

Yeats' "Leda and the Swan": A Myth of Violence

Ruzbeh Babae*, Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia,
43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

*E-mail address: rbabaei30@yahoo.ca

ABSTRACT

W. B. Yeats' "Leda and the Swan", first published in the *Dial* in 1924, is an example of Irish poetry drawing on Classical Greek and Latin texts to create a commentary on the political atmosphere in Ireland. The poem is based on the story of Leda, who was raped by Zeus in the form of a swan and later gave birth to Helen of Troy. In Yeats's poem, Leda represents Ireland, forcefully violated by a foreign power — Great Britain. The present study reviews mythological as well as political aspects of Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" and investigates the act of violence in the poem.

Keywords: Myth; Violence; History; Rape; Politics; Annunciation Poetry

1. INTRODUCTION

In "Leda and the Swan", Yeats employs the fourteen lines of sonnet form but in a new style. He depicts a range of wonderful but odd images of a physical event. By the help of language and structure, Yeats draws a well-known sexual picture without directly presenting the meaning of the poem. "Leda and the Swan" is a sexually violent poem with clear diction, rhythmic tone, and allusion to Greek myth about the world, the relation of human and divine, and the history. It is also a poem about the approach through which one event can be understood as a part of a bigger scheme; the consequence of the Zeus's invasion to Leda is the birth of Helen of Troy, and the outset of the modern time.

The title of the poem is significant, since it is the only indication of Leda and the Swan, the characters of the poem in which Yeats thinks that the readers know about the myth of Leda and the Swan. Yeats does not use the names of the characters throughout the poem. Also, Zeus's name is not seen in both the title and the text.

"Leda and the Swan" is one of Yeats' "Annunciation" poems. In Christianity, the Annunciation is the notice by Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would give birth to a child by the Holy Spirit that came to Mary in the form of a dove. The result of such union between the divine and human was Jesus Christ, whose birth showed the ruin of an old discipline in a new era and a Christian civilization. Yeats in his poem depicts an annunciation of a pretty different kind as Zeus, also in the form of a swan, comes to Leda and makes her pregnant with Helen, who destroys Greek civilization and raises a new period. Indeed, Yeats observes the rape of Leda by Zeus in parallel with the annunciation to the Virgin. Mary and Leda's children make some changes in the universe, and the time of their conception is fundamental for the

universe. Yeats sees the annunciation as a time in which the power of a god is mixed with humanity to renovate a civilization.

In "Leda and the Swan," like some other Yeats's annunciation poems such as "The Second Coming," "Two Songs from a Play," "The Magi," and "The Mother of God," the violence and horror of the union of divine and human is considered. Although Yeats assumes that any union of human and god should be horrible, he observes that it is possible for the mortal to gain a supernatural power. As at the end of "Leda and the Swan" Leda who is under the control of the "brute blood of the air," obtains some kinds of divine power and knowledge.

The poem starts with an attack. The initial lines show the attack and depict the details about Leda's thighs that are caressed. The reader comes to the understanding that there are several sexual images throughout the poem. Yeats' seizes the images with "wings beating still above the swaggering girl" and "her nape caught in his bill". Then, he contrasts such harsh images with the soft ones in "her helpless breast upon his breast".

Then Yeats display the images of rape and that "her fingers" can't push the "feathered glory from her loosening thighs". Also, a graphic picture of the rape, and the fall of the Greeks and the authority of gods over human is represented in the end of the poem. Yeats uses words such as "sudden blow, beating, staggering, beating, shudder, mastered" that show powerful actions. Also, he employs adjectives such as caressed, terrified, vague, and loosening that show Leda's weakness.

2. POLITICAL RAPE AND VIOLENCE

The poem is regarded as a masterpiece by many reviewers. Camille Paglia, sees the text as "the greatest poem of the twentieth century" (114). He argues "all human beings, like Leda, are caught up moment by moment in the 'white rush' of experience. For Yeats, the only salvation is the shapeliness and stillness of art" (118).

Janet Neigh observes the political aspects the poem, as she says, "when I take Yeats's sonnet personally, and pursue my identifications with the text, which as Cixous suggests one cannot help but do when reading, I identify with Leda and her experience of sexist victimization" (145). She sees "Rather than dismissing this as a subjective response to the poem not relevant to an analysis, I allow this response to propel my interpretation to explore how Leda might symbolize the female identified reader trying to establish agency from a text that in its representation of rape undermines her agency as a woman" (Ibid).

Neigh considers the political aspect of the poem as "ambivalent" because of its "open-ended conclusion" (Neigh 2006:146). Neigh considers the poem from a postcolonial perspective. She sees Leda as the symbolic rape of Ireland by the British Colonizers. Neigh sees the questions in the poem:

force the reader to consider what other kinds of civilizations might be possible. More specifically, Yeats questions what power Leda might gain from the swan before she is dropped to the ground after the rape. His decision to conclude the sonnet with a question invites his readers ... to imagine how Leda might recover agency and to develop strategies of resistance to colonialism and sexism. His final question makes his readers ask where, how, and whether Leda will find power. (Neigh 2006: 147)

Neigh's argument leads to some confusion in the poem. First she expresses the swan's "indistinguishable gender." Such observation of the swan's biological sex leads to the conclusion that "Leda and the Swan" is the reason that I

lose touch with absolute or binary gender categories. ... The "feathered glory", a name for the swan and perhaps even a symbol of the phallus, gets lost in a scene of hybridity and merging of opposites, suggesting that difference, rather than sameness, is the hidden underpinning of identity. The image of "breast upon breast" suggests the possibility of an erasure of the masculine all together. (Neigh 2006: 159)

For erasing the masculine power in the poem, Neigh removes the masculine pronoun "his," from the whole poem. While Yeats' text is "He holds her helpless breast upon his breast," Neigh says: "He holds her helpless breast upon breast" (Neigh 2006: 148) that results in great ambiguity.

According to Neigh, "Leda's lack of clear resistance to the swan's rape illustrates the impossibility of resistance without complicity" (2006: 153). Such complicity, from a postcolonial perspective in Yeats' poem, considers the writing of his work in English that is the language of the colonizers.

Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" represent a historical area. As Yeats himself imagines "the annunciation that founded Greece as made to Leda, remembering that they showed in a Spartan temple, strung up to the 'Leda and the swan' roof as a holy relic, an unhatched egg of hers; and that from one of her eggs came Love and from the other War" (Ross 140). Yeats sees, "all things are from antithesis," and continues, "when in my ignorance I try to imagine what older civilization that annunciation rejected I can but see bird and woman blotting out some corner of the Babylonian mathematical starlight" (Ross 141).

Yeats also himself confesses of his political intention for composing the poem, "I wrote Leda and the swan because the editor of a political review [George Russell, editor of the Irish Statesman] asked me for a poem. I thought, after the individualist, demagogic movement founded by Hobbes and popularized by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries." He goes on that "some movement from above proceeded by some violent annunciation. My fancy began to play with Leda and the swan for metaphor, and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it, and my friend tells me that his 'conservative readers would misunderstand the poem'" (Allt, 828).

Based on Greek myth, Zeus in the form of a swan raped Leda, the queen of sparta. Then, she produced two eggs. Based on the version of the myth to that Yeats depicts, "Castor and Clytaemnestra broke the one shell, Helen and Pollux the other" (Yeats *A Vision*, 51). Then the climax of the myth comes in the fall of Troy "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / and agamemnon dead".

At the center of the poem is the image of the swan that exists in a number of Yeats' poems, such as "among school Children," "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," "The Wild Swans at Coole," "Nineteen hundred and Nineteen," "The Tower." T. R. Henn observes the swan as a sign of "power, phallic strength, purity, spirit and spirits (as all white birds), fidelity; fire and air (as the dove); the ineffable Godhead" (Lonely Tower 256). Yeats states that he depicts the swan as: "Certain birds, especially as I see things, such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle, and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity, especially when floating upon the wind alone or alighting upon some pool or river, while the beasts that run upon the ground, especially those that run in packs, are the natural symbols of objective man" (Russell 789).

The poem starts suddenly with violence that is “A sudden blow.” Then we are exposed to a number of body parts such as webs, nape, and bill that are in the turmoil of the struggle. Word by word, the swan makes himself closer to Leda to hold “her helpless breast upon his breast.” Obviously, the swan is quite in power. Leda fingers are “vague” and “terrified”; the swan that was a creature of “web” and “bill” becomes a “feathered glory” and Leda’s things are “loosening.”

In the second stanza there is the regular end-rhyme. The reader faces with classical imagery that is the “feathered glory” of Zeus and his power. The second quatrain moves over the physical images to pose two questions. The first is that Leda does not have any choices but to accept. But, the second question suggests that Leda might not be quite unwilling and she is engaged in some emotional manners with swan. The rhetorical question in the second stanza gives Leda merely a “body” and openly states her temptation with a pun on “laid”: “and how can body, laid in that white rush, / But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?” In the ninth line, the word “turn” takes the reader to the fall of Troy that takes place after 10 years of war caused via the kidnapping of Helen by Paris while she grew up from an egg into a charming girl. Yeats breaks the eleventh line into two parts, writing the second half on a line under where it may be expected. This shows a mode of violence, which seems to be consistent with what happened previously.

Also, the swan’s “beating heart” refers to the allusion in line 13: “brute blood of the air.” Furthermore, it is an allusion to Christ’s beating heart in “The resurrection” (Russell 929, 931) as well as “Dionysus’s beating heart” in “Two songs from a Play.” In many works of Yeats, the “beating heart” shows that the divine is seems to be involved in the passion of the world, and the passion of the world is involved in the divine. According to Yeats in “RiBh denounces Patrick,” “Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed.” The horror is rooted in the idea that the world is controlled not via some rules of reason, but by the blood-sodden forces which captivated human being.

The third stanza becomes different. Instead of a four-lined quatrain, the poem becomes a six-lined sextet, including a caesura in the third line that starts with: “Agamemnon dead” and shows the imagery of the union of Leda and the Swan “the broken wall, the burning roof and tower.” After a pause, it goes on through a question that is it Leda who “put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” This stanza considers Leda’s perspective that allows the reader to see the regret she has about being so violated.

Yeats strongly shows the sentiment in “a shudder in the loins”. Leda bore Helen and Clytaemnestra, but at the same time the fall of Troy occurs: “broken wall,” “burning roof and tower” and the murder of Clytaemnestra’s husband, Agamemnon.

The poem comes to the ending with an equivocation: “Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” Such question raises the possibility that Zeus’s brute blood enters the human blood.

Yeats faces the readers with the idea that Leda’s relation with Zeus is more than that of a raped victim. In “Leda and the Swan”, Yeats tells more than a Greek myth. Remarkable symbolism can be found in the poem which retells the history consisting of a series of events in which everything influences everything else. Anything appears in isolation and everything new is produced via putting together of opposite forces. At the era, Yeats published “Leda and the Swan”, a new Ireland was made out of the previous chaos, and Yeats, as a member of Irish Senate, participated in the process of building a new Ireland. The opinion that violence has the capacity to produce knowledge can be seen in “Leda and the Swan” in which swan by his violence attempt to have control over Leda who later gains knowledge through this violence.

As Leo Spitzer observes, the poem pursues that of ancient Roman historians, “with which the poet must have been long acquainted” (Spitzer 274). The use of “the broken wall” pursues a Latin phrasing that was common in Livy and Ovid. Also, Trowbridge remarks on the scope of the poem: “Here, in a line and a half, the subject is immensely broadened, opening to the mind a vista of history” (121). The poem convinces the reader to consider Leda and her trouble. While Leda is the symbol of Ireland, the swan is England, and invader who attacks defenseless Ireland.

Elizabeth Cullingford (1996) notes that “according to Yeats, the poem was inspired by a meditation on the Irish situation in relation to world politics. The first version was finished... in the atmosphere of political instability resulting from the Civil War” (142). The poet wanted his poem to attack England’s violence. In Yeats’ words, “nothing is now possible but some movement from above preceded by some violent annunciation” (Allison 49). Yeats used “Leda and the Swan” as a metaphor to represent the “violent annunciation”. Obviously, the poem represents a political statement about the violent relation between Ireland and England. Indeed, the poem shows a social injustice by a higher power that is England.

Cullingford describes why Ireland was regarded as a quite conservative country in the 1920s and why obsession with sexuality resulted in the foundation of a Committee on Evil Literature in 1926. She states that Yeats’ intention of writing was “flout censorship” and that “its transgressive intent is readily apparent” (Cullingford 1994: par. 4). Also, Foster points to the genesis of “Leda and the swan” and Yeats’s goal of presenting the Irish atmosphere allegorically and refers to Yeats’ well-known statement that “as I wrote, a bird and a lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it” (Foster 2003: 243). Moreover, Cullingford argues: “All politics did not evaporate in the alchemy of the creative process, however: class politics were overshadowed though not entirely effaced by the politics of sexuality” (1994: par. 5).

Cullingford emphasizes on rape as the key theme of the poem. She sees rape as a significant motif for both feminists and gender critics since it considers sexuality as well as gender relations. Cullingford argues that the outrage produced after the publishing the poem was not due to concerning women, but that, “[a]t issue was not the right of women to control and represent their own sexuality, but the male writer’s freedom to use rape as a subject in a legitimate journal. ... no one at the time seriously questioned whether this liberalism justified [Yeats’s] graphic description of the body of a woman attacked and violently raped by an animal” (Cullingford 1994: par. 10).

Cullingford also sees a pornographic state in “Leda”: “Subordination, dehumanization, pain, rape, being reduced to body parts and penetrated by an animal: ‘Leda’ has it all” (Cullingford 1994: par. 14). Cullingford in her analysis represents a vision “in which the woman becomes an object for his scrutiny and pleasure” (par. 15). Cullingford shows the poem is pornography because it sees Leda as a body (nape, thighs, breast) that is subordinated and the swan is “above” her. Cullingford believes the narration of Leda and the swan is a piece of high art and as a pornography of a sexual intercourse between animal and human.

Furthermore, Cullingford sees the Hellenistic bas-relief, as a visual resource for the poem, and Faure’s idea about it. To compare that with Yeats’ distinguished version, Cullingford admits that Yeats made change in Faure’s idea which Leda welcomed Zeus’s attack, even if the violence of the attack was “a deceptive promise of gentleness” (Cullingford 1994: par. 25) stayed in “her thighs caressed.” Cullingford shows “‘Leda and the Swan’ starts as a real rape, but Yeats’s language hints at the possibility of consent in media res” (Cullingford 1994: par. 26).

Cullingford makes distinction between the first two and the last question. She argues Yeats tries to resist the temptation “to assume that being raped by a god must be a glamorous experience worth any amount of inconvenience” (1994: par. 36).

3. CONCLUSIONS

A critical reading of “Leda and the Swan” considering the opposite forces within the poem, mixed with an observation of Irish conditions against England reveals the poem to be a manifestation of the clash between colonizer and colonized, human and divine that Yeats tried to reconcile.

Leda is at the center of several clashes. Directly, she is in physical conflict with Zeus, as females of Yeats' era used to be in direct conflict with the males. Leda is depicted as a part of a political affair in which her action contributes to cyclical shift in power that occurs in the universe, just as individual struggles influenced the shift in power between Ireland and Great Britain. Leda represents a perception into how changes can be fulfilled. Although Zeus was in power, Leda obtained something valuable from his violence. She gained knowledge and awareness that are significant for a weak figure in confrontation with a powerful force.

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