Leda and the Swan

POEM TEXT

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.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
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?

SUMMARY

The god Zeus, in the form of a swan, suddenly attacks Leda, striking her with his enormous wings. She stumbles as he looms above her, his webbed feet grabbing hold of her thighs while his bill latches on to her neck. She is overpowered, upright only because Zeus is holding her up, pressing their bodies close together as he assaults her.

Is there any way Leda's terrified, disoriented fingers could prevent the god from parting her thighs and raping her? How could she, overwhelmed by this blur of white feathers, keep from feeling the alien heartbeat of her attacker, pressed against her own?

The swan Zeus ejaculates into Leda's womb, and conceives the child, Helen, who will grow up to shape mythological history by causing the fall of Troy and the death of the Greek king Agamemnon. Was Leda too overwhelmed, too overpowered by her godly assailant, to realize the significance of this moment? Or did she possibly gain access to Zeus's godly foresight before he callously let go and let her fall?

THEMES

SEX AND VIOLENCE

"Leda and the Swan" 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 consequence—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 seeks instead to capture the complexity of the moment in light of its enormous mythological significance.

From the opening phrase, "A sudden blow," it's clear that the god Zeus is violating the human Leda. Words such as "staggering girl," "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. A human woman has no chance, the poem implies, against a god's "feathered glory" and "white rush"—all she has are "terrified vague fingers" and a "helpless breast."

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

All of these details suggest that eventually Leda may not have simply surrendered to but even enjoyed the sex. This is troubling from a modern perspective but perhaps not surprising given the era in which the poem was written (1920s) or the era in which the poem takes place (ancient Greece).

The poem's description of Leda's reaction to her rape then culminates in the end of the sexual act, which results in impregnation: "A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof, and tower." 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*—that is, 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. This moment also

thus offers what is perhaps the poem's clearest take on sex and violence: that violence begets more violence, which is emphasized by the callous way Zeus treats Leda at the end of her rape, when his "indifferent beak" simply "let[s] her drop."

Ultimately, 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 at such a scale—the immense playing field of history, legacy, myth, and literature—only cause and effect can be traced, not right or wrong. 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 panic and fear are 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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

FATE AND FREE WILL

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. "Leda and the Swan" 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.

Furthermore, by posing such questions directly of the reader, the poem speaks to more than just this specific Greek myth. It 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.

From the start, by depicting an act of rape, the poem raises questions related to power and agency. Importantly, however, Zeus holds the power in this poem not because he is Leda's rapist but because he is a *god*. Rape therefore takes on metaphorical significance, in which Leda's assault is transformed into a symbol of the fate versus free will debate.

In this poem, fate wins: Zeus easily overpowers Leda. What's more, readers familiar with the myth will know that Leda is no ordinary human, but a queen in her own right. By referring to her merely as a "girl," the poem emphasizes her frailty. Between a god and a queen, the god still holds all the power, suggesting 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. By leaving both questions unanswered, the poem asks the reader to draw their own conclusions. This is emphasized by the fact that the "body" in line 7 is assigned no pronouns:

> 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. In this moment, the poem pushes the reader to pose the rhetorical questions directly of themselves, and take the measure their own free will against the immense forces of fate and history.

The suggestion in this stanza that Leda eventually consents to Zeus does not square with readers' modern understanding of sexual assault. However, it's important to note that regardless of whether she eventually consents, the poem overall makes clear that Leda has no control over the situation. The poem therefore suggests 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, at the moment of conception. Zeus's loins literally plant the seeds of myth and history, and Leda, described as "caught up" and "mastered," is powerless against the enormous forces of divinity and fate having their way with her body.

That said, even as this moment serves as a reminder of Leda's powerlessness, it also affirms her *significance*. Her body is literally where the conception occurs, and metaphorically where all the historical action comes to fruition. Zeus may be in control of her fate, but he needs Leda as the vessel.

Importantly, the last two lines of the poem then consider the degree to which Leda comprehends what is happening to her. The speaker wonders aloud whether Leda was granted momentary godly insight into the bigger picture of her assault—or if she was left in the dark, simply a cog in the wheel of history. This is posed as another rhetorical question, again asking the reader to draw their own conclusions about whether a human being can understand their fate. While the poem clearly asserts that humans are powerless to resist fate, this conclusion suggests that they at least have the potential to grasp the greater meaning of their existence.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

HISTORY AND TRANSFORMATION

The clearest thesis of "Leda and the Swan" is that a single moment can reverberate throughout the entirety of history. Yeats famously believed that history was a series of interlocking and repeating patterns—he thought of them as "gyres," which spiraled toward significant moments

that triggered immense change. The significant moment of the poem is of course Zeus's rape of Leda, which, according to myth, led to the Trojan War and the Golden Age of Greece—a modern age of art, literature, and democracy. The poem treats this significant moment between Leda and Zeus as a mythological and historical tipping point.

Of course, the poem makes clear that the thing that set this all in motion was an act of sexual violation, and that this violence, in turn, led to more terribly violent events before that Golden Age emerged. The poem thus also implies that sweeping historical transformation is often tied to moments of violation and violence.

Accordingly, the poem is also often read as an allusion to the dawn of Christianity, as well as a reference to the Irish War for Independence and Irish Civil War, which took place during the years when Yeats was writing "Leda and the Swan."

Indeed, to any reader versed in the Western canon, which Yeats certainly was, 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 himself wrote in his book *A Vision* 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. Likewise, just like Leda's children, especially Helen, have a transformative effect on Greek history, there's no question that Mary's son Jesus and the rise of Christianity had a transformative effect on global history, including Yeats's own country of Ireland.

Last but not least, 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. In this reading, Zeus 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.

Between 1916 and 1922, however, pro-Irish forces staged a rebellion that resulted in an Irish Free State (in which Yeats served two terms as a senator). Nevertheless, Ireland still technically remained under English control. Then, between 1922 and 1924, when Yeats was writing "Leda and the Swan," Civil War broke out, resulting in the split between independent Ireland and a Northern Irish state that remained part of the United Kingdom.

This was an immense turning point in the history of Ireland and England, and the beginning of a new era for Ireland. Thus, just as Zeus's rape "engenders" the rise of the Greek Golden Age, the English domination of Ireland eventually gave rise to Irish independence. This could not take place without violence, however, which the poem also vividly reflects.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl,

The poem begins *in medias res* (in the middle of the action), at the very moment that the god Zeus, in the form of a swan, has swooped down and hit Leda, a human woman and ancient Greek queen, with his enormous wings. As a result, Leda, described here as a "girl," stumbles, trying but failing to find her balance in the midst of this ambush.

Immediately, these lines establish the perspective of the speaker as very close to Leda's own. The first three words place the reader squarely within Leda's shock: she did not see the swan coming, and neither does the speaker or readers. This is further emphasized by the speaker's description of Leda as "staggering." She has not only been caught off guard but also violently struck, and is therefore reeling from this attack, barely able to remain on her feet.

Meanwhile, the description of Zeus's "great wings beating ... above" suggests that even in the form of a swan, the god is both larger and more powerful than Leda, and certainly larger and more powerful than an ordinary swan would be. Other than the image of the powerful swan beating its wings overhead, however, these lines reveal very little else about what's going on here. Again, this emphasizes how close the speaker is to Leda's own perspective. She's confused and overwhelmed by what is happening to her, so the speaker (and readers) are also disoriented.

These opening lines also introduce the poem's straightforward diction. The language is plainspoken, almost blunt, making clear what is happening here—a swan violently attacking a human woman. The meter here, on the other hand, is a bit unusual. The poem seems at times to be in iambic pentameter (meaning there are fie poetic feet, each with a da DUM stress pattern, per line)—the first indication that this poem is a sonnet, a traditional poetic form dating back to Petrarch and Shakespeare:

A sud- | den blow: | the great | wings beat- | ing still
Above | the stag- | gering girl,

However, the poem isn't consistent even from the start. The fourth foot of the first line ("wings beat-") is a spondee, a foot consisting of two stressed beats in a row; as a result, there are three stresses when describing Zeus's wings (great wings beat), which evokes the force and intensity of this action. The

third foot of the second line, meanwhile, is an anapest (two unstressed beats followed by a stressed beat, "-gering girl")—another break in the meter that perhaps reflects Leda's own stumbling confusion. By breaking the rules right at the start, Yeats makes clear that the poem's form mirrors its provocative subject matter.

LINES 2-4

her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

Next, the speaker goes into detail about exactly how Zeus, as a swan, is assaulting Leda. The imagery is vivid but strange: the "dark webs" of the bird's feet are directly contrasted with Leda's human thighs, the vulnerable "nape" of Leda's neck is trapped by the swan's "bill." It's similar to the image of grabbing a dog by the scruff of its neck—except that in this case, the animal is doing the grabbing, while the human is being overpowered.

It's important to note here that Yeats is relying upon readers to have the same familiarity with Greek myth that he does. Though Zeus is never named, by titling the poem "Leda and the Swan" Yeats alludes directly to the famous myth, and assumes his readers will know the story, as well as the fact that the Greek god Zeus had a habit of transforming himself into all kinds of things—animals, women's husbands, a shower of gold coins—in order to have sex with the humans he desired.

These lines also make very clear that Zeus is doing more than just grabbing hold of Leda—he is sexually assaulting her. The use of the word "caressed" in line 2 is both eloquent and troubling. With this one verb, the speaker signals that Zeus-as-swan has sexual intentions, and that those intentions can be understood by readers as erotic or sexy. This is not how most modern readers would describe rape, and, indeed, as the poem itself acknowledges, "caressed" is also likely not the word Leda would use to describe this experience. Therefore, this is the poem's first indication that the speaker does have some distance from both Leda and the situation. This remove tells readers that, ultimately, the speaker is not concerned with the morality of what's going on, just with capturing the precise details and deeper meaning of Zeus and Leda's encounter.

Line 4 serves a conclusion to what the speaker has witnessed thus far. It not only marks the end of the poem's first stanza, it's also the end of one long run-on sentence. The poem's use of enjambment has rushed readers on from one line to the next, mimicking Leda's panic and confusion. Here, in the final line, this rush of confusion comes to a close, as the speaker describes exactly where Zeus and Leda stand now that the assault is fully underway: Zeus, the god in the form of a swan, is clutching the human Leda close to his chest. This image of two bodies pressed together by force is another reminder that this is an act of rape. Furthermore, the word "helpless" emphasizes how powerless Leda is in this situation—she can barely hold herself up, let alone fight back.

Lastly, lines 2-4 establish the poem's rhyme scheme. "Still" from line 1 rhymes with "bill" from line 3, and likewise "caressed" and "breast," though an imperfect slant rhyme, match as well. Thus, like most sonnets, this first stanza of "Leda and the Swan" follows an *abab* end rhyme scheme, in which the last word of every other line rhymes with each other. Furthermore, these lines continue to mostly use the traditional iambic pentameter, though it does deviate in line3:

By the | dark webs, | her nape | caught in | his bill,
He holds | her help- | less breast | upon | his breast.

The spondee of "dark webs" and trochee of "caught in" 3 draw readers' attention to the graphic imagery of the swan's attack.

LINES 5-6

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

The next stanza opens with an important question: is it at all possible for Leda, whose fingers are described as "terrified" and "vague," to fend off Zeus and his "feathered glory" as he attempts to rape her?

The poem offers a number of ways to interpret these lines. The fact that Leda's thighs are "loosening" indicates that they were initially clamped together, and therefore that she was attempting to resist her rapist. The same could be said for the suggestion that her fingers could potentially "push" away her attacker.

However, the use of the word "vague" to describe Leda's fingers has long troubled some readers, who see that adjective as less than forceful, and potentially indicative of Leda's decision to give in to the rape, or even her eventual consent. The idea that a woman might not have been raped entirely against her will is frankly offensive to many modern readers, but it was (unfortunately) not seen that way during the 1920s when Yeats was writing or the ancient Greek age when "Leda and the Swan" is set and when the myth originated.

Regardless of whether readers choose to read that adjective as a sign of Leda's capitulation or consent, it's important to contextualize her actions within the opening words of line 5: "How can ... ?" Even the speaker here appears to be grasping at straws, searching for an answer, unsure how anyone, let alone a "terrified" girl, might fight off a god. Likewise, the contrast between Leda's "terrified vague fingers" and Zeus's "feathered glory" sets up a clear power differential. ("Feathered glory," it should be noted, is a euphemistic way of describing the swan's penis as it penetrates Leda.) No matter whether Leda is giving in here or fighting back, she doesn't stand a chance against Zeus.

Last but not least, it's important that this question is posed as a *rhetorical* question. For starters, this device is a powerful way to express the hopelessness of Leda's situation. By presenting Leda's plight in the form of a question that, in truth, needs no answer, the poem emphasizes just how futile this situation really is. Is it really possible that Leda has any free will in this situation orchestrated by an all-powerful deity? No. It is not.

On the other hand, by asking readers directly what they think about Leda's situation, these lines mark a crucial evolution in the relationship between the speaker and readers of the poem. Technically, the speaker is leaving it up to readers to decide what the answer is. This rhetorical device subtly places readers in Leda's shoes, prompting them to ask the same question of themselves. Do they, fellow human beings, just like Leda, have any free will in a world full of forces beyond their control? Humans today (or in Yeats's era) may not be concerned about mythological Greek gods like Zeus, but they are certainly subject to the tides of history and time and change, as well as more ambiguous forces like destiny and fate, and, for some, God.

LINES 7-8

And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

Lines 7-8 ask an even more peculiar rhetorical question: "And how can body, laid in that white rush, / But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?" The first unusual aspect to note here is the lack of pronoun associated with the word "body." Whose body is this, exactly? Likewise, in the next line, whose "strange heart" is beating?

Because the speaker goes on to describe the body as "laid in that white rush," the most straightforward reading suggests that this is Leda's body, pressed against a blur of white feathers as the swan assaults her. By that same logic, the "strange heart" likely belongs to her rapist, Zeus, who is doubly strange to her, both god and animal. In short, this reading suggests that it is Leda who cannot help but feel the heart beating against her own body which has been pressed against Zeus's feathers.

Nevertheless, by deliberately obscuring who the "body" belongs to, the speaker of the poem elides Leda's presence and once again encourages readers to put themselves in her shoes and ask this same question of themselves. It's a difficult question, raising complex issues of fate, free will, power, and agency. Fittingly, it is complexly crafted as well, evoking confusion and disorientation while also using sensual imagery that makes this moment seem mysterious and exciting, even arousing. All together, the speaker is implicitly asking readers: could they help but be drawn to this magnetic, alluring heartbeat? Would they be able to resist the forces that act upon their lives?

Once again, like the question in lines 5-6, the implied answer is no. Human beings, like Leda, are largely powerless. They are as likely to be overwhelmed (and potentially even excited) by the sweeping tides of fate and history that shape their lives.

Speaking of heartbeats, lines 7-8 are also written in loose iambic pentameter (there's another spondee in the third foot). The fact that Yeats maintains this meter in a line explicitly referencing a beating heart may be a subtle poetic nod to the belief that iambic pentameter resembles the rhythm of a human heartbeat:

But feel | the strange | heart beat- | ing where | it lies?

Finally, these lines rhyme with the two other lines in the stanza, pairing "push" with "rush" (a slant rhyme) and "thighs" with "lies." At this point in the poem, therefore, the rhyme scheme has followed *abab cdcd* in the first and second stanzas, which is typical of a Shakespearean sonnet.

LINES 9-11

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

The third stanza opens abruptly, transitioning from Leda's reaction to being raped to the exact moment when she is impregnated. Described as a "shudder in the loins," this image is an explicit reference to orgasm or ejaculation, which in turn "engenders"—in other words, begets, or produces—a number of consequences, not just for Leda but for the world as a whole.

First among these consequences is the conception of baby Helen, who grows up to become the infamous Helen of Troy. The speaker, however, skips right over Helen and her birth, and goes straight into describing the legacy that she (and thus her parents, Zeus and Leda) leave behind.

This legacy is captured by the images of lines 10 and 11, "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead." For Yeats, as for any readers well-versed in the Western canon, including *The Illiad*, Homer's epic poem, these images instantly call to mind the Trojan War. This conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans was fought over Helen of Troy, who was married to a Greek king before being abducted by a Trojan prince, and ended in the city of Troy being conquered and burned to the ground. Her brother-in-law, king and commander Agamemnon, survived the war, and returned home to Greece victorious—only to be murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, Helen's sister and Leda's other daughter.

This is the moment in the poem where it becomes clear why the speaker is paying such close attention to Leda's rape. The speaker's interest, in turns out, does not have much to do with how Leda feels about this experience. After all, in these lines, she barely merits a mention, described only as "there," the womb in which Zeus begets Helen and history.

Instead, in this moment, the speaker calls readers' attention to

the immense impact of this sexual encounter, not just for Leda but for Greek history, and indeed modern history as a whole. The era that followed the Trojan War (a mythological event, though whether a war of some kind really occurred is the subject of historical debate) is often considered the Golden Age of Greece, and laid the foundation for the evolution of European history as it is known today.

As befits such a momentous part of the poem, these lines mark the beginning of an important formal shift. Sonnets are known for ending on a volta: a twist or turn in the sonnet's argument or focus. In this sonnet, the volta can be seen not only in the poem's sudden shift in focus, moving from a blow-by-blow rendition of Leda's rape to the much broader subject of the Trojan War and the dawn of a new historical era, but also in the form itself. Line 11 undergoes a the visual interruption, suddenly stopping short after Agamemon's death, leaving it half the length of the other lines in the poem. Clearly, Yeats wanted to draw attention to this important moment in the poem; and tellingly, the meter of the poem also becomes very erratic at this stage.

LINES 12-13

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,

Lines 12 and 13 pick up where line 11 cut off, concluding the volta, or shift, in the sonnet. Indented so that it creates a visual connection to line 11, but nevertheless a new line, line 12 moves back to the scene that has held the speaker and readers' attention throughout the rest of the poem: Leda's rape by Zeus.

By opening with the word "Being," there is a confusing moment when it is not clear whether the speaker is using the noun and referring to a human being, or using the gerund of the verb "to be." (The latter turns out to be the case.) Once again, this disorientation mimics Leda's own experience, which is then described as "so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood of the air ..." In other words, she remains overpowered, under the control of the god Zeus and his mission to sow the seeds of myth and history.

The poem returns to consistency in these lines. Zeus is once again referred to using synecdoche, his "brute blood" standing in for the entirety of his godly force, coupled with a reminder that he is "of the air" in the form of a swan. The alliteration of "brute blood" draws further emphasis to the phrase. The implication here is also that the assault, though briefly punctuated by the moment of conception, is still going on, with Zeus holding Leda up in the air. This echoes the earlier imagery of the first stanza, in which Leda was "caught" in the swan's bill, before being described as "helpless" and held upon Zeus's "breast."

LINES 14-15

Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

The last two lines of the poem conclude with one final rhetorical question, perhaps the most probing yet, getting to the heart of the poem's concerns. Continuing the description from lines 12-13 of an overpowered Leda assaulted in mid-air by the swan/god Zeus, the speaker wonders in line 14, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power ... ?"

In other words, the speaker here is wondering if it's possible that, by having sex with a god, Leda may have been given access to the god's supernatural power. This includes "his knowledge" of what lies ahead—including all of the epic consequences of their union.

If so, then potentially Leda is granted a glimmer of understanding into her rape and her role within the larger context of Greek history, and may have a sense of her own significance on the historical stage, even as an ordinary human. In short, she may know that the swan raping her is Zeus, and may realize that she has just conceived a child with him who will grow up to change the world.

Or, she may not. Line 15 abruptly reverses this possibility, reminding readers that once Zeus has impregnated Leda, his "indifferent beak" (another synecdoche) then "let[s] her drop" to the ground. Therefore, it's also possible that the rape happened so fast and was so terrifying and confusing that before Leda could begin to understand what was going on, it was over.

One thing is clear: Zeus does not care either way. As soon as he has completed his godly mission to sow the seeds of history, he lets Leda fall to the ground. He is not even cruel, the speaker suggests, simply "indifferent." As a god, his priorities are on another plane entirely.

But the poem is more interested in humanity than divinity. Yet again, because the speaker has posed this question rhetorically, the interpretation of these closing lines is left in readers' hands. Once more, the poem asks readers to widen the scope of this question, and apply it to their own lives. Is it possible for human beings to understand the forces that influence their lives? Can people gain glimmers of insight into fate and destiny; are they capable of understanding their significance or purpose on the historical stage? Or are we all just cogs in the wheel of time, ignorant of the sweeping tides that change and shape our lives?

Unlike the rhetorical questions that have come before, this one is truly left open-ended, without the speaker suggesting one answer over another. This openness affirms the universality of the question, rendering these lines and the poem as a whole a meditation not just on Leda and the swan, but on all people and all eras.

SYMBOLS

THE SWAN

The swan in "Leda and the Swan" is no ordinary bird. It is actually the Greek god Zeus, king of the Olympian gods, who has transformed himself into the form of a swan in order to impregnate Leda. As befits his godly position, Zeus is the power player in the poem, his attack setting into motion Leda's pregnancy, the birth of Helen, and the war that leads to the fall of Troy and rise of modern Greek history. But rather than referring explicitly to Zeus the god, Yeats consistently depicts him in his symbolic swan form, which highlights his animalistic nature as he relies on violence and violation in order to achieve his ends.

Relatedly, because the speaker of the poem hews so closely to Leda's human perspective, the glimpses readers get of the swan are fragmented and disorienting. These include the swan's "great wings," "dark webs," "bill," "feathered glory," "white rush," "loins," "brute blood," and "indifferent beak." This use of synecdoche—in which a part of the swan represents the bird as a whole—adds to the sense that the swan represents something so immense, so all-powerful, that no one description can capture its entirety.

Accordingly, the swan has been interpreted as a symbol for many things besides the god Zeus himself. Drawing parallels between Zeus's rape of Leda and the Christian Annunciation, some have read the swan as symbolic of God or the Holy Spirit, whose child conceived upon the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, changes the path of history. Still others have interpreted the swan as a symbol for England, the colonial power that dominated Yeats's native country of Ireland for centuries. Regardless, in its broadest meaning, the swan can be understood as symbolic of fate, destiny, history or change—any of the powerful forces that impact human lives.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the great wings beating"
- **Lines 2-3:** "her thighs caressed / , her nape / ,"
- **Line 3:** "By the dark webs," "caught in his bill"
- **Line 6:** "The feathered glory"
- **Line 7:** "laid in that white rush,"
- **Line 8:** "the strange heart beating"
- **Line 9:** "A shudder in the loins engenders"
- **Line 13:** "brute blood"
- **Line 14:** "his knowledge with his power"
- **Line 15:** "the indifferent beak"

LEDA

Apart from the title, Leda goes unnamed throughout the poem. Introduced as a mere "staggering girl," from that point on, she, like the swan, is primarily described using synecdoche. Fragments of Leda's body—"her thighs," "her nape," "her helpless breast," her "terrified vague fingers" and "loosening thighs"—become representative of the woman as a whole. Line 9 simply reduces Leda to her womb, referring to her not even as a human being but as as "there"—the spot in which the god Zeus has planted the seeds of history.

Leda as woman, Leda as queen, Leda as 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.

For starters, Yeats himself drew comparisons between Leda and the Virgin Mary, both of whom were human women who conceived babies by divine power, and bore children who grew up to alter history and usher in new eras of transformation. But Leda has also been read as symbolic of the country of Ireland, colonized by its more-powerful neighbor, England. These readings are rendered more complex when considering that some have read Leda's actions in the second stanza as indicative of her eventual consent, prompting questions about how Yeats viewed Ireland's own role in its subjugation and colonization.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "the staggering girl," "her thighs caressed"
- **Line 3:** "her nape caught"
- **Line 4:** "her helpless breast"
- **Line 5:** "terrified vague fingers"
- **Line 6:** "loosening thighs"
- **Line 7:** "body"
- **Line 9:** "there"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?"

THE TROJAN WAR

Synecdoche is again the primary poetic device used in this symbol. Though the poem contains no *explicit* mention of Troy or the Trojan War, the individual images of the "broken wall, the burning roof and tower / and Agamemnon dead" in lines 10 and 11 are obvious references to this cataclysmic event in Greek mythology, which some believe may have been partially based in historical fact.

Together, Yeats uses these three striking images as symbols of the Trojan War, and in turn, uses the Trojan War as a whole as a symbol for a pivotal moment in ancient Greek history. This moment, as he saw it, set the stage for the dawn of the Greek Golden Age, and the era of modern European history that followed.

Therefore, this reference to the Trojan War can also be understood as a larger symbol of history and transformation. Yeats believed that history was composed of a series of cycles, and that it was possible to identify the turning points that triggered each new and transformative era. Every era, in other words, has its own Trojan War; and "Leda and the Swan" has often been read as symbolic of the dawn of Christianity and the Irish Civil War, with "the broken wall, the burning roof and tower / and Agamemnon dead" coming to represent the cataclysmic violence necessary for each era to achieve transformation.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is most evident in the first stanza of the poem, where the successive uses of the same sounds helps to convey the frenzy and panic of Zeus's attack on Leda. In particular, the repetitive /h/ and /b/ sounds in the final line, "He holds her helpless breast upon his breast," helps to emphasize the firm grasp that Zeus has on Leda. Just like he has dominated her, the alliteration dominates the line.

The second stanza also uses alliteration to significant effect, linking together two body parts in conflict, Leda's "fingers" and Zeus's "feathered glory," through the use of the /f/ sound. Followed-up by "feel" in line 8, each of these words tracks Leda's capitulation, which is then echoed by the alliterative link between "body" and "beating." The suggestion that Leda cannot help but feel Zeus's heartbeat is brought vividly to life by the alliterative /b/ sounds that themselves suggest a heartbeat.

Last but not least, the third stanza comes back to /b/ sounds in "broken" and "burning"—tying together the separate images that make up the fall of Troy, and linking them to the "brute blood" that courses through Zeus's veins and plays a vital role in bringing that event to life.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sudden blow," "beating still"
- **Line 2:** "staggering"
- **Line 3:** "By," "bill"
- **Line 4:** "He holds her helpless breast," "his breast"
- **Line 5:** "fingers"
- **Line 6:** "feathered," "from"
- **Line 7:** "body"
- **Line 8:** "But," "feel," "beating"
- **Line 10:** "broken," "burning"
- **Line 12:** "Being"
- **Line 13:** "brute blood"
- **Line 15:** "Before," "beak"

ALLUSION

The entire poem, as made clear by the title "Leda and the Swan," is an allusion to Greek myth, and the many other works of art that reference the story.

In brief, the story goes that the king of the gods, Zeus, transformed himself into a swan in order to impregnate Leda. (Some versions describe this union as seduction; others, like Yeats, as rape.) In some versions, Leda then gave birth to two eggs, out of which hatched four children, the warrior twins Castor and Pollux, and the sisters Helen and Clytemnestra. Pollux and Helen were said to be the children of Zeus, while Castor and Clytemnestra were the children of Leda's human husband.

There are many myths told about each of these four children, but the important one for the purposes of this poem is about Helen. She was married to a Greek king when a Trojan prince fell wildly in love with her. He stole her away to Troy (some say she went willingly), leading to a decade-long war between the Greeks and the Trojans, best known to literature through Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*. By the war's conclusion, Troy had been conquered by the Greeks, its walls breached by the infamous Trojan Horse before being burned to the ground.

As it turns out, Leda's other daughter and Helen's sister, Clytemnestra, had also married a Greek king—the powerful military commander Agamemnon, who happened to be the brother of Helen's first husband. (In other words, he was Helen's brother-in-law twice over.) Though he was among the victorious Greeks who got revenge against Helen and the Trojans, Agamemnon did not have much time to gloat over his victory. As soon as he returned home from the war, he was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra.

All of this mythology is implicitly referenced through Yeats's poem, especially the instigating event of this mythological epic—the sexual encounter between Leda and Zeus. Apart from the title, the most explicit allusions to the myth are the many descriptions of the swan, and the references in lines 10-11 to the conquered city of Troy and the death of Agamemnon.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead."

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Anthropomorphism is evident throughout the poem, which

presents the god Zeus in the form of a swan. Though he is engaging in human activities—for example, sex with a human woman—he is only ever described as a swan, including direct references to his wings, webbed feet, feathers, and beak. The contrast between the swan's body and Leda's human body renders these details especially unusual and vivid.

The poem's use of anthropomorphism is particularly strong in lines 7-8, when the description of the swan's "strange heart beating" next to Leda's implies that there is a connection being made between her body and his. The adjective "strange" helps emphasize how unusual it is for an animal to possess human characteristics, reminding readers that this is no ordinary swan, or even an ordinary human, but in fact a god.

Interestingly, though the title makes clear that the swan is in fact the god Zeus, carrying out his plans to shape Greek history, it is not until the final lines of the poem that the speaker gives the swan any internal thoughts. Though the swan's behavior is anthropomorphized, in other ways, because readers don't have direct access to the swan's motives, its behavior reads as brutal and animalistic due to the violence it inflicts on Leda. This changes in line 14, when the speaker describes the swan's "knowledge" and "power," and directly links those attributes not just to humanity but to divinity.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Lines 13-15

ASYNDETON

The first stanza is an excellent example of asyndeton, in which several clauses are listed one after another without conjunctions. Overall, this ramps up the pace of the poem. It creates a sense of haste and frenzy as Leda panics in response to Zeus's assault.

Likewise, the fall of Troy in line 10 in neatly captured using asyndeton to link together the two images that make up the conquest of the city:

> The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

In the next line, however, the death of Agamemnon breaks from the asyndeton with the conjunction "and," adding a sense of finality to the image.

Last but not least, the asyndeton in lines 12 and 13 helps to emphasize the extent to which Leda has been overpowered by Zeus. Listing one descriptor ("so mastered") directly after the previous one ("so caught up") without any conjunctions in between again builds up the pace of the poem and intensifies the emotions being described.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "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."
- **Line 10:** "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Being so caught up, / So mastered "

CAESURA

The poem contains caesura throughout. Sometimes this ties in with the poem's use of asyndeton, as commas merely serve to break up the poem's descriptive lists.

That said, there are two instances of caesura that are particularly remarkable. The first occurs in the very first line of the poem, when the colon separates "A sudden blow" from the rest of the description of Leda's assault. This abrupt interruption sets the scene by telling readers what has caused the rest of the attack, and also mirrors the attack itself by stopping and shocking readers in the same way that that the sudden blow stopped and shocked Leda.

Later, lines 11 and 12 are separated not only by a line break but also by an emphatic instance of caesura:

> And Agamemnon dead.
> Being so caught up,

Recall that the poem is written in iambic pentameter for the most part, meaning there should be 10 syllables per line. Both of these lines are clearly too short, then; line 11 has 6 syllables, whereas line 12 has either 4 or 5 depending on how readers scan "Being." Thus, despite their being separated by a line break, it's perhaps easiest to think of them as a single line that has been violently rendered into two parts, with both a full stop caesura and white space in the middle.

Fittingly, this marks a pivotal transition in the poem, shifting from the moment of Leda's conception of Helen (and the fall of Troy), to the aftermath, in which the speaker meditates on whether Leda is capable of understanding her fate, which has just been sealed. Because this poem is a sonnet, this shift is called a volta--the moment at the end of a sonnet when the poem undergoes a "turn" or rhetorical shift—and, in this case, is marked by the caesura following Agamenon's death.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "blow: the"
- **Line 2:** "girl, her"
- **Line 3:** "webs, her"

- **Line 7:** “body, laid”
- **Line 10:** “wall, the”
- **Line 11:** “dead.”
- **Line 12:** “Being”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout the poem, perhaps most vividly in the first stanza, which consists of a single run-on sentence. The overall effect is that of haste and urgency, pushing readers from line to line, one image after the next, helping to convey the chaotic nature of Zeus's assault on Leda. Likewise, in the first lines of the final stanza, enjambment once again speeds readers along by describing the moment of conception and the fall of Troy in one continuous sentence broken across three lines.

Throughout the second stanza, enjambment helps to link the images and ideas of each rhetorical question. In lines 5-6, it mimics Leda's own circumstances—she cannot push Zeus away, and neither can readers separate themselves from the image that carries on into the next line:

> How can those terrified vague fingers push
> The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

Lastly, the poem's final lines and final rhetorical question contains a pivotal use of enjambment. The continuous sentence helps tie together what are otherwise two lines representing contrasting interpretations of the moment—the possibility that Leda *does* "put on [Zeus's] knowledge with his power," and the possibility that she doesn't "Before the indifferent beak could let her drop" and Zeus moves on.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “still / Above”
- **Lines 2-3:** “caressed / By”
- **Lines 5-6:** “push / The”
- **Lines 9-10:** “there / The”
- **Lines 10-11:** “tower / And”
- **Lines 14-15:** “power / Before”

IMAGERY

"Leda and the Swan" is filled with imagery, much of it strange and graphic. The first stanza uses descriptions of both the swan and "the staggering girl" to vividly render the attack on Leda, zeroing in on details like "her nape caught in his bill" to help bring the assault to life and to underscore Leda's confusion and helplessness against a god. All of readers' senses are alert as the speaker shifts between violent and sensual language, in one moment calling forth the terrifying image of "the great wings beating" before suddenly conjuring the erotic image of "thighs [being] caressed."

This back-and-forth between violent and sensual imagery continues throughout the poem, as does the attention to small details, from Leda's "terrified vague fingers" to the swan's "feathered glory." The fall of Troy is also rendered in a series of specific images—"The broken wall, the burning roof and tower"—rather than any explicit reference to war or conquest. Rather than simply state that this rape will lead to war, the speaker pushes the reader to envision what that war will actually look like, to see a vision of the future in this moment.

Because of the controversial nature of the subject matter, the vividness of the poem's imagery can be uncomfortable. Yeats spares no detail in capturing what it would look like for a swan-god to rape a girl. In many ways, however, it's the power of the poem's imagery that also helps elevate the specific details of Leda and Zeus's story into something more metaphoric and symbolic. That is, the poem is not really about this specific moment, but rather what that moment suggests about humanity, fate, and progress.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-13
- Line 15

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Leda and the Swan" contains three different rhetorical questions. An unusual poetic move, these questions serve several purposes in the poem. The first is to suggest futility, especially in the second stanza, which includes two of the three instances of this device:

> How can those terrified vague fingers push
> The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
> And how can body, laid in that white rush,
> But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

In both cases, the form of the rhetorical question helps make clear that Leda was powerless to resist Zeus's assault. It frames the possibility of her resistance as a question whose answer is so obvious that it needs no answer at all.

The second impact of rhetorical questions in the poem is to directly invoke readers, and implicitly to ask *them* to come up with the answers to these conundrums. This is particularly true of the final instance, in the last two lines of the poem, when the answer is less obvious than before. Did Leda understand the significance of this moment, or no? Rather than tell readers outright, Yeats and the speaker empower readers to do their own interpretation and make their own choice.

Lastly, all of these questions are fundamentally universal: can human beings resist the powerful forces that shape their lives? In fact, for that matter, are they even capable of understanding them? The use of rhetorical questions therefore not only triggers readers to interpret the poem on their own, but also to consider their own lives on these terms as well.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "How can those terrified vague fingers push / The feathered glory from her loosening thighs? / And how can body, laid in that white rush, / But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?"

SYNECDOCHE

"Leda and the Swan" is littered with synecdoche. Both the swan and Leda are represented throughout the poem by their various parts. Wings, thighs, webbed feet, the nape of a neck, and each of their breasts are the examples from the first stanza alone! This continues through the second and third stanza, where the city of Troy and the Trojan War join the two main characters in being primarily described through synecdoche ("The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead.").

The effect is to disorient readers, or rather to orient them *to* Leda's terrified perspective, helping to convey the frenzy and fear she feels during the assault. Everything is happening so fast and so violently that she can only absorb it piecemeal. Likewise, the synecdoche helps emphasize the utter strangeness of her situation: an assault by a god in the form of an animal. For instance, "the strange heart" in line 8 represents the strange being, period, who has forced himself upon her.

This device also makes it easier for readers to interpret the poem as having symbolic meaning beyond the surface-level story of Leda and Zeus. Because Leda and the swan are never fully fleshed out, but instead presented to readers as various parts that represent a whole, it's easy to then interpret those wholes as metaphors for larger ideas or concepts. For example, Leda and her body have often been read as a metaphor for the nation of Ireland.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the great wings"
- **Line 2:** "her thighs"
- **Line 3:** "the dark webs," "her nape," "his bill"
- **Line 4:** "her helpless breast," "his breast"
- **Line 5:** " terrified vague fingers"
- **Line 6:** "The feathered glory," "loosening thighs"
- **Line 7:** "white rush"
- **Line 8:** "the strange heart"
- **Line 9:** "shudder in the loins," "there"
- **Lines 10-11:** "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead."
- **Line 13:** "brute blood of the air"
- **Line 15:** "the indifferent beak "

VOCABULARY

Blow (Line 1) - A "blow" is a forcible stroke delivered with a part of the body, such as a fist, or, in this case, Zeus's wings.

Staggering (Line 2) - "To stagger" is to reel from side to side or to stumble unsteadily, just as Leda is doing in response to being struck by Zeus. "Staggering" also can mean astonishing or overwhelming, meaning that this word is doing double-duty by literally describing Leda's actions but also implicitly conveying her shock as well.

Caressed (Line 2) - "To caress" something is to touch or stroke it lightly in a loving or endearing manner. It is a sensual verb that contrasts vividly and controversially with the reality of what Zeus is doing: raping Leda.

Dark webs (Line 3) - The "dark webs" in the poem refer to the swan's dark-colored, webbed feet.

Nape (Line 3) - The "nape" refers to the back of a person's neck, in this case Leda's, and has a connotation of vulnerability.

Bill (Line 3) - The "bill" in this poem is the swan's bill, a common bird body part used for eating, preening, killing prey, fighting, courtship, and feeding young.

White rush (Line 7) - The "white rush" refers to the blur of white feathers that Leda sees as the swan presses its body against hers. The use of the word "rush" helps to convey the speed and frenzy of Zeus's assault.

Loins (Line 9) - "Loins" is an old-fashioned word for genitalia; the "shudder in the loins" in this poem refers to orgasm and ejaculation. The word is also commonly used to refer to cuts of meat, emphasizing the animalistic nature of the swan.

Engenders (Line 9) - To "engender" something is to beget, create, or produce it. In this case, Zeus is literally creating a baby, but he is also producing the fall of Troy.

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower (Line 10) - These images are subtle allusions to the fall of Troy, a city that went to war with the ancient Greeks over Helen, Zeus and Leda's daughter, who was said to be the most beautiful woman in the world. After 10 years of war, the Greeks successfully infiltrated the city by hiding inside the Trojan Horse, and then burnt the city to the ground, killing many Trojans and taking others as prisoners.

Agamemnon (Line 11) - In Greek mythology, Agamemnon was

a king of Mycenae, one of many ancient Greek kingdoms. His brother was married to Leda's daughter, Helen, conceived in this moment in the poem. According to myth, when Helen was abducted by the Trojan prince Paris and taken to Troy, Agamemnon commanded the united Greek army in the ensuing Trojan War, fighting for the return of his brother's wife.Later, upon his return from the war, Agamemnon was murdered by his own wife Clytemnestra, who also happened to be Helen's sister and Leda's other daughter. Some versions of the myth say her actions were in retaliation for Agamemnon's adultery, since he brought a Trojan princess home with him as a concubine. Other versions say Clytemnestra sought revenge on her husband for using their daughter as a human sacrifice to the gods before going to war.

Brute (Line 13) - An adjective that means animalistic, savage, harsh, and violent.

Indifferent (Line 15) - An adjective that indicates a lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern—in this case, Zeus's lack of concern for Leda.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Leda and the Swan" is divided into three stanzas and follows the form of the Petrarchan sonnet. As is typical of this type of sonnet, the first two stanzas of the poem each contain four lines (making them quatrains). There wouldn't usually be a stanza break *between* these two quatrains (which together can be considered an octave) in a sonnet. Overall, though, Yeats does follow the form relatively closely, with one major exception: the final stanza (beginning with "A shudder ..." in line 9) consists of seven lines.

Typically, this section would be a sestet, or a stanza with six lines. That said, lines 11 and 12 are much shorter than all the other lines in the poem, and can be considered one line that's been abruptly severed in two. This break occurs between the vision of the future, with the fall of Troy, and the present, wherein the speaker wonders if Leda has any knowledge of the events that her rape will set in motion. By breaking lines 11 and 12 in half visually and linking them through indentation, Yeats does superficially maintain the sestet and the sonnet form while also drawing attention to Leda's actual distance from these future events.

Yeats also keeps the volta, or turning point, of the sonnet in the traditional spot, between the octave and the sestet: line 9 marks the precise, cataclysmic moment of ejaculation and conception, which changes the course of history.

Another important aspect of the poem's form is that while the Petrarchan sonnet is usually associated with love poems, here Yeats subverts the form and uses it to depict rape. This choice draws further attention to the controversial subject matter and Yeats's atypical 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 his depiction of this moment as revolutionary, leaving behind an outsize impact on the world.

METER

The meter of "Leda and the Swan" is unusual. In keeping with the sonnet form, the poem roughly follows iambic pentameter. This means that most lines of the poem consist of five metrical feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern, making for ten syllables total per line. This da DUM pattern can be seen in line 4:

He holds | her help- | less breast | upon | his breast.

Iambic pentameter is often said to resemble a human heartbeat, and when that meter is in use, Yeats employs that association to great effect. For example, in the first stanza, the hurried bursts of iambic pentameter convey a rapidly-thumping, panicky heartbeat as Leda reacts to being assaulted.

However, the poem does not stick consistently to iambic pentameter. For example, the first line might best be scanned as:

A sud- | den blow: | the great | wings beat- | ing still

The double stress of "wings beat-" is a spondee. Combined with the "great" from the prior foot, this might also be considered an instance of something called molossus, a metrical foot used in ancient Greek and Latin poetry that consists of three long syllables (great wings beat). Either way, the strength of Zeus's mighty wings disturb the meter of the poem here, reflecting the god's power.

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 favor 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.

For example, line 3 might be scanned as follows:

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill

This could be broken into feet in a few different ways, but what's most important is how the clusters of stressed beats help to emphasize the grotesque and violent imagery of the swan's assault.

These variations from the sonnet's traditional meter are particularly evident in the final stanza of the poem, in which Yeats not only freely abandons iambic pentameter when the word choice or subject matter calls for it, but evens adds an extra syllable into the final line, for a total of 11 beats instead of

the expected 10:

> Before | the in- | differ- | ent beak | could let | her drop?

Why do this? The word "indifferent" is hugely important here, conveying volumes about Zeus's relationship to Leda and to humanity as a whole. It's a deviation from the metrical norm made with care, helping accomplish the poem's overall goal of pushing readers to confront some difficult and provocative subjects and questions.

RHYME SCHEME

In terms of rhyme scheme, "Leda and the Swan" follows the traditional sonnet form. Interestingly, however, though the poem overall is more typical of a Petrarchan sonnet (in that it essentially consists of an octave followed by a sestet—more on that in the Form section of this guide), the rhyme scheme of the first two stanzas actually resembles a Shakespearean sonnet. This is because, instead of following an ABAB ABAB pattern, the stanzas go:

> ABAB CDCD

...with new end rhymes being introduced in the second stanza.

The closing sestet also breaks from tradition. Though the rhyme schemes of the sestets in Petrarchan sonnets tend to be very flexible, they typically rotate between two or three different end rhyme sounds. In this poem, however, there are technically *four* distinct sounds (because line 11 has basically been cut in half). As such, the pattern goes:

> EFGHEFH

It should also be noted that many of these rhymes are not perfect rhymes, but instead slant rhymes (take "rush"/"push" and "up"/"drop" for example). Similarly, the word "dead" in line 11 rhymes with nothing else—an unusual choice in a sonnet. In this case, however, that choice not only makes this important moment in the poem—the description of the fall of Troy—stand out from the rest, it also is followed by a full stop, a clear pause that helps transition readers back into the scene with Zeus and Leda.

Nevertheless, the regular rhyme scheme is the aspect of the poem where Yeats sticks closely to the traditional sonnet form. In a poem that otherwise breaks many conventional rules, this consistency helps the poem hang together as a unified whole. It also adds to its readability, as the rhyme propels readers forward despite the difficult subject matter.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Leda and the Swan" is an anonymous figure. They are a witness to Zeus's assault on Leda, and describe the event in real time, blow by blow. For the most part, they stick closely to Leda's experience of the event, primarily conveying her panic and fear in response to being raped. In contrast, the speaker does not give readers any insight into Zeus's motivations or reactions. This indicates, most likely, that the speaker is meant to be a fellow human being, not a god. The fact that the speaker often addresses readers—presumably, also humans—through rhetorical questions also supports this interpretation.

However, the speaker is not just a bystander who happens to be present when this assault takes place. As revealed in the third stanza, the speaker already knows the consequences of Leda and Zeus's sexual encounter. The speaker has connected the dots between this significant moment and the legacy it leaves behind, which enables the speaker to not only render the moment of conception in line 9, but also to flash-forward and begin to reflect on its greater historical impact.

Interestingly, though, the speaker is not all-knowing. As lines 14-15 indicate, the speaker remains unsure of the degree to which Leda herself understands what is happening to her. Though the speaker has put themselves in Leda's shoes throughout the poem, conveying her terror with great precision, they still do not have complete insight into her internal experience.

In this way, the speaker very much reflects the readers, and even Leda herself—all of whom are human beings who vividly experience the forces of fate and history, even if they don't necessarily fully understand the implications or significance of those powerful forces.

SETTING

Given the myth that shapes the poem's narrative, the poem can be thought of as taking place in ancient Greece. That said, there is very little indication of any more specific setting of "Leda and the Swan." The speaker is so focused on the action and relationship between these two characters that no time is spent describing exactly where this assault takes place. The only place described by the poem is the city of Troy, in line 10, and even then, the city is used mostly as a symbol.

The poem does move around in *time*, however, from this moment between Leda and Zeus to the future where the city of Troy is being conquered and Agamemnon is murdered. The fluidity of the poem's time period reflects its thematic concerns with the way that a single event can ripple throughout history.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Leda and the Swan" was published toward the end of Yeats's career, in his 1928 collection *The Tower*, just five years after he

was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. This collection includes many other celebrated poems of his, including "Sailing to Byzantium." Not only are they regarded as masterpieces of Irish literature, both "Leda and the Swan" and *The Tower* as a whole are widely recognized as among the greatest literary works of the 20th century.

"Leda and the Swan" is also, of course, one of many artistic renditions of a classic Greek myth that has been told and retold many, many times. Indeed, even as far as back as ancient Greece itself, the story can be found in illustrations on vases and urns. In brief, the most common version of the myth is that the king of the gods, Zeus, transformed himself into a swan in order to impregnate Leda. (Some versions describe this union as seduction; others, like Yeats, as rape.) From this union, Leda gave birth to at least one child, Helen, considered the most beautiful woman in the world. Helen married a Greek king, only to be abducted by a Trojan prince, leading to the decade-long Trojan War described in *The Iliad*.

The Iliad is generally believed to be among the first literary works of Greek antiquity. Together with *The Odyssey*, it represents the heart of the Western literary canon, and has influenced writers and their work for thousands of years. "Leda and the Swan" is very much a part of this literary family.

Beyond its mythic and ancient literary context, "Leda and the Swan" should also be understood as part of Ireland's history, both literary and otherwise. William Butler Yeats was an enormously prolific and influential Irish writer. Born in 1865, his influences were wide and diverse, including the English Romantics—figures such as Wordsworth ("I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), Blake ("London"), and Keats ("To Autumn")—and the French Symbolists, such as Stephen Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud.

Yeats was also fascinated by Irish mythology and folklore. He played a vital role in the Irish Literary Revival, which included a renewed interest in Irish and Gaelic literature, language, history, and culture, all of which had been suppressed by English colonization. This revival was a key part of the Irish push for self-autonomy, leading to its eventual rebellion and the achievement in 1924 of an independent Irish state.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though "Leda and the Swan" makes no explicit mention of Irish nationalism, nor does it touch on Irish folklore or mythology (as many of Yeats's poems do), it has nevertheless been widely interpreted as an allegory for the Irish War for Independence and Irish Civil War. These two back-to-back conflicts were cataclysmic, marking the biggest political upheaval in Yeats's lifetime (barring perhaps World War I). They certainly hit closer to home, and led to political changes that Yeats had been advocating for most of his life.

"Leda and the Swan's" depiction of historical change vividly reflects the intense violence and upheaval that Ireland endured during Yeats's lifetime. What's more, from his notes and papers, scholars know that Yeats was working on the poem during 1923 and 1924, the precise years of the Irish Civil War, while he was also serving as a senator for the Irish Free State. Though Yeats generally eschewed violence as a means of resistance, he had conflicting feelings about those involved in the armed insurrection, and certainly about the impact of violence when it aligned with his own political goals and beliefs. This can be seen throughout "Leda and the Swan," especially its ambiguity concerning Leda's rape.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Yeats's Geometry and Gyres — An excerpt from a scholarly article that investigates W.B. Yeats's theories about "gyres" and historical change. (https://www.yeatsvision.com/Geometry.html)
- The Life and Works of William Butler Yeats — An online exhibition presented by the National Library of Ireland on W.B. Yeats and his impact on his native country. (http://www.nli.ie/yeats/)
- Yeats's Biography — An account of W.B. Yeats's life, with a focus on his development as a poet. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)
- Leda and the Swan in Art — A round-up of just some of the many interpretations of the story of Leda and the Swan in visual art. (https://painting-mythology.blogspot.com/2015/11/44-works-leda-and-swan-art-from-greek.html)
- Encyclopedia Mythica — A helpful resource for more information on mythical figures referenced by the poem, including Leda, Zeus, and Agamemnon. (https://pantheon.org/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- Easter, 1916
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- When You Are Old

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