

Leda and the swan and the second coming essay sample



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Yeats was an Irish poet, dramatist and prose writer, who was born in Dublin in 1865 and as a young boy moved between London and Ireland, witnessing the effects of the Republican Movement in Dublin. His ability to oppose the oppression of Ireland under the influence of England, was reinforced by his ability to write some of the best poems in English literature in the 20th century. Although Yeats was profoundly interested in poetry, when he studied at the Theosophical Society, he began to appreciate mysticism, as it was a form of imagination which was largely removed from the hardships in Ireland which he had experienced.

His interest in mysticism turned into a life long hobby, which saw him conjure up a paradigm of the gyres and cycles which are applicable to every person, culture, process and period of time, and thus includes historical events from thousands of years ago. His most famous ideas include The Theory of the Mask, and The Great Wheel. The Theory of the Mask represents two dominant modes of civilisation that can be used to explain phases of an individual's psychological development, as the two interpenetrating gyres represent different characteristics.

The primary gyre emphasises truth, goodness, peace and rationalism, while the antithetical gyre is related to aristocracy, art, fiction, evil and war. Therefore this can be used to support Yeats' argument for an antithesis, the idea that every two thousand years, these processes are reversed, and one monumental historical event is substituted by another of the opposite nature. The theory of The Great Wheel, is Yeats' discovery of the system outlined in 'A Vision'.

This consists of twenty-eight spokes representing the twenty-eight phases of the lunar month and one successive revolution which takes roughly 26, 000 years. However, Yeats was not particularly bothered by the precision of timing, but instead the sweeping gesture of important human events. The most important cycles include religion and civilisation, which Yeats makes clear in such poems as ' Leda and the Swan' and ' The Second Coming'. To begin with, ' Leda and The Swan' is the annunciation of the rape of Leda by Zeus in Greek mythology.

Zeus, disguised as a swan captures Helen, and at the moment of conception not only engenders impregnation; but also causes the fall of Troy and the death of Greek heroes. Yeats uses this subject to illustrate a moment in time, which his cyclical view of history is begun anew. Therefore, Yeats' is making a concealed reference to his Theory of The Mask highlighting the idea that the two interpenetrating, rotating cones have effectively reserved their motions and caused historical turbulence. We realise this firstly, due to his use of tenses.

The poet brings attention to the timelessness of the event by describing the rape in the first eight lines in the present tense, followed by the future tense in lines nine to eleven, and finally the past tense as Yeats brings his poem to a close. This makes it clear that the rape and assault of Helen, had momentous meaning in the context of his cyclical views of human history, and the idea that these views are relevant for the past, present and future. It is evident then, that the rape and assault of Helen stands for much more than the literal terms.

Yeats uses the form of the poem to emphasise the importance of the key events taking place. To begin with the audience can understand that; 'Leda and the Swan' is a Petrarchan sonnet, which is ironic firstly due to the idea that in the octave, it appears to be a ghastly and explicit rape scene. However, in the sestet the tone changes, creating ambiguity about the situation, making the audience question whether in fact Leda is falling in love with the power which this God-like figure imposes on her.

The audience realise this may be a metaphor for the way in which people will behave towards the change in era; comprehensive and anxious at first, yet strengthened and satisfied later. Yeats cleverly uses the dividing line between the octave and sestet as the moment of ejaculation: 'A shudder in the loins...' This emphasises the idea that the moment of conception, is the moment of change, not only for Helen who will end up "caught up" with Zeus only for him to be "indifferent", but also for humanity, which will see a completely new era arise as a consequence, i. the hatching of Helen's children into Clytemnestra and Helen and the war-gods Castor and Polydeuces which resulted in the Trojan War. Yeats makes a brief reference to this in 'Leda and the Swan': '...The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/And Agamemnon dead' yet the idea which Yeats wants us to register, is the lasting impact which this war had; it brought about the end of the ancient mythological era, and saw the rise of modern history. Furthermore, Yeats uses powerful and evocative language, as a means to help the audience understand the events unfolding, and the notion of his cyclical views.

Aesthetically, the poem is a marvel, Yeats combines adjectives which indicate the power of Zeus (sudden blow, beating, staggering, mastered, burning)

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contrasting with Leda's weakness (caressed, helpless, terrified, vague)

Moreover Yeats uses alliteration of "brute blood" to emphasise Zeus' power, and a half line emphasising Helen's weakness: '...being so caught up' thus increasing the sensory impact of the poem, but also clarifying the antithesis that the era will bring; possibly suggesting that the weak will be at the hand of the strong.

Likewise 'The Second Coming' is viewed as a prophetic poem that envisions the ending of a two thousand year era. In this case we understand that Yeats' theory of The Great Wheel is relevant to the end of the Christian epoch, and the violent birth of a new age. The poem's title makes reference to the Biblical reappearance of Christ, however we can tell by the tone which is immediately brought about with Yeats' use of nightmarish imagery in the first stanza, that Yeats' idea of a "second coming" is not one of benevolence, order or love. Instead, it is obvious by the use of metaphor: 'The falcon cannot hear the falconer' that the primary gyre: the age of Christianity, is approaching the end of its cyclical era and an antithetical change is to replace it. Thus the idea that the falcon (Christians) are distant from the falconer (Christianity) therefore the new generation will give up the traditions of those before, relishing new art, new literature, new ethics and as a result, "anarchy" will be loosed upon the world. Much of the power generated from the opening stanza derives from the simplicity of the language, as well as what the words symbolise.

For example, he uses words that contradict Christianity, implying that there can be no more baptism, no more saviour, no more order: (disintegration, anarchy, tide of blood, drowning ceremony of innocence, weakness) The <https://assignbuster.com/leda-and-the-swan-and-the-second-coming-essay-sample/>

audience realise this will be as a result of the gyres, as Yeats makes constant reference to their movement throughout the poem: (turning, widening, moving, wind, rocking) This use of language highlights the idea that this change is coming around quickly, and that it should panic us.

In other words, the world's primary gyre is falling apart, and like the frantically widening flight-path of the falcon that has lost contact with the falconer; the next age will take its character not from the gyre of science, democracy and peace, but from the contrary - the "rough beast" which slouches towards Bethlehem. This vision of the new world troubles Yeats, who uses repetition as a means of mocking the people who welcome this change: 'Surely some revelation is at hand/The Second Coming! This is not only used as a form of sarcasm, but also as a warning to reassure the audience's apprehension of a lawless society. A further reference to the Bible is apparent in Yeats' expression of the Sphinx's shape: 'A shape with lion body and head of a man...' that resides in '...a waste of desert sand' Christ himself was tempted by Satan in the desert, and the use of such a desolate environment is pathetic fallacy and supports the idea that human society will collapse, including its "Spiritus Mundi".

We realise that Yeats is describing what the next two thousand years will constitute of; an evil and apocalyptic future for all. This is supported by the extended metaphor of birds, which Yeats uses on several occasions. He explains that the birds become "indignant" as they "wind" around the Sphinx. This helps the audience understand that one day we will realise how far we have distanced ourselves from the good of the primary gyre, but by then there are no reversible actions.

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