

Ambiguity and the undermining of the feminine in "leda and the swan"



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The message of “Leda and the Swan” is often interpreted in drastically different ways due to the ambiguity of the text. Much of this ambiguity can be attributed to intentional contradiction by the author, William Butler Yeats. This contradiction emphasizes the nature of sexism, for sexism is often portrayed as a misdirected view of the victim. Several of the following critics offer differing interpretations of the poem, portraying the ambiguous nature of the text and therefore the larger theme of sexism in the poem’s various suppositions of a forced sexual encounter. Johnsen summarizes the poem as such, “Textual/Sexual politics never had a better example than ‘Leda and the Swan’ a sonnet depicting rape as a welcome sign of a better future” (Johnsen 80). Johnsen interprets the poem’s ambiguity as an indication that Leda welcomes the rape as a positive instance. Along similar lines, Mckenna states, “The final form of the poem. . . reaffirms the tragic consequences of Leda’s rape but also affirms her potential for self-awareness” (Mckenna 425). Like Johnsen, Mckenna agrees that Leda is better from the experience, but Mckenna also argues that the consequences of the rape (the destruction of Troy), are what is tragic. Barnwell argues differently, stating, “Often read as a rape-poem, ‘Leda and the Swan’ offers perhaps the clearest example of the extreme importance of Yeats’s copulation ‘personae’ who act and are acted upon in various ways to learn certain lessons” (Barnwell 63). Barnwell thus argues that the poem’s center on rape and ambiguity of text offers differing possibilities as to who is really the victim. Leda and Zeus could both be victims, or neither. Lastly, Neigh argues, “When I take Yeats’s sonnet personally and pursue my identifications with the text . . . I identify with Leda and her experience of sexist victimization” (146). Neigh differs drastically from both Barnwell and Johnsen in that she interprets Leda as the sole

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victim. Empson contributes this to the following, “[Ambiguity] occurs when a statement says nothing...so that the reader is forced to invent statements of his own and they are liable to conflict with one another” (Empson 176). Each critic has substantial and convincing evidence for their argument, yet all interpret the poem’s depiction of a forced sexual encounter in quite different ways. Arguably, it is intentional contradiction in “Leda and the Swan” that creates ambiguity, creating a larger theme of sexism because of its undermining of the oppression of the women.

In Yeats’ description of a sexual encounter, there is perhaps an inevitable ambiguity due to the nature of poetry itself, creating a contradictory effort to depict a forced sexual encounter clearly. The result of this ambiguity creates an undermining of the feminine; a theme of sexism. Holden describes the somewhat inevitable undermining as follows, “Poetry which attempts to describe in concrete detail sexual intercourse will usually disappoint and possibly offend” (83). As Holden describes, an artist’s effort to depict a sexual encounter without it being interpreted in differing ways is somewhat inevitable. Holden explains that due to sexual encounter being a form of absolute knowledge, even poetry is unequal in approaching it with exaction, instead, it can simply point toward a concept of sexual encounter. (84). This idea can be seen in “Leda and the Swan,” where an artist’s depictions of a forced sexual encounter becomes muddled because of the inevitable layers found in good poetry. Barnwell notes the following: “Leda” is in fact a profound and provocative dramatization of the ambiguities of sexual encounter for Yeats, and questions as well as answers the major premise in his scheme of thought: the idea of a perfect order in the universe that

supports, guides, and affirms all of man's endeavors in various ways. (62)

Barnwell argues that sexual encounters are by nature ambiguous, and in "Leda and the Swan," the ambiguity acts as a question to sexism- whether or not men are guided and therefore excused for their actions because of a greater scheme. Scott describes various interpretations of a forced sexual encounter in art as such, " Whether it's deliberate or not, people can and do fail to see the oppression of women because they fail to see macroscopically and hence fail to see the various elements of the situation as systematically related in larger schemes" (16). In " Leda and Swan" and undermining of the feminine is created through the highly ambiguous nature of the poem, which can be attributed to the contradictory nature of ambiguous poetry and the absoluteness of sexual encounter.

The theme of violence in " Leda and the Swan" is contrasted with the theme of erotica, creating an ambiguity that muddles the oppression of Leda, and so can be interpreted as a larger representation of sexism. The poem depicts a rape scene, and unintentionally or otherwise, allows for a more permissive outlook on the depiction of sexual violence, seen in the poems erotic diction and ambiguity towards victimization. This is seen in lines like the following, " The feathered glory from her loosening thighs" (Yeats 6). There is a sort of paradox discovered in " Leda and the Swan," where a reader's effort to understand a possible instance of rape culture- which Scott identifies as, " the myth of an uncontrollable male sex drive serves to ensure male sexual right of access to women by presenting it as a natural need, thus enforcing the expectation of women's sexual availability"- is mingled with passion and the erotic (340). Leda's rape by Zeus depicts this circumstance; Zeus'

attraction to Leda led to his forceful and “indifferent” taking of her in order to fulfill his uncontrollable needs (Yeats 15). This aggression is juxtaposed by images of sexual intercourse that question whether Leda’s rape endows her with some form of power or knowledge. “Did she put on his knowledge with his power?” (14). An idea of misdirection is portrayed in “Leda and the Swan,” where a violent action is heavily contrasted by erotic descriptions. This duality of violence and the erotic creates an ambiguity that represents issues surrounding sexism, where the victim is often marginalized due to misdirection of attention.

The style of the poem, specifically point of view and structure, portrays intentional contradictions that create ambiguity and undermine the feminine. The point of view in “Leda and the Swan” invites ambiguity with its duality of perspective. Neigh states, “The detached third person narrator ironically invites rather than discourages identification, because the narrator gives no direction” (148). Neigh argues that the reader is forced to identify at differing times with both the swan and Leda. This contradiction in perspective undermines the position of Leda and represents a larger theme of sexism. Additionally, both perspectives, the swan and Leda, shift moods that are contradictory to one another. “A noteworthy point is the changed moods of both Swan and Leda. At the beginning of the poem, Swan was passionate, while Leda was terrified and helpless. At the end of the poem, Leda is caught up in Swan’s passion, while Swan becomes indifferent” (Modern English Literature 11). Furthermore, the poem is breathless in its structure; with the first stanza itself composed of four lines and only one sentence. The first three words of “A sudden blow,” followed by a colon,

creates a quickness as all following lines are a supplication, a list, to the statement “ a sudden blow”(1). Additionally, commas are interspersed to strengthen the fluidity of the stanza. This breathlessness created by just the first stanza reflects a passion that is contradictory of a rape scene and of Leda’s fear. A sense of indecision is as well created as the following stanza beings a list of rhetorical questions. “ How can those terrified vague fingers push/ The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?/ And how can body, laid in that white rush/ But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?”(5-8). As the narrator poses these questions, it creates an ambiguity as towards victimization, and ultimately undermines Leda and her situation. The passionate and breathless structure of the poem, while depicting a forced sexual encounter, adds to the ambiguity as to what level it is indeed forced. The third stanza, like the first, is one full sentence. This quickness is followed through by the last stanza, which parallels the structure of the second stanza in its listing of rhetorical questions, ultimately ending the poem with a question, “ Did she put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” (14-15). By ending with a question, the entirety of the poem is given an indecisive air. By portraying ambiguity in point of view and structure, the poem creates a larger theme of sexism in its undermining of Leda and her position as a rape victim.

Diction in “ Leda and the Swan” contributes to the intentional ambiguity, and the larger theme of sexism, in that the images created are dual and contradictory in meaning. In the text, phrases and words given such as “ her thighs caressed/ By the dark webs,” “ Breast upon his breast,” “ terrified vague fingers” and “ burning” offer ambiguity that muddle and undermine

the rape (2-3, 4, 5, 10). “ Her thighs caressed” offers a romantic, almost tender connotation, but is followed by the following line “ By the dark webs” (2-3). This eerie contradiction creates an ambiguity as to the nature of the sexual encounter. “ Breast upon his breast,” in its connotation of femininity, seems to suggest the masculine is not present (4). Neigh writes, “ The image of ‘ breast upon breast’ suggests the possibility of an erasure of the masculine altogether” (148). This image creates additional ambiguity for the text, in its lack of distinction of gender, confusing and even undermining what it is to be feminine. The phrase “ terrified vague fingers” creates contradiction with “ terrified” and “ vague,” with the former suggesting that Leda is, in short, highly afraid, while “ vague” suggests a more passive mood on her part (5). The confusion, like previous phrases, undermines her position as a rape victim. Additionally, the word “ burning” is highly ambiguous in that it connotes sexual passion and destruction (10). Neigh argues, “ ‘Burning’ clearly express sexual desire, which thwarts the interpretation of rape in the poem” (148). As with other phrases, the author’s chosen diction and creation of ambiguous images undermines Leda’s situation and creates confusion as to her situation. Zeus’ transformation into a swan depicts a conjunction and contradiction of both the masculine and the feminine, reinforcing the poem’s ambiguity and larger representation of sexism. Neigh argues, “ With the swan’s indistinguishable gender, these ambiguities encourage readers to identify both with a raped human and the pleasure of a rapist”(148). With Zeus taking the form of a feminine creature, yet with his actions highly aggressive, there is an ambiguity created as to what is feminine or masculine. The ambiguity in imagery thus portrays a

larger theme of sexism in which a rape scene is portrayed as both a rape scene and a positive sexual encounter.

The mythological basis of the poem is contradictory as well in its ambiguity of the long-lasting consequences of Zeus' rape. Yeats states the following , " A shudder in the loins engenders there/ The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/ And Agamemnon dead" (9-11). This foreshadowing of Leda and Zeus' posterity is interpreted in differing ways, and reflects whether Zeus' act is seen as a punishment or as " the idea of a perfect order in the universe that supports, guides, and affirms all of man's endeavors in various ways" (Barnwell 62). Helen, born by Leda and Zeus, brings destruction and decimation to the land. " This act of violence exerted by god on the human leads to the destruction of Troy" (Rezaei 2). However, mythological history also offers the interpretation that Zeus's act brought about new beginnings. " Thus Zeus' act in raping Leda meant the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the Greek. In other words, it is the beginning of a new civilization" (Modern English Literature 11). This ambiguity of consequence undermines Leda's position as a rape victim in that her suffering is interpreted as being part of a grander scheme, or even as necessary. The ambiguity of victimization in " Leda and the Swan" reflects a larger theme of sexism in which societal tendencies dismiss objectification of women in favor of erotic imagery, or do not focus on the rape victim and instead turn attention to other aspects of effects. The poem harbours distinct and intentional contradictions that undermine femininity and portray sexism. " For Yeats, Zeus's violence proves his divinity and Leda's morality; his freedom, her bondage; violence father Love and War on her. All things are by antithesis"

(Johnsen 85). By this use of contradiction and ambiguity, a variety of interpretations can be argued, however, all interpretations serve to show how Leda's rape, significant in representing sexual violence, can be marginalized through poetry and analysis itself.

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