

Leda and the swan essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

LEDA AND THE SWAN Leda and the swan was written in 1928 by William Butler Yeats. It is a petrarchan sonnet, in iambic pentameter; it has a rhyme pattern in ABAB CDCD EFGFEG. This is the most famous poem in the collection *The tower*, and the one with most imagery. Despite its ABAB rhyme scheme, the poem is breathtaking due to enjambments. Leda and the Swan was first published in a different version in 1924. Yeats is well known for his symbolist style, and interest for Irish folklore and mythology. He believed that history moved between different and contrary cycles.

Leda and the Swan seems to happen at the exact turning point between two cycles. It is important to know the Trojan War's impact: it brought the end of the ancient mythological era and the birth of modern history. The Burning of Troy set the stage for the future rise of the Roman Empire and, much later, the rise of modern Europe. We can say that Leda and the Swan represents something like the beginning of modern history. In order to study this poem we can wonder is the poem simply referring to a myth? How can we link this poem to Yeats' personal life and society?

So in order to answer these questions we will first study the paradox of the poem and the possible meanings of the poem, and then we will link it to Yeats' background considering Leda as a personification of Ireland facing her oppressor Zeus, personification of England. In Greek mythology Leda was the daughter of Thestius, king of Aetolia, and wife of Tyndareus, king of Sparta. She was rape by Zeus, the ruler of the Greek gods assuming the form of a swan, and from that union she bore two eggs from which hatched, Castor and Pollux, from one egg, and Helen and Clytemnestra from the second.

Helen, who became the breathtakingly beautiful wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta, was abducted by Paris, a Trojan prince. This kidnapping led to the Trojan war, indeed Menelaus asked his brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenae to help him take his wife back. So Agamemnon and his troupes besieged and destroyed Troy, but when he came back home, Agamemnon was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra. After the first reading, a paradox emerges: the poem is written in a traditional form, using a traditional rhyme scheme, yet the subject matter is non-traditional: a violent rape. This paradox is representative of the many oppositional elements in the text.

The rhyme scheme is traditional (ABAB CDCD EFG EFG) but four of the rhymes are not perfect: " push" and " rush", " up" and " drop". This again is another oppositional element. Yeats created a sonnet that is both violent with a structure that conveys feelings of safety and beauty. The first line immediately grabs the reader's attention. The poem starts *In Medias Res*. There is no set up for the story that follows. There is only the loud and violent action opening the sonnet: " A sudden blow: the great wings beating still", which brings the reader dramatically into the conflict.

There is a blow of some kind, and the sound of large wings beating in the air. The reader is startled by the blow, and after having only partially absorbed the shock of it, hears the whoosh of beating wings. The reader does not know where the assault comes from or to who the wings belong to. This beginning takes us by surprise, as Leda is surprised by the ambush of the bird. The reader is thrown in the rest of the story " Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed/ By dark webs, her nape caught in his bill, / He holds her helpless breast upon his breast" (lines 2-4).

There is beating, staggering, caressing, catching, and holding in a whirl so fast the reader doesn't have time to prepare a response to the attack. The reader endures the attack along with Leda, barely able to visualize the swirl of motion packed in the first four lines. We see the world the way we would see it if we were smacked. As we only catch a glimpse of images it reinforces our disorientation, which could also be Leda's disorientation. The first stanza is characterized by percussive beats and pauses. The first three words mimic the surprise and panic of the attack with the two intense beats in "sudden blow," followed by caesura.

Similarly, the word "staggering" in the second line has a harsh, sharp sound. The imagery in *Leda and the swan* is also representative of oppositional elements in the text. Leda is first described in concrete terms and the swan in abstract terms. Leda is "the staggering girl" and the poem refers to "her thighs," "her nape," "her helpless breast," and "her loosening thighs." The swan is never really called Zeus or even referred to as a Swan. The swan is described by his "great wings", "dark webs", "that white rush", "blood", "indifferent beak" and "feathered glory". A second reading of the poem shows more ambiguity.

The concrete and abstract unite. Abstract terms are used for Leda ("terrified vague fingers") and concrete terms for the swan (wings, bill, and beak). This ambiguity is, again, representative of the conflict within the poem. Verbs play a main role in the poem. Yeats uses the present tense throughout at the beginning ("holds," "push," "feel," "engenders") and then shifts to past tense at the end ("caught", "mastered", "Did"). The verbs in the present tense imply an intense immediacy while those in the past tense distance the

reader (and perhaps the aggressor as well) from what has just occurred. Read also essay about Zeus Actions in Prometheus Bound.

Additionally there is a juxtaposition between active and passive verbs . The active verbs (“ holds,” “ engenders”) are used for the swan while passive verbs(“ caressed”, “ caught”, “ mastered”) are used for Leda. Throughout the poem Yeats combines words indicating powerful action for the swan (sudden blow, beating, staggering, beating, shudder, mastered, burning, mastered) with adjectives describing Leda’s weakness (caressed, helpless, terrified, vague, loosening). Yeats chooses to emphasize the swan’s instinct and animal nature whereas Leda is “ helpless” and cannot stop the rape from taking place.

Both her chest and finger are personified “ helpless breast “ and “ terrified fingers”. All the adjectives referring to Leda are those employed for a pray caught by a hunter. The first time the swan is called “ he” line 4, because since the beginning the swan was only described through synecdoche “ wings”, “ webs” “ bill”, despite being a god. “ Dark webs” could suggest that is not able to see clearly like in the darkness. “ Web” could also suggest that Leda is the prisoner of the swan like a insect in a spider-web. “ The feathered glory” is again a synecdoche clearly referring to the god-swan penis.

The second stanza is composed of two rhetorical questions, the first question is about how Leda could have stop that rape from taking place, and the second rhetorical question is about how Leda could stop feeling the swan’s heart. But as they are rhetorical question it implies that she could have not even prevented it. The third stanza introduces a new subject with a leap in

the future: it is a dramatic reference to the destruction of Troy. The first eight lines of "Leda and the Swan" describe the act of rape from Leda's perspective.

The ninth line, which is the dividing line, ends the description of sex with the moment of ejaculation "shudder in the loins." The last six lines of the poem, then, narrate the consequences of the act, both for humanity (the Trojan War) and for Leda personally. This rape "engenders" life, and this life "engender" the fall of Troy: "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower, And Agamemnon dead." So, although Leda didn't directly cause the Trojan War, she is now one of the indirect causes. The final stanza returns to the present scene of Leda and the swan. "Brute blood of the air" refers to the brutality of Zeus as a bird. The alliteration and the percussive sound of the "b" in "brute blood" show the brutality of both Zeus and the rape. Finally, the swan "let her drop" indifferently. The final verse implies that the whole scene happened in the air. Once again Zeus is shown as a rude character with his "indifferent beak", he let Leda fall on the floor as a dead pray. He doesn't care for her, he lives in his own world where human lives have no value and he can use them as he wishes, without caring about the consequences W. B.

Yeats (1865-1939) was a modernist poet who during the Irish Revolution (1922-23). The Irish Revolution was the struggle of the Irish nationals for independence from the British imperial power. The Irish Revolution brought a situation of disorder and rebellion as the young generation wanted to break out from the English regime. Here Yeats offers an impartial view of the contemporary trouble in the society. Leda and the Swan is often considered as unique work for the period because of the violent description of Leda's

rape and the hidden political themes that evoked the oppression of Ireland at the hand of England.

Leda is at the heart of many conflicts. She is in direct physical opposition to Zeus, as women of Yeats' time were in direct opposition with the men around them. Always considered as the weaker sex, women long occupied the position of passive objects instead of acting. The concept that women are unable to express their sexual desires is echoed in the poem: " How those can terrified vague fingers push/ The feathered glory from her loosening thighs? " (Lines 5-6). At the same time Leda pushes away from Zeus she accepts him.

Her fingers are " vague" lacking in force, definition, or purpose. Her " loosening thighs" allow entrance for the " feathered glory" of Zeus. Leda offers no protestation. There is no opposition from her part. In this way Yeats confirms the period belief that women are willing victims. Despite this terrible presumption, there is a glimmer of progressive ideology in his portrayal of Leda, because previously the myth represented Zeus seducing Leda, who gave herself and cheated on her husband, which also results as " the broken wall, the burning roof and tower/ And Agememnon dead".

Yeats gave an opposite version in which Zeus victimized Leda, and her submission to his mean divine strength ended in a future of violence and murder. Leda is part of a huge political struggle in which her actions contribute to historical, cyclical shifts in power, just as individual efforts affected the shift in power between England and Ireland. Leda offers a view of how change should be acquired. Even if Zeus was an overpowering force,

she gains something from his attack: knowledge. Knowledge and education are key components required for someone weak to challenge a greater force.

Leda is also part of deep spiritual struggle. Through her experience with Zeus we are given permission to question our beliefs. At what point does our allegiance with the divine become a source of oppression? Disorder, change, force, violence and power are dominating themes in "Leda and the Swan." Leda is overpowered by the god Zeus and in her moment of violent union with the divine she not only becomes impregnated with his powerful offspring but absorbs the dark knowledge of the fate of Troy.

When she is "caught up" and "mastered by the brute blood of air" it express the idea that changes comes through violence and aggression. Yeats believed that change was cyclical. As Troy lost in front of Grecian forces because of what Zeus did to Leda, the sins of England would likewise be visited upon them as Ireland gained independence through agitation, revolution, and change. Just as Greece enters a new age beginning with the rape of Leda, Ireland will enter a new age. The text shows oppositions that can be linked to the conflicts between the material world and the spiritual world: between human and divine .

Here Yeats explores the idea of Divine punishment in using the result of Leda's rape as his subject, which are Helen and Clytemnestra. With the final question "Being so caught up, so mastered by the brute blood of the air, did she put on his knowledge with his power before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" we can wonder if Leda knew what was going to happen, and if she had fought back against God, would the future of her children have been

different or worse? So here we can say that the poem seems to be a critic of religion.

To conclude we can say that Yeats uses this myth to describe and criticizes several contemporary realities. The myth helps Yeats in universalizing the poems, and provides a sense of eternity. By never naming Zeus or Leda, he makes it applicable even today. The oppositions in the text, and the series of conflicts which they represent, are important in that they are manifestations of oppositional conflicts occurring in Yeats' own life. We can also think that maybe Leda is in fact Maud Gonne.