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# UNIT 21 WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

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## 21.0 OBJECTIVES

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After you have read this unit, you will be able to:

- Critically respond to W.B. Yeats's life and works.
- Understand Yeats's poetry in relation to Irish politics and history of his time.
- Appreciate the relationship between form and content of his poetry.
- To examine Yeats's contribution to poetic modernism.
- Examine the poems "To a Shade," "No Second Troy," and "The Second Coming."

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## 21.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit, we will have first look at W.B. Yeats's life and works. Yeats lived a long and eventful life. There was a direct connection between his social, and political life and the kind of literature he wrote. Therefore understanding his life may hold some key to comprehending his poetry.

The first poem in this unit is "To a Shade," which Yeats wrote to commemorate the great Irish nationalist Charles Stuart Parnell. As a nationalist Yeats was greatly influenced by this revolutionary leader, and his passion for the

independence of Ireland. Let us see by reading this poem what kind of tribute does the poet pay to this revered leader.

The second poem is titled “No Second Troy.” As the title suggests, the poem makes a reference to the Greek epic *Iliad* that celebrates the war of Troy. The poem is, however, not about Iliad but Ireland of Yeats’s times. Yeats compares his beloved Maud of Gonne to the mythical Helen of Troy. Read the poem to find out why Yeats does so.

The third poem in this unit is “The Second Coming.” It is one of the most anthologized of Yeats’s poems. It presents the Yeatsian theory of history through his symbol of gyre. It has Christian connotations. Instead of the second coming of the Christ, the poem announces the coming of a monstrous figure with the body of the lion and head of a man as an anti-Christ.

You are advised to read the poems before you read other sections of the unit.

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## 21.2 WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS (1865-1939)

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W.B. Yeats will go down in history as perhaps the greatest Irish writer ever. He was more than a poet; he wrote plays as well as prose, worked as an anthropologist and folklorist, was one of the theatre-managers at Abbey Theatre that he founded along with Lady Gregory, organized political meetings and lectures for the Irish movement for independence. However, with all his other accomplishments, he would be remembered mostly for his poetry that runs into numerous volumes. In his interview to *The Paris Review* in 1994, Seamus Heaney talks about the impossibility of ignoring Yeats in any assessment Irish poetry, and that he had to be included in his acceptance speech of the Noble Prize. Yeats both observed and influenced the political and literary history of Ireland, since the 1890s to his death. Working as a nationalist poet for almost half a century from the 1889 to 1939, he either took part or closely watched critical developments of that era such as the formation of the Irish National Theatre Society (later named as the Abbey Theatre), Irish Home Rule Movement, Easter Rising of 1916, and the Irish War of Independence, also called the Anglo-Irish War, that was fought between 21 January 1919 and 11 July 1921. Though, Yeats was averse to political violence, and never took part in any violent struggle against the British colonial forces, he tirelessly worked for cultural nationalism, reviving the oral and folk tradition of Ireland, as well as writing plays and poetry on nationalistic themes. The ambivalent streak in his poetry and personality is evident in the following lines from his poem “Man and Echo,” in which he painfully wonders if his play, *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, inspired young Irish men and women to violence and death in the Easter Uprising of 1916:

All that I have said and done,  
Now that I am old and ill,  
Turns into a question till  
I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answers right.  
Did that play of mine send out  
Certain men the English shot?

So, Yeats’s influence on Irish politics remains undeniable. Paying tribute to the key role the poet played in securing the independence of Ireland, Oliver St John

Gogarty said, and “If it had not been for W.B. Yeats, there would be no Irish Free State!” He was appointed to the first Irish senate in 1921. He also served a second term in 1925.

Yeats was a major force in the English poetic tradition. Though remaining astutely Irish in outlook, he wrote in the tradition that he inherited from Blake and Shelley calling himself “the last romantic.” However, in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he along with T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound radically transformed English poetry, making it suggestive and symbolist. In the process, he made himself a key figure in the European Modernism.

In his search for poetic truth, Yeats also came under the influence of Indian philosophy and poetry, especially through the *Upanishads* and the poems of Rabindranath Tagore.

Now let us look at his life in more detail.

W.B. Yeats was born in Dublin, now the capital of Ireland, on June 13, 1865. His father, John Butler Yeats, was a painter of modest success, and belonged to a respected family line of Protestant aristocrats and clergymen. Yeats, the poet, was named after his grandfather William Butler Yeats, who was a rector at Tullyish. Yeats’s mother, Susan Yeats, belonged to a family of business men in County Sligo on the west coast of Ireland. Though qualified as a barrister, the poet’s father decided to move to London with a hope to become a painter. However, Susan Yeats, unhappy with her husband’s decision, chose to live for some months every year from 1867 to 1873 at Sligo. Living with his grandparents and uncles at seaside Sligo, and with his father in London, Yeats and his five siblings came into contact with two completely different worlds- urban and the center of colonial Britain, London, and the typical Irish rural world, that evoked his postcolonial imagination quite early in life.

In his early lyrics, composed in the 1890s, Sligo inspired Yeats to write about the Irish landscape filled by lakes, hills, clouds and streams, which was a counterfoil to the colonial, urban, and metropolitan culture represented by London. In the most famous lyric from this phase of Yeats’ oeuvre, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” the poet says,

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey  
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

The beautiful island of Innisfree, with a lovely stretch of woodland, was in Lough Gill, about three miles away from Sligo. To the north of Sligo, a few miles away, was Ben Bulbin, the mountain with a waterfall. Under this mountain lay the Drumcliff Churchyard, which the poet wished to be the place of his burial. He expressed this wish in his poem *Under Ben Bulbin* (1939)

Under bare Ben Bulbin’s head  
In Drumcliff Churchyard, Yeats is laid

In London, the young Yeats came across artists and intellectuals who came to visit his father, and who talked about philosophy, religion, and arts, whereas at Sligo, Yeats came to know the Pollexfens and Middletons, the loving uncles,

aunts and cousins, who introduced him to the world of intense feeling, practical living amidst Irish nature, and folktales and fairies. The poet's father would say: "By marriage with the Pollexfens, I have given a tongue to the sea cliffs." Yeats would, for the rest of his life, remember Sligo as attached with childhood bliss, Irish family traditions, and folk and oral traditions of Ireland.

In 1881, financial hardships forced the family to return to Ireland. They took a cottage in Howth, a village on the sea shore, some 10 miles northeast of Dublin. The young Yeats accompanied his father daily to London by train, where in his studio; the father read aloud poems of Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. Yeats grew fascinated with Blake, Shelley and Byron, as the romantic wielded great influence on his poetic sensibility early on. He wrote in their imitation. As a boy, he was captivated by Shelley's *Alastor*, a poem about the idealist and passionately romantic as well as visionary hero, also a poet, who turns his back upon the world completely disillusioned with it.

Yeats's romantic tendencies, his belief in imagination, and his belief in poetry and literature as the truest form of self-expression led him to regard himself as the most authentic voice of Irish renaissance or the Irish Literary Revival. His reading of the romantics and the Irish oral folklore had produced in him a strong belief in spiritual self as against the intellect, the former he identified with Ireland and the latter with Britain.

Yeats's first collection of verse *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889) announced the arrival of a truly original poet, of exceptional imagination that could transform Irish myths and legends into contemporary narratives. He adopted myths, ballads, and folktales, and used their diction and rhythm in his poems. Oisín, the warrior poet from Irish mythology, ultimately sees through the mystery of the three islands that tempt in him in the beginning, and he returns to Ireland, "in the house of the Fenians, be they in flames or at feast."

Yeats's primary interest in the 1890s lay in starting a cultural revolution in Ireland that could inspire and support the political revolution against Britain. In 1896, he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and began organizing conferences, delivering speeches and writing articles about the future of Ireland. In 1897, he met Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, and formalized a manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre, which was renamed as Irish National Theatre in 1901, and finally the National Theatre Society (also the Abbey Theatre) in 1904. Yeats not only wrote for this theatre, but also served as its managing director along with Gregory and Synge. He saw the theatre as a movement to foster culture nationalism, as the manifesto, *Our Irish Theatre*, says,

We propose to have performed in Dublin...certain Celtic and Irish plays...to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.

In the collection of poems published as *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899), Yeats continued to explore the contraries and antithesis as the central trope of his poems, which would in fact remain so throughout his career. The quotidian and the ideal, dreams and reality, soul and intellect, mythology and contemporary Ireland return as subjects of his poems.

Yeats met Maud Gonne in 1889 and fell in love with her, but his love remained unrequited all his life. Maud Gonne was a fiery nationalist, who played an active role in the struggle for independence. She was also a fine actress, and played the role of the Cathleen, the old woman and the symbol of Ireland herself, in Yeats's postcolonial play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. But she chose John MacBride, the revolutionary who was executed for his role in the Easter uprising, over Yeats. In his poem *Easter 1916*, Yeats commemorated the death of MacBride and other revolutionaries in the Easter uprising, while also denouncing the use of violence for securing the independence of Ireland.

Yeats wrote some wonderful love lyrics to remember his love for Maud Gonne. For example, in "Adam's Curse," he says

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:  
That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
To love you in the old high way of love;  
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown  
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

With *In the Seven Woods* (1904), there are indications of a shift in Yeats's style, as he begins advancing towards a modernist poetics. But it is only after meeting Ezra Pound that a radical change in his poems; they come across as less ornamental, and become suggestive, sparse, and symbolist. Yeats had always been a symbolist. As early as 1900, in his essay, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," he writes:

It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of Nature.

However, it was his meeting with Ezra Pound that brought a change into Yeats's poetry from a romantic use of symbols to the very texture of the poems becoming elusive, concrete and suggestive. He stayed with Pound during winters from 1913-1916. They shared a cottage in Sussex, and Pound read and edited his poems. Through Pound's research, Yeats also came to know about the Japanese Noh drama, and learned from it the obscure and symbolist style that rejected naturalism. From now on, Yeats wrote poems that used concrete images, which were sparse and associative. He employed words and objects that resonated with suggestive meanings. He could do this by avoiding abstract words and traditional metaphors. The collection *Responsibilities* (1914) demonstrated these developments in his poetry. His subsequent volumes of verse *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) further revealed the maturity of Yeats's style, suggestive a rich blending of passionate speech and symbolist energy.

Yeats was bestowed the Noble Prize for Literature in 1923. However, some of his best poems were yet to be written. For all his life, Yeats had been working on a system of thought, a metaphysical framework that was antithetical to the reason-dominated modern Western thought. He found no solace in Christianity, and hence ruminated Neo-Platonism, occultism, theosophy, kabalistic thought, Rosicrucian systems, mysticism, Indian philosophy etc, for an alternate system

that would symbols to his poetry. He also learnt spiritualism from Mohini Chatterjee, the Indian theosophist. With Madame Blavatsky, he experimented in occultism, particularly the telepathic connections with the immortal Tibetan saints. Yeats had already learnt a great deal from Indian philosophy. He had read the *Upanishads* as well as Patanjali's *Yoga-sutra-s* with his Indian guru, Purohit Swami. Yeats wrote 'Preface' to the former, and 'Introduction' to the latter, when his guru translated these works. It was his interest in the Indian philosophical traditions that had inspired him to receive Tagore's *Gitanjali* with great excitement in 1912-13.

Yeats passionate pursued the esoteric systems of thought as an answer to the modern, rationalist and mechanized intellectual frameworks. He articulated this philosophical system in his prose work *A Vision* (1925), which provided the themes, personalities, and symbols, and geometrical diagrams of the cycles of history, that he in his later poetry. *The Tower* (1928) contained some of his most famous poems: "Sailing to Byzantium," "Among School Children," "Leda and the Swan," and the title poem.

Having read about the life and works of W.B. Yeats, answer the following questions

**Self-check Exercise I**

Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers after doing the exercise.

1) Who was W.B. Yeats's father and what did he do?

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2) How did living with his maternal grandparents and uncles influence Yeats as a person and as a poet?

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3) Who were the poets who influenced Yeats?

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4) What role did Yeats play in the Irish struggle for independence?  
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5) What made Yeats a modernist poet?  
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6) How was Yeats influenced by the Indian traditions?  
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**21.3 TO A SHADE (1913)**

**21.3.1 Introduction**

The poem “To a Shade” appeared in the collection *Responsibilities* (1914). It commemorates Charles Stewart Parnell, a radical Protestant leader, inarguably the most influential Irish politician of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He founded the Irish Parliamentary Party, and led various movements against British colonialism, inside and outside the parliament, most significant of which were the Home rule movement, and the land reform agitation. However, his adulterous affair with Katherine O’Shea, wife of Captain William O’Shea, which came to light when the husband sought divorce, shocked both England and the Catholic dominated Ireland. Most of the members of his party shunned him, which brought a sudden downfall of his illustrious political career in December 1890. He died on October 6, 1891, merely a little more than a three months of his marriage with Katherine. However, Parnell continued to be remembered as the greatest Irish leader of his era.

The poem rues the ingratitude of the Dubliners towards Parnell. For all his great sacrifice and service rendered to Ireland, he is a forgotten figure of the past. The Parnell monument, and the sea, as well as the sea gulls and the bleak Dublin houses might respond to a visit by the leader’s spirit, but for the people of Dublin, the leader, who once inspired generations of Irish people, is an obsolete figure, whom some of them brought to disgrace.

The poem also indicts Dubliner's lack of loyalty and respect for Hugh Lane, a painter, and an Irish nationalist of great esteem.

### 21.3.2 The Text

IF you have revisited the town, thin Shade,  
Whether to look upon your monument  
(I wonder if the builder has been paid)  
Or happier-thoughted when the day is spent  
To drink of that salt breath out of the sea  
When grey gulls flit about instead of men,  
And the gaunt houses put on majesty:  
Let these content you and be gone again;  
For they are at their old tricks yet.

A man  
Of your own passionate serving kind who had brought  
In his full hands what, had they only known,  
Had given their children's children loftier thought,  
Sweeter emotion, working in their veins  
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,  
And insult heaped upon him for his pains,  
And for his open-handedness, disgrace;  
Your enemy, an old foul mouth, had set  
The pack upon him.

Go, unquiet wanderer,  
And gather the Glasnevin coverlet  
About your head till the dust stops your ear,  
The time for you to taste of that salt breath  
And listen at the corners has not come;  
You had enough of sorrow before death—  
Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.

### Glossary

**Shade** : a ghost

**Glasnevin** : Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, where Parnell is buried

**Simile** : a figure of speech that compares a thing with another thing unlike it, with an intention to make the description more clear as well as beautiful.

Read the poem and its analysis all over again, and answer the following questions.

### 21.3.3 Analysis

The poem is addressed to the ghost of Parnell in three stanzas of unequal length. The first stanza has 9 lines, the second 10, while the third contains 7 lines. This corresponds to the uneven progress of the thought of the poem, and the tonal undulation through it. The first stanza concerns Parnell, the second stanza remembers Hugh Lane, while the third moves back to Parnell.

The first stanza begins with a conditional clause, which determines the structure the rest of the stanza. The poet tells the ghost that if it has come back to Dublin merely to a look at his monument, or to enjoy the evening sea breeze, or to watch the sea gulls flutter, or the bleak Dublin houses looking beautiful, it should be satisfied. If not, or if it expects more, it should get back to its tomb, because the Dubliners are still the same crafty, mercantile, and distrustful people, busy at their intrigues.

In the second stanza, the poet alludes to Hugh Lane, the contemporary painter, who was devoted to the well being of Ireland, being close to the Irish nationalists. Like Parnell, he could have inspired generations of Irish children with great thoughts. If he was allowed to pursue his dreams for Ireland, he could have instilled sweet emotions in them through his art, but his efforts too were met with insults and injury by resentful characters such as William Martin Murphy.

In the third stanza, the poet advises the ghost to depart unnoticed covering his head with a bedspread, for the people of Dublin would only insult him, as they had before he died. The poet asks him to return to his tomb, a safer place for him to be in.

Written on 29 September 1913, “To a Shade” compares well with another poem written in the year titled “September 1913.” In both poems, Yeats attacks the self-serving nature of the Dublin middle class, mercantile and selfish, with no sensitivity to the sacrifices of the great leaders of the Irish nationalist movement. In September 1913, while disparaging the present Irish people, he exalts the memory of John O’Leary, a 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist and member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, who was arrested in Britain for his involvement in the anti-colonial activities:

Romantic Ireland is dead and gone  
It’s with O’Leary in the grave

“To a Shade” begins in the manner of a talk, a style that Yeats had mastered; it gave him great possibilities to unravel the antithesis and contraries running through the speaker’s mind. In a 1913 letter to his father, he wrote:

I have tried to make my work convincing with a speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling.

The opening line contains mild accents, and a caesura, which creates a rhythmic break in speech, to help the speaker express a feeling of dejection and suppressed anger. The parenthesis in the third line is a colloquial speech:

(I wonder if the builder has been paid)

It works as an aside, giving a sense of actual talk. The use of personal pronouns “you” and “I” reinforces the effect of the speaking in conversations with the spirit of Parnell, while being heard by the readers. The poet ironically mocks the false and pretentious respect shown to the memory of Parnell in the form of the monument constructed on O’Connell Street. Addressing Parnell’s spirit as “thin Shade,” the poet, however, suggests him that if it chose to visit Dublin again, it might be content still with the look of the monument, a symbol of the Dubliner’s

hypocrisy. With the help of concrete nature images such as the “salt breath out of the sea,” the grey gulls,” and “the gaunt houses,” the poet presents nature as an antithesis to the town. Parnell’s spirit might find solace in the natural sights, but it might be for utter dejection if it wants to visit the Dubliners, as they are back at the old habits of scheming against the Irish heroes.

Yeats associates the memory of Parnell with another major nationalist figure from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hugh Lane, who sought to contribute to Ireland through his art, as Parnell did through his political activism. The painter was Yeats’s hero, because for the poet the cultural revival of Ireland was critical for its independence from the colonial rule. Like Parnell, Lane would have engendered great thoughts and sweet emotions in the future generations of his country. Lane worked so that a gallery of contemporary art could be established in Dublin. He wanted to put for exhibition some of his impressionistic paintings, but his efforts were thwarted and he was not allowed permission to put them in the city gallery. Moreover, his wish to work as a curator of the National History Museum of Ireland was also opposed and defeated. The poet singles out William Martin Murphy, the owner of the newspaper, *The Irish Independent* as the sort of people who defamed a national hero like Lane, and the kind of people who brought disgrace to Parnell. Therefore, he appropriately snubs Murphy as

An old foul mouth that had slandered you had set  
The pack upon him

Parnell is buried in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin. The poet implores his spirit to return to his tomb. The poet imagines the spirit in the person of Parnell, and advises it to wear a Glasnevin bedspread around his head, because, if identified, the people would show no respect or hospitality to him. As the Dubliners do not yet have “gentle blood” flowing in their veins, which these two heroes could have made possible, it is not yet time for Parnell to even enjoy the taste of the sea breeze or visit his neglected monument.

The form of the poem sustains its theme. It is through alliteration such as “grey gulls,” and “salt breath out of the sea,” that the poet conveys concrete imageries. Assonance is also used to similar effects. For example in the following line, where the ‘o’ sound is repeated in musical pattern:

Whether to look upon your monument

The poet uses a simile to convey the great contribution of Irish heroes like Hugh Lane to the Irish society:

Sweeter emotion, working in their veins  
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,

The simile “like gentle blood” communicates how the cultural revival augmented by artists like Lane transformed the very character of Irish future generation by instilling true values in them.

The rhyme and rhythm of the poem is rather irregular. The first two stanzas follow a set rhyme scheme, but the third is completely uneven. An irregular rhythmic pattern is used to suggest the tone of the poem which is cynical, angry, and even bitter. It almost forces the reader to pause and think about the ingratitude of the Dubliners towards their national heroes.

**Self-check Exercise II**

1) Who are the figures addressed or referred to in the poem? How does the poet relate to them?

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2) Why Parnell and Lane are still ignored in Ireland? What has been Ireland’s loss because of their absence?

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3) Why does the poet urge the ghost of Parnell to return to its tomb with its head covered?

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4) Comment on the style of the poet? What poetic devices has the poet used to convey the meaning of the poem?

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**21.4 NO SECOND TROY (1910)**

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**21.4.1 Introduction**

The poem “No Second Troy” was published in the collection *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910). The subject of the poem is the unrequited love of the poet for Maud Gonne, the beautiful and Irish nationalist firebrand, who he met in 1889, and instantly fell in love with. Though she was Yeats’s friend, and

collaborated with him as actor in the Irish plays the writer produced at the Abbey Theatre, and Yeats would often visit her and show her his poems, she never returned his love. However, Yeats remained fascinated by her beauty and personality all his life. After her husband Major John McBride's death in the 1916 Easter uprising, Yeats again proposed to Gonne, hoping that she might accept his love, but she again turned down his proposal. There upon, he proposed to her daughter, but was to be disappointed yet again.

In "No Second Troy," Yeats works admits his infatuation for Gonne, while successfully coming out of the provocation to blame her for causing him emotional misery by refusing his love. In order to express the extraordinary beauty of Gonne, Yeats invokes a comparison with Helen of Troy, the most beautiful and controversial woman of the classical world, who was the cause behind the Trojan War, as sung in Homer's *Iliad*.

However, the poet goes beyond his romantic attraction towards Gonne. In his elevation of the beauty of Gonne and his 'misery, even as he brings Helen in the context, the poet snubs the middle class Irish people, who lack the ability and resolution to understand her extraordinary character and personality, and rise to her expectations. The age itself does not deserve Maud Gonne, who is so much like the Helen of Troy.

### 21.4.2 The Text

Why should I blame her that she filled my days  
With misery, or that she would of late  
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,  
Had they but courage equal to desire?  
What could have made her peaceful with a mind  
That nobleness made simple as fire,  
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind  
That is not natural in an age like this,  
Being high and solitary and most stern?  
Why, what could she have done being what she is?  
Was there another Troy for her to burn?

### 21.4.3 Analysis

The poem is structured by four rhetorical questions. Grammatically, it is grouped into two sections of five lines each, followed by two lines. In the first five lines, using the first rhetorical question, the poet absolves Maud Gonne from blame of being the cause of his misery, as well as for exciting the unworthy men to chaotic violence. In the second group of five lines, posing the second rhetorical question, the poet ironically states that the middle class Irish people, had no moral strength to equal their 'desire' of a free Ireland, and wonders how a woman of such noble and tranquil mind as well as exceptional character and beauty as Maud Gonne could find peace in an age so mean. In the last two lines, containing the third and fourth rhetorical questions, the poet makes explicit her comparison with Helen of Troy, but regrets metaphorically that Ireland was no Troy to burn for Gonne, as Troy had done for Helen.

The poem comes across as Yeats's attempt to reconcile with the rejection by Maud Gonne by overcoming the consternation caused by his unrequited love to blame her. In the same imaginative sweep, however, he also sees an opportunity to resent finds the Sinn Fein men, the rabble that found the better of Maud Gonne as was their leader, and wife of John MacBride, the Irish nationalist was executed for his role in the Easter Uprising. Yeats no doubt disliked MacBride; even in the poem "Easter 1916" written on the Uprising, Yeats could not hide his jealousy and dislike for MacBride:

This other man I had dreamed  
A drunken, vain-glorious lout.  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart  
Yet I number him in the song

To Yeats, the coarse and plebian mob that Gonne led in different revolutionary activities, and who she chose over the love of Yeats hardly deserved a royal mind and classic beauty that she embodied:

, or that she would of late  
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,  
Had they but courage equal to desire?

The juxtaposition of the images "little street" and "the great" confirms Yeats's faith in the aristocratic lineage, and his enthusiasm for the traditional Irish society under the protection of the aristocratic lords. The agents of nationalism therefore for him should have been noble and valiant men of the upper class rather than the "ignorant men," who have no physical or moral "courage equal to desire."

The poet employs two similes to suggest the nobility of Gonne's mind and her extraordinary beauty:

What could have made her peaceful with a mind  
That nobleness made simple as fire,  
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind  
That is not natural in an age like this,

It is the exalted nature of her mind, as pure "as fire," as well as her physical "beauty like a tightened bow" that that gives her superiority over the crowd, and makes her presence out of place "in an age like this." In the simile "beauty like a tightened bow," the word/object "bow" transforms into a symbol of sternness and grace, a mix of austerity and passionate action, restraint and violence.

In the final movement of the poem, Yeats wonders what would Maud Gonne do knowing what she is, as there was no another Troy to burn for her.

The poem is in the form of a sonnet, with an exception. It does not have the couplet that ends a sonnet. It has 12 lines, whereas a sonnet has 14 lines. Shakespeare's sonnet no. 126 only has 12 lines rather than 14. Unlike grammatically, the rhyme scheme structures the poem into three quatrains of 4 lines each: *abab, cdcd, efef*. The metre employed, as in a sonnet, is that of iambic

pentameter, in which five stressed syllables each follow an unstressed syllable. In other words, an iambic pentameter line would contain 10 syllables set in a pattern in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable:

What could have made her peace-ful with a mind

Now that you have read the poem and its analysis, answer the following questions.

**Self- check Exercise III**

1) Who was the Helen of Troy alluded to in the poem?

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2) What is the significance of the title “No Second Troy”?

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3) Why does the poet consider the people of his era and time not deserving Maud Gonne?

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**21.5 THE SECOND COMING (1920)**

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**21.5.1 Introduction**

In Christianity, the phrase ‘the Second Coming,’ refers to the Second Coming of Christ, his return to the earth as prophesied in the gospels. It is believed that in ‘end of the world’ or apocalypse, withhis coming, the Messianic Age of peace and happiness will be established.

The poem is, however, based on a vision of the poet about the coming of an anti-Christ. This prophetic event suggests the advent of a civilization opposite to the present Christian civilization. The present civilization has lasted for 2000 years,

and is now coming to an end as signaled by widespread violence, bloodshed, and a period of great anarchy.

In “The Second Coming,” Yeats integrates mythology and history into an organic whole. He abstracts a mythological system out of history, as well as reads history in terms of myth. While Yeats borrowed widely from Greek and Irish mythology, he had long been working on his personal mythology, an imaginative system to comprehend history and civilization, as well as the modern reality dominated by violence and bloodshed during the World War I, and the Anglo-Irish war. His efforts materialized in a prose work called *A Vision*, which was published in 1925. However, in his numerous poems prior to his publication of *A Vision*, Yeats had already expressed many of his ideas and images. The poem “The Second Coming” is one such poem, which employs the concept of a cyclic creation and destruction of the world, as an alternative to Christian doctrines about creation and the dissolution of the world. As an expression of the Yeatsian apocalypse, it announces the coming of the anti-Christ, and in the process, subverts the Christian notion of revelation. In his earlier poems such as “Easter 1916,” Yeats had already expressed a revelatory vision antithetical to the Christian doctrines:

All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

“The Second Coming” was written in 1919. It was first published in *The Dial*, an American magazine, in November 1920. In same year, it appeared in the collection of Yeats’s verse called *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*.

### 21.5.2 The Text

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?

## Glossary

- Gyre** : a spiral or cone. In the Yeatsian system, the rotation of a gyre represents the movement of both history and the human mind.
- Spiritus Mundi** : a “spirit world,” or a storehouse of images and symbols that creative people share, according to Yeats.
- Bethlehem** : a Palestinian city, located near Jerusalem. According to the *New Testament*, it is the birthplace of Jesus Christ.
- Apocalypse** : a prophetic or visionary revelation about events of great devastation and violence, such as described in the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation in The Bible.

Having read the poem and its analysis, now answer the following questions.

### 21.5.3 Analysis

The poem is written in 21 stanzas, divided into two stanzas. The first stanza contains 8 lines; while the second has 14 lines. It is unconventional in structure. However, its structure compliments the development of its theme. The two stanzas divide the poem into two parts: the first part being an intense reflection on the violence and disorder of the society is shorter, and give way to the fuller projection of the nightmarish vision in the second part, which is as long as sonnet. The first stanza presents interconnected images of a fragmented world living in the midst of confusion, anarchy, and violence. Through the image of the falcon flying free out of the control of the falconer, who may be taken as a symbol of a unifying being, the God, poet presents an impression of a murderous world let loose without control. The spiral movement of the gyre upon reaching its end at its widest expanse is occasioned by mindless violence. It acts as a symbol for ‘the end of world’ phase of human history characterized by anarchy and bloodshed. The innocence of the world is overtaken by violence. The people with quality and ability who could bring some order to the society are apathetic, while the worst are driven by frenzy, escalating social disorder and violence.

The second stanza separates from the first stanza by the images abruptly forming in the mind of speaker-poet as he reflects upon the panorama of violence and chaos. The massive scale of destruction makes him predict and utter that certainly the return of the Christ, his “Second Coming” is imminent. It here that the speaker has an extremely disturbing vision of grotesque figure, “the rough beast” emerging out of “Spiritus Mundi,” the creative unconscious shared by the poets and visionaries. This repulsive figure, the anti-Christ, with a lion body and a human head, is spotted in a desert scene. Its eyes are remorseless and blank, as indifferent as that of the sun, unlike the benevolent eyes of the Christ. It is a stark and nightmarish vision. As this figure moves its beastly things, the desert birds of prey hover about it, even as darkness descends on him. The poet infers that this horrendous figure, the signaler of the new history, had been lying dormant as if in “a stony sleep” for the last “twenty centuries” when the Christian civilization lasted. As this civilization ends with enormous violence and chaotic scenes all around, it’s time for this creature to come out of its “rocking cradle,” and walk towards Bethlehem, where Christ was born, to be born and inaugurate the new civilization.

The meaning, images, and symbols of the poem are based on the geometrical figures that lie in the background. The first line refers to the expanding gyre:

Turning and turning the widening gyre

Yeats imagines a pair of antithetical gyres, locked into each other, as constituting opposite progress of human history. One of the gyres or cones is widening, while the other is tapering. He associates the widening gyre with the elevating flight of the falcon:

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Yeats had used the flight of the bird as an image of the widening gyre of history in his earlier poems as well, such as “The Wild Swans at Coole”:

I saw, before I had well finished,  
All suddenly mount  
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings  
Upon their clamorous wings.

The widening gyre represents the historical progress of 2000 years that had begins with the birth of the Christ. It is at this point, that the world order is all well, as the ‘falcon’ is well within the control of the falconer, stationed at the pointed base of this gyre. But as this gyre moves ahead and up, widening further and higher, the ‘falcon’ soars higher and higher and loses the control of the ‘falconer’. What this image symbolizes is breakdown of the social order, the destruction of all institutions and moral values that the Christian civilization stood for:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

As the widening gyre widens the contracting gyres narrows up, the widened end of the first gyre is met with the narrowest point of the second gyre, antithetical to the first. The second gyre, also in progress antithetically to the first, is therefore spoken by the poet lying in “twenty centuries of stony sleep.” It is at this point that the second gyre or cycle of history will begin its widening movement producing values antithetical to the Christian civilization. The Western civilization at the contemporary moment, at the widest opening of its historical gyre is the worst where,

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.

These lines and the sentiments they convey bring to our mind the poem “No Second Troy” that we have already analyzed:

or that she would of late  
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,  
Had they but courage equal to desire?

The tone of the lines in this stanza is somber as well as cynical. Though tirelessly working for the Irish independence, Yeats detested the violence perpetuated by the radical nationalist groups. By the “best” who “lacked conviction” the poet obviously means the middle class Irish people, who had turned away from the nobility of character represented by the aristocracy, and busying themselves in mercantile activities, had turned a blind eye to the chaos and disorder in Ireland. By the “worst” that are “full of passionate intensity” he refers to the mob driven by frenzy and irrational passion that turned themselves against the true heroes of Irish nationalism like Charles Stewart Parnell, J.M.Synge, and Yeats himself. These lines also present a picture of the World War Europe, of massive violence, bloodshed, and loss of hope in humanity.

The tone of the lines is somber as well. “The blood-dimmed tide” is an intense image symbolizing horrific violence as well as opacity of scene that submerges and overwhelms all innocence of human kind.

In Yeats’s philosophy, these figures do not simply represent movements of history. They also symbolize the subjective and objective forces within the individual. The widening gyre stands for the objective or ‘primary’ force or attribute of an individual as well as civilization. The new world order, which is imminent, would represent the subjective or the ‘antithetical’ force governing the individual or the civilization. The widening spiral of history, as also the individual existing in this history, is scientific, rational, democratic, and mechanical, while values antithetical to these will be associated with the second pattern of history and the individual living in it. Yeats says in his *A Vision*:

After an age of necessity, truth, goodness, mechanism, science,  
democracy, abstraction, peace, comes an age of freedom, fiction, evil,  
kindred, art, aristocracy, particularity, war.

The second stanza sets off an escalation in the tone, as well as takes the theme to a visionary level. It takes the readers to a desert scene to stage the “Second Coming,” not of Christ but of the anti-Christ. This figure symbolizes paganism, destruction, irrationality, passion, evil- in short values that would destroy modernity, or the modern civilization ruined by excessive use of reason and rationality. The term “Spiritus Mundi” is a technical coinage in Yeats’s esoteric philosophy. It refers to the “world spirit.” In a description found in “An Image from a Past Life,” Yeats calls the “Spiritus Mundi” “a general storehouse of images which has ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit.” In the poem, it refers to the inner eye or the creative unconscious out of which evolves the desert scene in which appears that

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs...

The poet presents a nightmarish spectacle as the horrific man-beast walks its animal thighs slowly towards Bethlehem to herald the onset of the new history and civilization. As it walks above it sway “the indignant desert birds.” This image connects these lines with the first stanza. The solitary falconer, who is noble and gracious, has been replaced by a group of desert birds of prey.

In the final lines, the poem mixes the dark and nightmarish vision of the beast with the Christian myth of the Second Coming of the Christ. As if like Christ, the grotesque beast “its hour come round at last” moves towards Bethlehem to be born. But whereas Christ’s Second Coming is associated with the beginning of the Messianic Age of happiness and peace, the rough beast signals the continuation of violent history and civilization.

The poem has been composed in blank verse. The metre is not regular throughout the poem; however, generally, the poem in iambic pentameter.

**Self-check Exercise IV**

1) What is the significance of the title “The Second Coming”?

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2) What makes the poet predict the Apocalypse?

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3) Discuss a few images that the poet has used to indicate the world associated with the coming of the anti-Christ.

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4) Discuss a metaphor from the poem to suggest Yeats as a modernist.

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## 21.6 LET US SUM UP

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Yeats's life and works represent valuable interfaces between poetry and politics, poetry and mythology, tradition and modernity, life and literature, history, literature and nationhood, as well some specific concerns of the poet living in Ireland at a very crucial juncture of history, especially his cultural politics. We hope that you will read more poems by the poet from anthologies and his collections of verse some of which have been mentioned in this unit.

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## 21.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

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### Self-check Exercise 1

- 1) W.B. Yeats's father was John Butler Yeats. He was a painter of meager success in Dublin and London.
- 2) Living with his maternal grandparents and uncles in County Sligo on the West coast of Ireland, Yeats's personal as well as poetic personality was shaped by his perceptions of the Irish landscape, and the rural life animated by folklore. His early attachment with the Irish country side, and his reception of the folktales in the Irish cottages influenced the formation of his postcolonial sensibility.
- 3) In early part of his career, Yeats was influenced by the British romantic poets, especially William Blake, and P.B. Shelley. He later became associated with Ezra Pound as his poetry turned modernist in style.
- 4) Yeats strongly believed in the strengths of cultural nationalism as an anti-colonial movement. He was instrument in the establishment of Irish Literary Theatre (1897) with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, which later became the Abbey Theatre. It staged plays on nationalistic themes. He also organized public meetings, gave lectures, and wrote pamphlets against the colonial government.
- 5) By 1912, Yeats's poetry had entered the modernist phase, and it coincided with his meeting with Ezra Pound in 1913. His poems became suggestive, and complex with esoteric symbols and concrete imageries. His diction became precise, simple, clear and sparse. In short, his poetry became elusive and indirect.
- 6) Yeats was drawn towards the Indian philosophy and poetry. He had studied Patanjali's *Yogasutra-s*, and the *Upanishads* with the help of his mentor Purohit Swami. He also greatly admired *The Geetanjali* of Rabindranath Tagore. In the Indian philosophy, he found an alternative to the mechanized, commercialized, and rationalist Western civilization.

### Self-check Exercise 2

- 1) The poem is addressed to the ghost of Charles Stewart Parnell, the most prominent Irish politician of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another Irish hero referred to in the second stanza is Hugh Lane, a painter, and a nationalist, who made efforts to establish Dublin's Municipal Gallery of Modern Art. Both these personalities earned great respect for Yeats for their contribution to Irish nationalism.

- 2) It is the selfishness of the middle class Dubliners and their ingratitude that is responsible for the neglect of the memory of these two illustrious Irish heroes. In their lifetime, they become the target of the scheming and intriguing people around them. Parnell met his downfall in the aftermath of the exposure of his affair with a married woman, who had not yet taken divorce. Hugh Lane, on the other hand, who could have inspired generations of Irish children by his art work, fell due to intrigues of certain individuals like William Martin Murphy. If Parnell had continued as a leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, he could have served Ireland far longer.
- 3) The poet advises the ghost of Parnell to cover his head while returning to its tomb, to save itself from the embarrassment caused by the lack of regard and respect from the people, even when they recognize him.
- 4) The poem is rendered in a colloquial style. It is characteristic of the Yeatsian talk, a mode Yeats mastered, whereby he would present the speaker in conversation with a persona. Naturally, therefore, the diction is simple and clear. He uses poetic devices such as personification, simile, and alliteration. The phrase “salt breath out of the sea” is an instance of personification. He uses alliteration when he, for example, sets up a repeated pattern of ‘g’ and ‘s.’ His use of simile in the phrase ““like gentle blood” intensifies the poet’s feeling for Hugh Lane.

### Self-check Exercise 3

- 1) Helen of Troy was daughter of the Greek god Zeus, and Leda, wife of Tyndareus, the king of Sparta. The seduction of Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan is the subject of Yeats’s poem “Leda and Swan.” Helen was abducted by Paris, the Prince of Troy, which resulted in the Trojan War fought between the Greek states and Troy.
- 2) The title gives a unity to the thought of the poem. The poem is a comment on the fallen values of the time. Even as Ireland desperately needs a cultural and political revolution against the colonial occupation of Britain, the middle class is too engrossed in its mechanical routine and mercantile ambitions to worry about the country. Comparing Maud Gonne with Helen, Yeats says though she is equally beautiful and noble, Ireland is not the place she deserved, as it would not be truly inspired as Troy was by Helen. There would be ‘no second Troy.’
- 3) The poet reprimands the Irish people of his age to be a violent mob, lacking the nobility of mind that Gonne possesses; they lack courage and conviction, and are driven by desires. Therefore, the poet says, Maud Gonne is born with a physical beauty and mental nobility “not natural in this age.”

### Self-check Exercise 4

- 1) The title suggests the theme of the poem, the “Second Coming” of the not Christ to announce the beginning of a Messianic Age, but of an anti-Christ, the rough beast, to herald a new world of violence, primitiveness and irrationalism.
- 2) The all-round violence and anarchy, the wiping out of innocence by bloodshed, the unrestrained fury of the mob, whereas the silence of the people holding positions, have given the poet enough evidence that the end of the world is soon.

- 3) In the Christian context, the image of the rough beast, human head with the body of a lion, is a grotesque image. This harbinger of the new age walks slowly towards Bethlehem, while the desert birds of prey hover over his head. These images are used as symbols to suggest the grotesqueness and the violence associated with the new world that is about to begin.
- 4) For example, Yeats's use of the 'falconer' is full of concrete suggestion. Unlike the traditional metaphor, its meaning is not limited merely to a controlling agent, say God. By mixing the image of flying falcon with the spiraling gyre, Yeats could make the metaphor more concrete as well as compressed with associative meanings. the flight of the falcon, symbolize the anarchy of the world, its breaking apart, its loss of spiritual core, while at the same time announcing the end of the world.

