

# ANALYSIS OF W.B.YEATS' LEDA AND THE SWAN

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**Abstract:** Yeats meeting with Ezra Pound, made him more aware of his poetic language and resulted in a more concise way of saying things. But he never lost his interest in folklore and mythology and he went on using them as vehicles for more contemporary ideas-Leda and the Swan proves that.

The poem Leda and the Swan by William Butler Yeats, talks about the story of Greek mythology, the copulation of Zeus (or Jupiter),and Leda. The poet narrates the story vividly, dramatically, and with almost a Dantesque concentration. A big bird, a Swan with great wings has been represented as giving a sudden and staggering blow to the girl Leda bathing naked in a pond.

The bird fluttering over her, caressing her thighs, holding her nape with his beak, and pressing her helpless breast upon his chest ,must have been a nerve shattering experience for the terrified girl. She was helpless in the clutches of the brute blood of their air, and her helplessness is signified by the "loosening of her thighs", which is an expression rich in overtones of sexuality.

In this way, an immortal God mated with a mortal girl. The event proved a fateful one as it set in motion a whole chain of events. The girl gave birth to Helen and the result was the Trojan war and the burning of the roof and "top less " towers of Troy. She also gave birth to Clytemnestra and the result was the tragedy of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra was the queen of Agamemnon but she got so angry with him that she with the help of his children killed her own husband.

The fourteen lines of this sonnet are divisible into three quatrains and a couplet. The sonnet is a dramatic and picturesque presentation of the sequel act between Leda,a mortal beautiful maiden, and Zeus (jupiter) ,a God in Greek mythology that was in the form of a big bird: a Swan. The first four lines narrates dramatically ,vividly,the story of mating of a common girl and a God, while the former was bathing naked in a stream. Zeus,in the form of a big bird, Swan is represented as giving a sudden and staggering blow to the girl Leda bathing naked in a pool. the bird fluttering over her , caressing her thighs, holding her nape with his beak, and pressing her helpless breasts upon his chest, must have been a nerve shattering experience for the terrified girl.

The second quatrain shows the helplessness of the delicate and beautiful maiden Leda being subjected to sexual exploitation by the Swan. yeats says that the naked bathing girl was unable to save herself from the mating by Jupiter in the form of a Swan.Her fingers were delicate and weak, she was terrified , and thus unable to push off the big white bird with lots of feathers.she started being passionate and so her thighs started becoming loose to let the sex-act being performed without resistance. The delicate and frail body of Leda also began to beat inside with the vehemence of sexual desire .she started taking interest in the act with her cooperation.

The third quatrain brings the sex act between Leda and the Swan to its ultimate satisfying conclusion. they both feel a shudder in their loins. thus, a god mated with a mortal and the event proved a fateful one as it set in motion a whole chain of events .in the due course , the girl gave birth to Helen, who, in turn, became the cause of the Trojan war, the burning of the roof and tower of Troy, and also of the destruction of the big wall around Troy. Leda later gave birth to another girl named Clytemnestra who caused the tragedy of Agamemnon. Agamemnon was leader of the forces which defeated and destroyed Troy.later on, on his return from the war to his country , Mycenae in Argos, Agamemnon was killed by his own wife Clytemntra , who was also the daughter of Leda and Zeus.

The couplet, the last two lines of the sonnet conclude the poem with a rhetorical question.the poet wants to know if Leda imbibed the knowledge with the physical power of the god Zeus after the sex act , when the no longer interested beak of the Swan, released the nape of the girl.

Yeats was interested in such momentous events. he believed that civilization progressed on a cycle, where each epoch lasted roughly two millennia .in 2000B.C. the violation of Leda by Zeus inaugurated a new epoch: 2000 years later, the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary would signal the arrival of a new era. Another of Yeats poems "The second coming" ,explores the idea that another epoch-changing moment may be approaching in the modern age. more specifically, Yeats believed that something he called 'annunciation' which involved gods interfering in human affairs and using their divine energy to breathe new life into human civilization. This is what Zeus, as a swan-is doing. A dove was often used in Renaissance paintings depicting the Annunciation scene, in which the Holy spirit merges with the Virgin Mary- as with the story of Leda and the Swan from Greek myth, fusing the mortal with the divine.

Yeats portrayal of this seismic moment is brutal: The poem begins suddenly, without any preamble. Zeus assaults at once. Yeats manages to merge the violence of the incident with a more sinister softness: Zeus is ,a swan, a delicate though unpredictable bird; and note how Leda's thighs are caressed by the swan's wings.

The poem depicts an act of rape. The poem's graphic imagery leaves no doubt that Zeus, in the form of a Swan, violently assaults Leda. At the same time, however, the poem seems to revel in sensuality even as it lays bare the brutality of Leda's rape and its equally brutal consequences—the Trojan war. This ambiguous depiction of sexual violence is a central tension of the poem, and it is left unresolved. The poem neither condemns nor approves of Leda's rape, but it seeks instead to capture the complexity of the moment in light of its enormous mythological significance.

From the opening phrase, 'a sudden blow', it is clear that God Zeus is violating the human Leda. Words such as 'staggering girl's 'helpless' and 'terrified' clearly articulate that Leda is taken by force. The fact that her thighs 'loosen' indicates that, at first, they were clamped together, and she tries, but fails, to push Zeus away. The poem thus reflects Leda's initial panic, confusion, and resistance upon being attacked, which in turn draws attention to her fragility.

Despite the clear violence here, the speaker also lends the encounter a sensuality. Words and phrases (thighs, caressed, nape, feathered glory, shudder in the loins) lend a sensual urgency to the poem's depiction of this union. Leda's fingers pushing Zeus away are described as 'vague', her thighs eventually 'loosen', and the speaker even suggests that her body cannot help but 'feel the strange heart of Zeus'.

The poem's description of Leda's reaction to her rape then culminates in the end of the sexual act, resulting in impregnation. Here the poem's scope opens up dramatically, from Leda's body to the wider world, moving abruptly from the rape itself to its consequences—i.e., the eventual fall of Troy. Now the poem reveals its real concerns: not with the rape itself, but with what that rape will achieve on a mythological scale. The moment also thus offers what is perhaps the poem's clearest take on sex and violence: that violence begets more violence, emphasized by the callous way Zeus treats Leda at the end of her rape.

The ambiguous depiction of Leda's rape suggests that it cannot be understood as an act of sexual violence alone. Rather, it is a tipping point in history, and as such a scale—the immense playing field of history, legacy, myth, and literature—only cause and effect can be traced. The moral quandary of Leda's body being violated is not the poem's most pressing concern. Nevertheless, the speaker's attention to Leda's panicked fear is important; the speaker does not paper over the harm Zeus has caused, but instead contextualizes that harm within the larger scope of mythology and history.

To what degree do human beings have control over their destinies? In ancient times, there was no doubt that the gods held ultimate power over human beings. The poem depicts this reality in no uncertain terms: Leda's body and fate are at Zeus's mercy. Nevertheless, the poem also suggests that humans possess enough free will to at least question their fates. The poem also suggests that all human beings are subject to forces beyond their control—and meditates on whether human beings are capable of understanding their place in the grand scheme of destiny and history. The poem raises questions related to power and agency. Zeus holds the power in this poem not because he is Leda's rapist but because he is a god. Rape therefore takes the metaphorical significance where Leda's assault is transformed into a symbol of the fate versus free will. In the poem, fate wins as Zeus easily overpowers Leda, who herself, is not an ordinary woman, but a queen. The poem suggests that all human beings are ultimately subject to the tides of history, fate, destiny, and change.

As Leda's rape continues, the second stanza is then composed of two rhetorical questions, both of which essentially ask to what degree Leda has any free will within this situation. Leaving both questions unanswered, the poem asks the readers to draw their own conclusions. "And how can body, laid in that white rush/ But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?" This could be Leda's body, or Zeus's body, or even any body. The suggestion in this stanza is that regardless of whether she consents, she has no control over the situation. Thus, it implies that no matter how human beings react to the forces dictating their fates, those forces are still immensely more powerful than human free will. The poem's most explicit depiction of fate takes place in the final stanza. Leda is powerless against the enormous forces of divinity and fate having their way with her body. The moment serves a reminder of her powerlessness, and her significance. Zeus may be in control of her fate, but he needs Leda as a vessel.

The clearest theme of the poem is that a single moment can reverberate throughout the entirety of history. Yeats believed in the theory of 'gyres', spiraling and triggering immense change. This rape resulting in the Trojan war and the golden age of Greece—a modern age of art, literature, and democracy. The poem treats this union as a mythological and historical tipping point.

The poem also implies that sweeping historical transformation is often tied to moments of violation and violent force. The poem is often read as an allusion to the dawn of Christianity, the poem's close attention to Leda's as well as a reference to the Irish War for independence and Irish Civil War, taking place during the years when Yeats was writing the poem.

The poem's close attention to Leda's experience also calls to mind another woman's experience with divine conception—Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Yeats, in his book *A Vision*, says that he saw Leda's rape as analogous with the Annunciation—the moment when the angel Gabriel tells Mary she will conceive a child by God. Just like Leda's children, especially Helen, have a transformative effect on Greek history, also, Mary's son Jesus and the rise of Christianity had a transformative effect on global history, including Yeats' country Ireland. Many readers have interpreted the poem as an allusion to colonial relationship between Great Britain and Ireland, and more specifically to the Irish War for independence. Zeus, in this poem, represents not just the powerful forces of fate and history but the colonial power of England which fully conquered Ireland in the 1500s, leading to famine, oppression, and violence—a kind of metaphorical rape, in the poem's terms. The English domination of Ireland gave rise to Irish independence. This could not take place without violence, which the poem vividly reflects.

Leda as woman, as a queen, as a mother, all fade into the background in contrast with all the things her body is being used to accomplish—"the broken wall, the burning roof and tower/And Agamemnon dead". As a result, despite giving readers insight into Leda's terror, the poem makes it easy to read her as symbolic of other things. Leda and Virgin Mary conceived babies by divine power, and bore children who grew up to change history and usher in new eras of transformation. Leda is also symbolic of Ireland, controlled and ruled by Britain. Leda's subjugation at the end of the poem is also symbolic of Ireland's subjugation to Britain.

The poet uses Synecdoche, a literary device, to point toward Troy and the Trojan war (broken wall, the burning roof and tower and Agamemnon dead) -referring to the cataclysmic event in ancient Greek history. This moment, set the stage for the dawn of the golden Greek era, and the era of modern European history following it.

Alliteration, in which the successive uses of the same sounds helping to convey the frenzy and panic of Zeus's attack on Leda, is used in the poem. (he holds her helpless breast upon his breast) helps to emphasize the firm grasp that Zeus has on Leda. The second stanza also uses alliteration to significant effect in Leda's 'fingers' and Zeus's 'feathered glory', 'body' and 'beating', suggesting that Leda cannot help but feel Zeus's heartbeat, is brought vividly to life by the alliterative /b/ sounds that themselves suggest a heartbeat. The last stanza has 'broken and 'burning' -tying together the separate images that make up the fall of Troy, linking them to the 'brute blood' that courses through Zeus's veins and plays a vital role in bringing that event to life.

The poem is divided into three stanzas and follows the form of a typical Petrarchan sonnet. The first two stanzas of the poem contain four lines each (quatrains). Typically, this section would be a stanza of six lines, a sestet. By breaking lines 11 and 12 (And Agamemnon dead/being so caught up) in half visually and linking them through indentation, the poet superficially maintains the system and the sonnet form while also drawing attention to Leda's actual distance from the historical future events. The turning point (volta) is in line 9 (a shudder in the loins engenders there) marking the precise, cataclysmic moment of ejaculation and conception, changing the course of history. Another noteworthy aspect of the poem is that while the Petrarchan sonnet is usually associated with love poems, Yeats here subverts the form and uses it to depict rape. Yeats' point of view of this event is a typical take on the Greek myth, in which Leda and Zeus's union is often portrayed as seduction rather than sexual assault. This in turn reinforces Yeats' depiction of this moment as revolutionary, having enormous effect on world history. The meter employed roughly follows the iambic meter form. 'He holds/her help-/less breast/upon/his breast. In the first stanza, the hurried bursts of iambic pentameter convey a rapidly thumping, panicky heartbeat as Leda reacts to being assaulted. Perhaps the best way to characterize the poem's meter then, is to say that it frequently uses iambic pentameter, but often discards that meter in favour of rhythmic interruptions and alterations that help to draw attention to the poem's violent and shocking subject matter, as well as its vivid diction.

The speaker in the poem is an anonymous figure. The speaker witnesses Zeus's assault on Leda, primarily conveying hepatic and fear in response to being raped. In contrast however, Zeus's motivations and intentions are not described. This most likely indicates that the speaker is meant to be a fellow human being, not a god. The speaker knows the consequences of this sexual encounter. The speaker, at the same time, remains unsure of the degree to which Leda herself understands what is happening to her. Through the speaker, we comprehend and vividly experience the natural forces of fate and history, although not fully understanding the implications or significance of these powerful natural forces.

The poem is based on the ancient Greek myth in which Zeus takes the form of a Swan in order to make love to Leda, wife of Tyndareus, king of Sparta, who also happens to copulate with her the very night. She thus becomes pregnant and gives birth to Helen, Clytemnestra, Castor, and Pollux—all have profound effects on Grecian and western civilization. The poet uses the theme of seduction, rape, and resultant offspring as a metaphor for the relationship between Britain and Ireland, the former being a Swan and the latter being Leda, i.e. the helpless victim. Perhaps this is why we see the use of words such as blow/beating/staggering/dark/caught/holds/shudder/mastered/power/indifferent—a natural tension is set up with the progression of the poem.; it is basically a masculine versus feminine struggle. In Greek mythology, the gods looked down on the human world and treated them as playthings. Humans were pawns in a game. In the poem, the brutal physical act sets off a chain of events, leading to all sorts of disruption and violence in human society.

#### References-

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