

William feel as she is
overwhelmed and



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

William Butler Yeats poem Leda and the Swan is a hauntingly beautiful recreation of the Greek myth in which Zeus takes the form of a swan in order to seduce Leda, who, as a result of this brutality becomes the mother of Helen of Troy the woman who is credited with starting the Trojan War. Yeats choice of employing the sonnet format (sometimes associated with romantic thoughts) in order to retell this story, along with other poetic techniques, allows the poem to go beyond the familiar story which has been told and retold many times. Within the realm of the storyline, this poem captures the moment during which Zeus, disguised as a swan, overwhelms and attacks a helpless young woman. During the first four lines of the poem, the speaker wastes no time in situating the reader as to what is occurring: A sudden blow: the great wings beating still Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill, He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

First of all, swans are not often associated with being birds of violence. One might envision a vulture attacking someone, but swans are thought of as birds of beauty and grace, and symbolize elegance and peacefulness. The action of the swan in the poem actions is the total opposite and one may find it ironic. This could imply the reason that Zeus chose this bird for his disguise: it would be easier to surprise and overwhelm Leda. Starting the poem with this instance of violence as Yeats chooses to, brings the reader immediately in on a moment of supreme horror.

Throughout the poem, the compact nature of the lines, all in iambic pentameter, along with their rhyming endings, further escalate the fever pitch of the moment by swiftly moving along the reader. The ringing

assonance of end words still and bill, caressed and breast all work to keep the reader riveted as to what is occurring here in the beginning. The next four lines capture the terror that Leda must feel as she is overwhelmed and virtually smothered by this living down comforter. Yet the speaker manages to incorporate a sensual aspect within the violent confines of the description.

Amidst the violence of the rape as it is occurring, the speaker manages to convey confusion, and wonder at what it is that is actually overtaking Leda. The speaker wonders How can those terrified vague fingers push/The feathered glory from her loosening thighs? At this point in the poem, it becomes clear with the descriptive language and imagery that this is much more than a random act of violence. Has it occurred to Leda just who is occupying the body of the swan? Is there more here than a rape scene? Since, as part of the myth it is known that Zeus is the one occupying the form of the swan, and since he is king of the gods this could be interpreted as more of a divine intervention.. This is even more telling because Helen of Troy, the woman who launched 1000 ships because of her beauty is the result of this union. The following four lines (lines 9, 10, 11 & 12) go one step further. These lines refer to the overtaking of Troy by the Greeks, during which the gods all respectively played their part and personalities by taking their preferred sides.

The speaker could be connecting the conception of Helen, whose eventual abduction from her husband, Menelaus, (brother of Agamemnon) began the Trojan War. In typical Shakespearean Sonnet format, the last two lines of the poem form a resolution of sorts. Here, the speaker is questioning what exactly, if anything, that Leda took from this attack. In a way, this leaves

Leda with the upper hand. Did she put on his knowledge with his power/Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? This statement questions what Leda might have gained from the attack.

As a woman unable to fend off the overpowering nature of this attack, Leda had no say in the matter of this brutal rape. Yet the speaker seems to be questioning whether or not Leda left this scene a changed woman perhaps even empowered? Again, one