Discussion Guide for William Butler Yeats’s The Second Coming

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Lesson Overview
Is the “rough beast” approaching Bethlehem a savior, or something else? This resource provides students with the text of The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats, as well as ideas for presenting it in class and discussion questions.

Lesson Details
Subject area(s): English, Poetry
Grade Level: High School, Middle School
Resource Type: Close Reading/Reflection

Special Learners
This resource was developed with the following special learners in mind:

- Traditional Classroom
- Homeschooled Students

Standards Connection
The teacher who prepared this lesson determined that this lesson meets the following standards:

- ccss.ela-literacy.rl.8.1
- ccss.ela-literacy.rl.9-10.2
Lesson Plan

Procedure

• Give all students a copy of William Butler Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming.”
• Read the poem aloud to students 2-3 times while they read along. After the first time through, pause after each line and allow the students to observe you relishing the beauty and deliberateness of the language. Before beginning any analysis, let your enthusiasm and delight in the poet’s use of language be contagious.
• After students have read the poem 2-3 times, take a few moments to clarify any questions about vocabulary.
• Read the poem aloud 1-2 times more. When you have finished, discuss some or all of the questions that follow.

The Second Coming, by William Butler Yeats, 1919

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?

Discussion Questions
How would you describe the mood of the poem? (In other words, what feeling or atmosphere does it bring about?) What are some adjectives that might describe it?

In addition to the ideas students generate, you may suggest: dark, scary, frightening, foreboding, ominous, terrifying.

What are some ways the author achieves that mood? Give specific examples of imagery, diction, sentence structure, etc. and explain how they contribute to the poem’s mood.

Accept reasoned answers. A case could be made for nearly every line and word in the poem.

The poem was written in Europe in 1919. How would you describe the historical context of the poem? Does this context help you understand it?

The poem was written after World War I, during a time of great instability in Europe. Yeats may have been expressing his and others’ fear of their world “spinning out of control,” as the poem describes.
Does the poem have meaning outside this context?

Yes. We can understand and feel the poet’s warning in the aftermath of World War I in a variety of contexts. Indeed, the many ways the poem can be applied to episodes in world history show the universality of the sentiment – the fear that man has wrought his own destruction, that mankind, in need of a savior, will be judged harshly.

Is what Yeats describes inevitable (impossible to avoid) in any society? Will generations in time always be like a “widening gyre,” with people growing further and further away from the teachings and principles that bind their communities together?

Accept reasoned answers.

What are some ways that ideas or inventions may progress outside of man’s ability to control them? Can you think of any recent artistic expressions (e.g. books, movies, songs) of this idea?

In addition to the ideas students generate, you may wish to add: theories of government such as communism or socialism (which have led in China, the USSR, Venezuela, etc.) to human rights violations and countless murders; ideas about the supposed superiority of one race over others (for example, Nazi Germany); technological weapons (nuclear bombs or chemical weapons); artificially intelligent machines; surveillance tools used by government, and others.

The poem is entitled “The Second Coming.” Is the “rough beast” approaching Bethlehem a savior, or something else?

The “rough beast” or desert sphinx appears to be an Anti-Christ figure, bringing not salvation, but destruction.

Why do you think Yeats chose to use a biblical title and theme in his poem?

Students may suggest that he personally connected with this theme, and/or that he believed such a theme would be understood widely, and/or that the imagery in, for example, the book of Revelations, provokes awe in readers that Yeats wishes to provoke. Accept additional reasoned answers.

Enrichment

Have students create a work of art to illustrate what they believe is the most powerful imagery in the
poem.