Turning and turning in the widening gyre *
The falcon cannot hear the falconer:
Things fall apart; the center 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?

• *Second Coming*: the return of Jesus Christ for the salvation of believers, as described in the Book of Revelation, which foretold that Christ's return would be preceded by famine, epidemics, war and civil disturbances.

* Gyre: a radiating spiral, cone, or vortex. Yeats refers to the intersection of two of these shapes as a visual symbol of his cyclic theory. As one gyre spiraled, widened, and disintegrated, a period of history would be ending. At the same time, a new gyre would be beginning a reverse spiral.

• *Mere*: in this line means "absolute," "pure," not "only" or "unimportant," as it usually does.

• *Conviction*: from the same Latin word as convince co/com/con (usually," together," "with",

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)
but not in this case) + vinco, vicere, vici, victum (overcome, conquer). Here, "con" is used as an intensive to mean "completely." So, for the word convince, con + vinco seems to mean that [any doubts] were "completely overcome"; and for the word conviction, con + victum seems to mean a strong belief (with good connotations) because any doubts were "completely overcome." Thus, one with convictions had strong principles, ethical/moral standards.

What kind of Second Coming does Yeats expect? Evidently it is not to be a Christian one. Yeats saw human history as governed by the turning of a Great Wheel, whose phases influence events and determine human personalities—rather like the signs of the Zodiac in astrology. Every two thousand years comes a horrendous moment: the Wheel completes a turn; one civilization ends and another begins. Strangely, a new age is always announced by birds and by acts of violence. Thus the Greek-Roman world arrives with the descent of Zeus in swan’s form and the burning of Troy, the Christian era with the descent of the Holy Spirit—traditionally depicted as a dove—and the Crucifixion. In 1919 when Yeats wrote "The Second Coming," his Ireland was in the midst of turmoil and bloodshed; the Western Hemisphere had been severely shaken by World War I and the Russian Revolution. A new millennium seemed imminent. What sphinx-like, savage deity would next appear on earth, with birds proclaiming it angrily? Yeats imagines it emerging from Spiritus Mundi, Soul of the World, a collective unconscious from which a human being (since the individual soul touches it) receives dreams, nightmares, and racial memories.

Yeats’ "The Second Coming" seems to suggest that in the eternal battle between good and evil, it is now evil’s turn to rule. In stanza one (pg. 567), "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,..." (line 5) may represent the savagery of mankind freed from the restraints of God and civilization and acting purely on its own chaotic, primordial, blinding hatreds. To convey the power of such uncontrolled evil, Yeats uses the metaphor "tide," comparing a powerful force of nature, the ocean tide coming in, with a seemingly very different mass of humanity. The important, but less obvious, similarity is in the sheer numbers of people—like the sheer numbers of water droplets that form a wave—all mindlessly moving to overwhelm—like an incoming wave—everything in its way. In this case, the "everything" is civilization. Again, like the tide, Yeats believed that human life goes in cycles: in comes civilization (represented by the twenty centuries following the birth of Jesus) and out goes the tide of ancient bestiality; then, in comes evil and out goes goodness and innocence for another 2000 years. Thus "tide" is a good metaphor for the poem’s theme of the cyclical exchange between the civilized and the destructive forces within human nature.