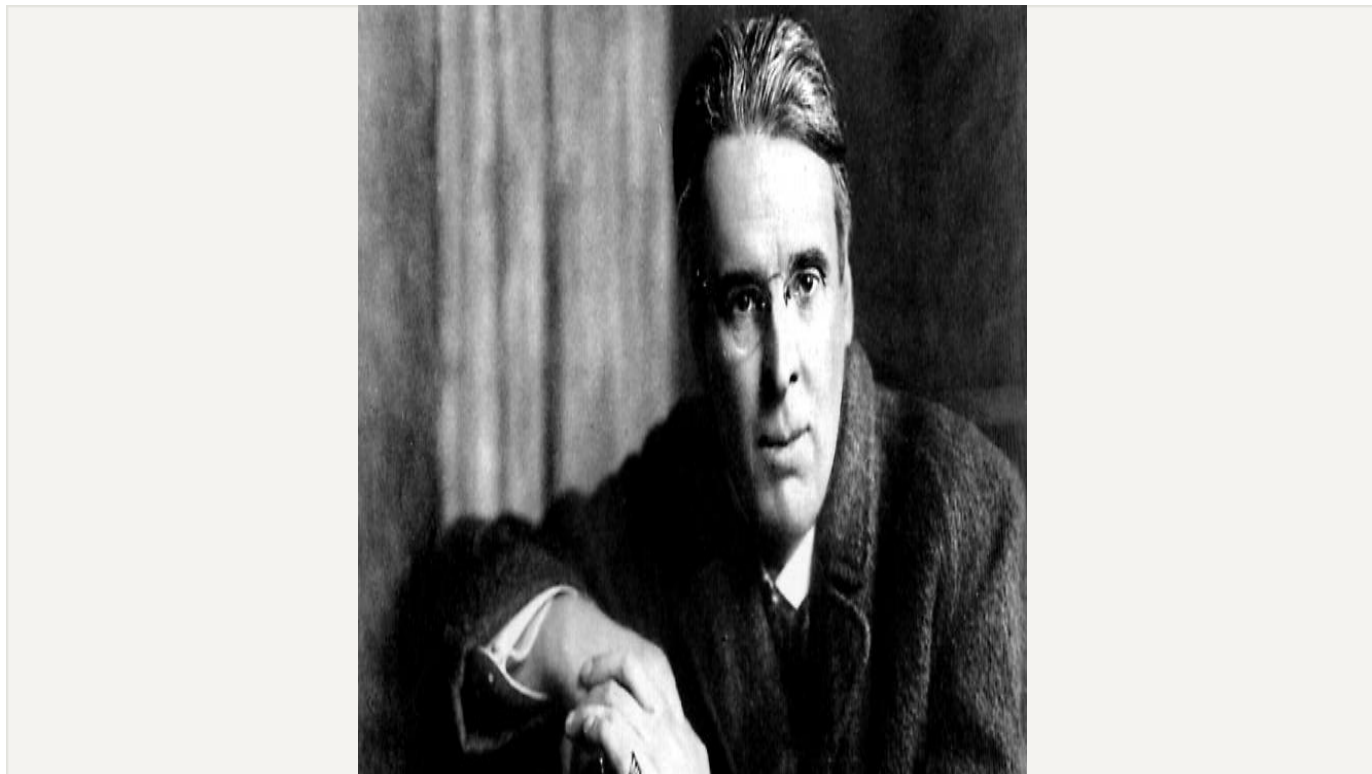


## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# WB Yeats's *The Second Coming* is being used to describe our grim times



WB Yeats's 1919 poem *The Second Coming* has found currency with modern writers and commentators.

ED BALLARD THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM August 26, 2016

A torrent of bad news and political upheaval has given new life to a nearly 100-year-old poem written in the aftermath of World War I.

Terror attacks, the fracturing of the EU and a polarising US election have made this the year of *The Second Coming*, WB Yeats's chilling poem, written in 1919 as a warning of sorts for a world entering a dark, anarchic age. "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" its final lines asked.

Nearly a century later, the Irish poet's incantatory words and frightening symbolism are being deployed with unusual frequency by commentators, journalists and others seeking to add an apocalyptic tone to their work.

An analysis of Factiva, a media database, shows that some of Yeats's most resonant lines have been quoted in news sources more often in the first seven months of this year than any other year in the past three decades.

References on Twitter also have gradually increased during the past year, according to social-analytics firm Sysomos, with spikes after terror attacks in Paris and Brussels, and in the wake of Britain's vote to leave the EU.

"The centre cannot hold" was tweeted or retweeted 499 times on June 24, the morning after the Brexit vote. Since then it has appeared 38 times a day, compared with 24 times a day before the referendum. So far this year that same line has been used 249 times in newspapers, news sites and blogs tracked by Factiva, level with last year's record total.

The phrase that follows — "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" — has appeared 79 times, compared with 42 last year and 64 in 2014, the previous apex.

Other lines, such as "The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (33) and "The best lack all conviction" (108), are narrowing in on their top figures (37 and 136, respectively; also both from 2014). Combined, references to those four lines — some of the poem's most famous — have been used 469 times this year, compared with a high of 429 last year.

"There's a sense that old forms of authority are outmoded" today, says Roy Foster, Carroll professor of Irish history at the University of Oxford and author of *WB Yeats: A Life*.

"There's a sense of insecurity, instability, risk, and a feeling that something appalling is around the corner. I think we have seen rough beasts arise, notably in desert countries."

Two of Yeats's lines above all have become common cultural currency. "Things fall apart," which provided the title for Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel about the fateful clash of traditional African and colonial cultures, is quoted most frequently: 695 times so far this year, as against a high of 1545 in 2013, the year Achebe died.

"Slouches towards Bethlehem" also found fame in association with another writer, thanks to Joan Didion's 1968 collection of essays and its title piece on hippie culture in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury.

Since then, variations on "slouches towards" have proved a popular fixture of book titles and headlines, with 320 appearances in the news this year, according to Factiva. (Factiva is owned by Dow Jones, the News Corp subsidiary that publishes *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Australian*.)

The enduring quotability of *The Second Coming* attests to Yeats's brilliance as a phrase-maker. "You'd have to go to Shakespeare's sonnets to find something that has instilled itself into the ear of the reading public over as long a period, in as intense a way," Foster says.

Seeking to transcend his own time, Yeats stripped out references to the events that inspired him: the Russian Revolution and Ireland's failed 1916 Easter Rising.

The only phrase that implicitly roots the poem in history is "twenty centuries of stony sleep" — the time between the birth of Christ and the ominous "Second Coming".

What remains is a sequence of images dark enough to conjure a sense of doom and vague enough to be invoked by anybody looking for a more highbrow way of saying “the world is going to hell in a handbasket”.

The poem is most popular in US and British newspapers, but Yeats's lines have been invoked in polemics about press freedom in South Africa, income inequality in Nigeria and substate nationalism in India. Claimed by people of diverse political leanings, it has been quoted by columnists celebrating Brexit and others mourning it; by conservative and liberals discussing the US presidential election; by defenders and opponents of Jeremy Corbyn, the embattled leader of the Britain's Labour Party; by environmentalists and climate sceptics.

*The Wall Street Journal*

## **The Second Coming**

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,  
 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?

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SARAH VOGLER

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AMOS AIKMAN

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