

Violence in yeats's 'leda and the swan'



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The poem *Leda and the Swan* was inspired by the Greek myth, in which Leda is seduced and raped by Zeus in the guise of a swan. In his poem, Yeats explores the idea of a single action unfolding into violence and destruction. This could be seen as a metaphor for Yeats's frustration with the decline of Ireland and its culture, echoed here by the fall of Troy. Yeats also presents the violence of the rape with an ambiguity that is both unsettling and intriguing, leading many critics to question whether Yeats does in fact present a violent episode, or whether he instead portrays the victim with a degree of complicity.

One of the most powerful aspects of the poem is Yeats's vivid depiction of action and motion. This is evident from the very beginning, with the resounding first line, 'a sudden blow', plunging the reader straight into the violent scene and opening the poem with an impact that echoes Leda's surprise. This dramatic opening could be compared with that of *The Cold Heaven*. Yeats emphasises the physicality of the attack in his deliberate omission of any names or characters, referring to the swan as 'the great wings', and Leda as 'the staggering girl'.

By presenting the rape as simply a series of motions, with little hint at human thought or emotion, Yeats creates a feeling of strange detachment. Furthermore, Yeats chooses to use verbs in the progressive form, such as 'beating', 'staggering' and 'loosening', making the rape seem immediate and vivid, and creating the uneasy feeling that the reader is watching as the violence unfolds before their eyes. This is a technique also seen in *The Second Coming*, where Yeats creates a sense of immediacy and looming threat: 'turning and turning in the widening gyre', 'moving its slow thighs'.

In addition, Yeats emphasises the poem's feeling of motion through his use of metre. It is written largely in iambic pentameter, which gives the poem an almost pulsating rhythm, echoing perhaps the 'great wings beating', or even the physical action of the rape. However, Yeats also uses caesurae, enjambment and irregular sentence distributions, which jar the regular rhythm and quicken the pace, adding to the sense of urgency. This digression from the iambic metre can be seen clearly in the fifth line, 'how can those terrified vague fingers push', and perhaps evokes Leda's struggle against the force of her rapist.

Yeats not only portrays the rape of Leda as an act of violence, but also as the cause of future violence and destruction, arguing that the 'shudder in the loins' ultimately led to the death of Agamemnon and the entire fall of Troy. Yeats was interested in the idea of a small action having significant, horrific consequences: the fleeting word 'shudder' juxtaposes with the almost apocalyptic imagery that follows. Similar concepts can be seen in *The Man and the Echo*, where he asks, 'did that play of mine send out / certain men the English shot? The moment of ejaculation forms the sonnet's volta, after which the poem's iambic metre and regular rhyme scheme begins to disintegrate, echoing the destructive imagery of 'the broken wall' and 'the burning roof and tower'. In addition, the volta signals a change in the poem's tone. Whilst the progressive verbs of the first two stanzas gave it a feeling of immediacy, the use of past tense after the volta (caught, mastered) and the rhetorical questions give it a more reflective feel.

It could, however, be argued that Yeats presents a certain lack of violence in his portrayal of the rape, creating a somewhat disturbing representation of

the myth, and suggesting even a degree of complicity. Yeats's decision to write the poem as a Petrarchan sonnet is unusual, as this form is most commonly associated with love. However, certain descriptions do in fact hint at some affection in the seemingly violent scene: 'her thighs caressed', 'he holds her helpless breast'.

Furthermore, Leda's 'vague fingers' and 'loosening thighs' could imply willing submission, rather than giving in to force. Yeats's use of the third person emphasises this idea further, by creating a sense of detachment and voyeurism. Leda is not given thought or emotion, and we are therefore discouraged from identifying with her as the victim. In fact, one could go as far as to argue that Yeats encourages the reader to identify with the swan, by presenting Leda as an object and reducing her to a list of body parts.

All of this adds to the poem's disturbing nature. Overall, the violence of Leda and the Swan is used by Yeats to explore how a single act can have tragic, destructive consequences, using the fall of Troy as a metaphor. He focuses on physicality of the rape, portraying it as little more than a series of actions, giving the poem an unsettling feel. Furthermore, Yeats's ambiguity and lack of violence suggest a perhaps a certain complicity, making the poem all the more disturbing.