

# Leda and swan analysis

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The structure of the sonnet is Petrarchan, an Italian form of the sonnet that characteristically divides its theme into an octave, in which a problem or emotion is stated, and a sestet, in which the problem or emotional tension is resolved. There is a clear separation between the first eight lines (the octave) and the final six (the sestet). The octave is divided into two four-line stanzas, or quatrains. The first quatrain opens with a recounting of the occurrence in mid-scene.

It begins abruptly, as the swan assaults Leda with “ a sudden blow,” which is most likely a reference to an act of sexual penetration. The use of that simple, powerful phrase (not a complete sentence) and a break before the line continues emphasizes the explosive violence of the act. Line 1 continues with a description of the great swan hanging in the air above the girl with its wings beating. There is a pun on the word still; the bird’s wings continue to beat and are also still as it hovers above without moving.

In line 2 there is a description of Leda that indicates her physical (and perhaps psychological) state, as she staggers under her assailant. The swan has its body over Leda as she falters under him; he caresses her thighs with his webbed feet. There is an almost sensuous description in the phrase “ her thighs caressed,” but this is followed immediately by the grotesque image of the swan’s “ dark webs” in line 3 and the image of Leda’s neck in his bill as he holds her helpless against him.

The swan is never referred to directly as a swan, but its presence is expressed in ordinary images like “ great wings” and “ dark webs” that in the context of the poem seem quite extraordinary. Leda is simply “ the girl” who is caught in the bird’s beak like a small helpless animal. In line 4 the  
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crushing movement of the girl pinned against the bird is reinforced by the repetition of the word breast as the two are joined together unwillingly.