

The Gyres Summary

Writer: William Butler Yeats | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Summary

Beginning of the Poem: Yeats begins the poem with a loud call: "The Gyres! The Gyres! Old Rocky Face, look forth!" He calls upon an ancient figure, like a god or spirit, to witness the turning of the world. The poet believes that old ideas and values are dying. The world has reached the end of one great cycle. Everything that was once beautiful or valuable is now fading. The poet says, "Beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth." It means that greatness destroys itself when it reaches its peak. Yeats feels that human history moves in circles, called "gyres," where each age rises, blooms, and finally collapses. The poet views this change not with sorrow, but with a strange feeling of acceptance.

Fall of Civilization: In the next lines, Yeats speaks about the fall of the old civilization. He says that the world is now covered with "irrational streams of blood." This line reminds readers of wars and violence. The mention of Empedocles and Hector shows that Yeats is thinking of the ancient world, which also faced destruction. Empedocles, the Greek philosopher, believed that the world was made by the conflict of love and strife. Hector's death in Troy marked the end of a glorious age. Yeats compares his own time to such tragic endings. Yet, he and others "laugh in tragic joy," meaning they see this destruction as part of nature's cycle. The tone is both sad and strong, as Yeats believes that such destruction is not the final end.

Acceptance of Change: The poet then asks, "What matter though numb nightmare ride on top?" He means that there is no need to cry over the loss. Civilization has grown old and must die. Yeats says, "A greater, a more gracious time has gone." The past was beautiful, but it cannot be returned to. He used to admire the beauty of ancient art, such as "painted forms or boxes of make-up in ancient tombs," but now he has stopped yearning for the past. He accepts that time must move on. Out of the darkness comes a single voice saying only one word: "Rejoice!" This word surprises the reader because it shows hope. Even in ruin, there is a call to be joyful, because a new cycle is about to begin.

Coarseness of the Present Age: In the later lines, Yeats describes the present time as coarse and corrupted. People's thoughts, work, and morals have become rough and dull. Yet again, he says, "What matter?" He is not shocked anymore. He knows that history always repeats itself. The ancient spirit he calls "Rocky Face" holds dear those who loved strength,

courage, and beauty: “lovers of horses and of women.” Yeats believes these noble qualities will return when the gyre turns again. Although the world seems lost in darkness, the poet is certain that heroes, artists, and saints will rise again from the ruins.

The Turning of the Gyre: The image of the gyre is central to the poem. It refers to a significant spiral or turning movement that governs the rhythm of history. One gyre narrows and ends when another begins to widen. Yeats says that life, civilization, and even the human spirit follow this pattern. The phrase “unfashionable gyre again” suggests that forgotten values will become new again when the cycle turns. The world moves from order to chaos and back to order. Destruction leads to creation, and every death brings a new birth.

Conclusion and Message: In the final lines, Yeats teaches that every fall is followed by a rise. The poet looks at the decay of his age without fear. He sees it as part of a larger design. When everything collapses, it is not the end but a preparation for renewal. The poem mixes sadness and joy: sadness for what is lost, and joy for what will be born. “The Gyres” shows Yeats’s deep belief that time is circular, not straight. Every civilization must die so that a new one can live. The final message is full of courage: even when the world is dark and bloody, we should still listen to the voice that says, “Rejoice!”