examine how this line contributes to the overarching themes of chaos, transformation, and the cyclical nature of history, and explore the poet's critique of modern society's moral and spiritual decline.

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## **Understanding the Line: "The best lack all conviction"**

### **The Text and Its Context**

Yeats's *The Second Coming* opens with a striking image of a world in disarray:

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

This imagery sets a tone of chaos, disorder, and impending collapse. Within this tumult, the line "the best lack all conviction" appears as a reflection on the moral and spiritual state of those who are most capable of guiding society toward stability and goodness.

The poem was written during a period of profound upheaval—post-World War I disillusionment, the Russian Revolution, the fall of empires, and the rise of revolutionary ideologies. Yeats perceives that the moral backbone of society is weakening even among its most virtuous members, leading to a potential vacuum of leadership and moral authority.

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## **Semantic Analysis of the Phrase**

The phrase itself contains a stark paradox:

- "The best": Refers to the morally upright, the virtuous, the wise, or the capable individuals in society.
- "lack all conviction": Implies an absence of firm belief, confidence, or steadfastness.

This combination suggests that those who are morally or intellectually superior are, paradoxically, the ones most hesitant or unwilling to take a stand. Their lack of conviction means they are unable or unwilling to assert their values or influence societal direction, leaving a void that chaos and destructive forces can fill.

Key aspects to consider:

- The word "lack" indicates deficiency or absence.
- "All conviction" points to a comprehensive lack of certainty, confidence, or moral certainty.
- The phrase underscores a kind of moral paralysis among the "best," which, in the context of the poem, becomes a significant concern.

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## **Deeper Interpretations and Critical Perspectives**

# Why Do “The Best” Lack Conviction?

Several interpretations have been proposed to explain this phenomenon:

## 1. Moral Fatigue and Disillusionment

- After the horrors of war and upheaval, many individuals—especially those morally upright—become disillusioned with the prevailing social and political systems.
- Their skepticism or sense of futility leads to hesitation in asserting convictions, fearing that their beliefs might be futile or ineffective.

## 2. Fear of Conflict or Repercussions

- The social climate may discourage firm stances due to fear of persecution or backlash.
- The “best” might be cautious or hesitant, especially in turbulent times when speaking out can be dangerous.

## 3. Loss of Faith in Traditional Values

- The decline of religious and moral certainties erodes confidence among those who once held steadfast beliefs.
- This loss of spiritual grounding results in wavering convictions.

## 4. The Complexity of Modernity

- The modern world’s complexity demands nuanced perspectives, which can lead to relativism or indecision.
- The “best” may struggle to find clear moral or ideological anchors.

## 5. Psychological or Existential Angst

- A sense of helplessness or despair may sap individuals’ confidence.
- The overwhelming scale of chaos can lead to paralysis rather than action.

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# Implications of the Line in the Poem’s Thematic Framework

This line functions as a critical commentary on the state of society and the moral fabric of humanity. It suggests that:

- The absence of conviction among the virtuous fuels societal decline.
- The “best,” who should ideally lead or uphold moral standards, are rendered passive.
- This paralysis creates a power vacuum, allowing destructive forces—symbolized by the “rough beast” in the poem—to emerge and dominate.

It also reflects Yeats’s preoccupation with the cyclical nature of history, where periods of moral and spiritual decline are inevitable precursors to upheaval and rebirth.

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## **The Contrast Between “The Best” and “All Conviction”**

### **The “Best” as Moral and Intellectual Leaders**

In Yeats’s worldview, the “best” are those endowed with virtue, wisdom, or insight—individuals who could guide society toward stability and moral integrity. Historically, these figures might be philosophers, spiritual leaders, or moral exemplars.

### **The Lack of Conviction as a Sign of Weakness or Cynicism**

The phrase highlights a deficiency—not necessarily active evil but a form of spiritual or moral weakness. Their lack of conviction signifies:

- An inability or unwillingness to stand firm.
- A capitulation to chaos and uncertainty.
- A disconnect from core moral principles, possibly due to disillusionment or fear.

This weakening of conviction among the morally upright is, in Yeats's view, a dangerous sign, as it leaves society vulnerable to forces of destruction.

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## **The Role of the “Best” in Yeats’s Vision of History**

Yeats believed in the cyclical view of history, with civilizations rising and falling through spiritual and moral cycles. The line suggests that:

- When the “best” fail to uphold conviction, a society risks entering a period of chaos.
- The decline of moral certainty among the “best” signifies the waning of spiritual vitality.
- This decay sets the stage for the emergence of a new, often destructive, force—represented in the poem as a monstrous creature.

This perspective aligns with Yeats's broader poetic philosophy, emphasizing that societal renewal depends on the moral strength and conviction of its individuals.

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## **Contemporary Relevance and Critical Reflection**

### **Modern Parallels**

The line remains profoundly relevant today, echoing concerns about:

- Political apathy among morally committed individuals.
- The rise of populist or extremist movements where moderate or "good" people remain silent.
- The erosion of traditional values and the decline of moral leadership.
- The paralysis of intellectual or moral authorities in facing global crises like climate change, inequality, and conflict.

### **Critical Perspectives**

Some critics argue that Yeats's assertion oversimplifies the complex dynamics of societal change. They suggest:

- That even the most virtuous can experience doubt without losing their capacity for conviction.
- That societal upheavals often arise from broader structural forces beyond individual convictions.
- That the poem's bleak outlook may reflect Yeats's own fears and anxieties rather than an inevitable historical process.

Others posit that the line invites a reflection on the importance of moral courage. In times of uncertainty, the "best" must act with conviction to prevent chaos from overtaking society.

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## **Conclusion: The Enduring Significance of the Line**

Yeats's assertion that "the best lack all conviction" encapsulates a profound truth about moral and intellectual paralysis in times of upheaval. It serves

as a cautionary note on the importance of steadfastness, moral clarity, and spiritual resilience.

This line underscores a paradox that resonates across eras: that virtue and capability alone are insufficient without the courage to stand firm. The poem as a whole warns that societal collapse is perilously close when the most capable individuals fail to assert their convictions.

In contemporary discourse, Yeats's words challenge us to reflect on our own moral commitments and the courage required to uphold them amid chaos. They remind us that societal renewal depends not just on the presence of virtue but on the active, unwavering conviction of those who possess it.

The Second Coming remains a vital, haunting meditation on the cycles of history, the fragility of moral order, and the transformative power of conviction. Understanding this line deepens our appreciation for Yeats's prophetic voice and its enduring relevance in navigating the tumultuous landscapes of human civilization.

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