Analysis of “The Second Coming” by William B. Yeats

Prior to August of 1914, many people in Western civilization saw that there society was approaching the pinnacles of perfection. Many have more than the basic necessities; scientists kept creating more marvelous inventions that made life easier. Ignoring their racist view on the rest of the world, the leaders of Western culture viewed themselves as superior, and able to overcome the flaws of humanity such as war. Following the bloody, tragic, and unnecessary war, that view of the world was gone. “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats is an example of the despair and fear of the future that many felt following First World War. Yeats is able to capture the mood many in power had with his use of antithesis, allusions, and imagery.

In his first stanza, Yeats using antithesis to show how the world was collapsing. “The falcon cannot hear the falconer” shows the verifiable functions of society failing. If the falcon cannot hear the falconer, the falconer loses his purpose. Still in the first stanza, Yeats uses antithesis to show how society was becoming undone when “The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.”

While Yeats was a strong Irish patriot, he was a firm believer in old society. He believed in an elite class, a monarchy, and a nobility. His use of antithesis above shows his view. “The best in society,” i.e. the elite, the rulers of Europe and those who were born into the roles in society, “lack all conviction.” It does not condemn them for their actions; it condemns the worst, “full of passionate intensity.” The worst here represent how Yeats is disgusted by the rioters and the people who rising up against old Europe following the First World War.
Several Biblical allusions are found in “The Second Coming.” The title itself is an allusion. The Second Coming of Christ brings to mind not the joy that Christ the Messiah has returned to end all torment and evil, it brings to the mind the horrible events that take place before. The Book of Revelations discusses a seven year period of tribulation, one of war and famine. By simply naming the poem “The Second Coming,” Yeats’ readers conjure up apocalyptic imagery.

The title is not the only allusion found. The second stanza discusses mostly the anti-Christ, the horrific beast that truly signals the beginning of the end of the world. Yeats shows more Biblical allusion by having the “rough beast” born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. This follows what the Book of Revelations said about the end, the “second coming,” after “twenty centuries of stony sleep.” The end of the twentieth century was viewed by many in the failed prophets’ predictions as the end of the world.

His use of allusions ties in well with the imagery. The death and destruction that follow the Second Coming are seen through Yeats’ poem. The second stanza is filled with desert imagery. Since the antichrist “slouches towards Bethlehem to be born,” he will be in desert. The image of sand, the “desert birds,” and the “A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” show the rigors and unbearable circumstances of the desert. If evil is to manifested anywhere, the desert, which is devoid of life, is a powerful image.

The image of water, the immense power of it, is repeated several times in the first stanza. “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,” “The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,” and “The ceremony of innocence is drowned.” Water, like all of nature, has been one of the many things
man has yet to control. No matter what one does, one can not stop a wave crashing on a beach. These two images conflict heavily, the water and desert, yet are both powerful symbols of death and destruction to man.

Through powerful images of death and destruction, Biblical allusions to the apocalypse, and antithesis showing disorder and chaos in the world, “The Second Coming” is William Butler Yeats capturing the pessimistic mood of his contemporaries following World War I.