The Second Coming, by William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre\(^1\)  
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\(^2\)  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man\(^3\),  
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?

Read and annotate the poem, then answer the following questions on a separate sheet.

1. What do you think the title means?
2. The first stanza presents images that depict the condition of the world.  
   a. What is turning and turning in a widening gyre?  
   b. Who or what can the falcon not hear?  
   c. What happens when the center cannot hold?  
   d. What is loosed upon the world?  
   e. What is drowned?  
   f. What do the best lack?  
   g. What are the worst full of?
3. The speaker, believing that such distressing circumstances signal the end of one two-thousand-year cycle and the beginning of a new one, says hopefully, “Surely some revelation is at hand; surely the Second Coming is at hand.” As soon as he says this, he receives a vision of the Second Coming—but it is not what he expected it to be. Answer the following questions about the image the speaker sees.  
   a. What is the setting for the image he sees (line 13)?  
   b. What does the beast look like (lines 14-16)?  
   c. What creatures reel around the beast (line 17)?
4. The poet realizes that this beast represents the beginning of the next two-thousand-year cycle. Where is the beast going, and why is it going there (lines 21-22)?
5. What elements of literary modernism are most evident to you in this poem? (Use the handout from 2/15 to help you.)

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\(^1\) spiral  
\(^2\) Spirit of the World  
\(^3\) sphinx