

## Leda and The Swan

classmate

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Leda and the Swan is one of the most famous and perfect poems of W.B. Yeats. It is a sonnet of fourteen lines which was composed in 1923. It fuses mythology and history and depicts Yeats' view of the cyclic movement of civilization.

The poem dramatically presents in a graphic manner the story of Leda and the Swan from Greek mythology. In the Greek mythology, Leda was the mother of mankind; Zeus, or Jupiter appeared to her in the form of a Swan and raped her. As a result of this sexual act were born heroes and heroines who laid the foundation of a way of living called the Athenian civilization. Leda became the mother of Helen, Castor and Pollux, and Clytemnestra. This mythological story is thus the theme of this poem.

A girl is bathing naked in a pond when a big bird suddenly swoops down upon her, caresses her, thighs, holds her nape with his beak and presses her helpless breasts upon his own. The girl is terrified. She feels helpless in the grip of the bird and her thighs loosen. A god thus exploits a mortal woman. And out of this sexual union of the human with the superhuman are born great persons. Leda gave birth to Helen and Clytemnestra, and both of them were the causes of great tragedies.

The poem is very rich in suggestiveness. It suggests a crucial stage in the history of mankind when heavenly agency intervenes in mundane affairs of humanity. We are, thus, reminded of Virgin Mary and her dove, and of the advent of Christ two thousand years ago. The era of civilization commenced in the world following the sexual congress of an immortal god with a mortal woman of the human race. When it completed its destined cycle of years its second cycle began with the incarnation of a god. Now the second cycle is nearing its end and

Therefore, superhuman power must intervene in some form or the other. Yeat's vision of the future of the human race is thus rooted in mythology.

The poem also reminds us that beautiful women have always been a cause of disaster. Helen the most beautiful woman of her age allowed herself to be seduced by the prince of Troy and eloped with him. That act of feminine folly led to the destruction of Troy. Another beautiful woman was Clytemnestra. She was the wife of a great hero, Agamemnon. But she betrayed him and murdered him with her paramour's help. His death was avenged by his son who slew Clytemnestra in turn.

The poem reflects Yeat's occult beliefs and his philosophy of "A Vision". It depicts Yeat's view of the cyclic movement of civilization. "The solar wheels of the Principles and the lunar wheels of the Faculties, and every moment of time are parts of the primary or antithetical phase of more than one wheel." The Greek civilization was antithetical and the Christianity was a primary phase. Yeats represents annunciation in the poem *Leda and the Swan*. "The annunciation has been portrayed through the rape of Leda by the divine swan". It is Zeus who in the garb of the swan appears and begets Helen leading to the destruction of Troy. Zeus's passion terrifies Leda in the beginning but later when she has become passionate, Zeus is unconcerned.

Leda and the Swan are the counterpart of Mary and her dove who ushered in the Christian civilization. While the Greek civilization was the harsher worship of blood, toil and tears, the Christian was one of passive and non-violence era of love. By an inexorable law, now that the Christian era is coming to an end, it is bound to be followed

by a more violent age, such as the Greek era was. From this point of view the poem assumes the proportions of a prophecy. In the words of Cleanth Brooks - "Leda and the Swan far from being merely a pretty cameo, a stray object of art picked up from the ruins of older civilizations, has a vital relation to Yeats in his own civilization of the twentieth century."

"Leda and the Swan", therefore is a poem which is rich in its originality and suggestiveness. It is a perfect sonnet. Everything in it contributes to the design. Even rhythm itself underlines the shifting passions of the two characters. The deliberate Freudian imagery is there. There are images that suggest so much, tell more than they mean. There are rich suggestive phrases like the "loosening thighs", "the white rush", "the beating heart" all of which suggest sexual orgy. And when we read of the broken wall, the whole history of the Trojan war dances before our eyes.

Behind the poem there is phonetic subtlety, the change of speed and tension. The poem is classical in its elegance and choice of words. The poem starts with the suddenness of a storm. Everything is dramatically conceived. Everything is concentrated and condensed. Everything is compressed, and out of such a concentration, compression and conception, the poem rises to the lofty heights. At last, the Swan becomes the symbol of the soul, Leda of the body.