

## 36

I hear an army charging upon the land,  
And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their knees.  
Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,  
Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.

They cry unto the night their battlename:

I moan in sleep when I hear afar their whirling laughter.

They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,  
Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.

They come shaking in triumph their long, green hair:

They come out of the sea and run shouting by the shore.

My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?

My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?

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### Notes

This was No. 36 in the 1907 edition.

Written (according to Ellmann) in Paris in early 1903, this poem is regarded by many authorities as the best in the collection. The American poet and critic Ezra Pound included it in an Imagist anthology in the United States in 1914.

This poem is in large part a rewriting of Yeats's 'He Bids His Beloved Be at Peace' from *The Wind Among the Reeds*. There are obvious similarities of language, rhythm and tone; perhaps that is why Yeats valued it so highly.

Tindall links the masochistic tendencies in this lyric with those of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.

The closing poem of George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862) (another poetry sequence about failed love) also features horses thundering along the shore – and a flitting bat!

There are also echoes of the *Book of Ezekiel* (noted in the previous lyric) where, in Chapter 38, the purgative army of God is described with its horses and horsemen.

The word 'cleave' is used throughout the Bible, and its dual – in fact, opposite – sense is widely remarked: in one definition it means to split, in another it means to join. In this context 'cleave' retains a martial association which accords with the theme of the lyric (and, linked by the 'cl' sound, with the 'clanging' in the next line); but the opposite meaning – of joining, adhering or sticking to 'the gloom of dreams' – also works.

Continuing the biblical connections, compare the final lines of the poem with the words of Jesus on the cross: 'My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?' (*Mark* 15:34).

Standing as a response to the bitterness of disappointed love, perhaps the martial theme of this song is an augury of Ireland's political fate over the following decades.