

**Relationship Between Language and Meaning:  
“Leda and the Swan” by William Butler Yeats**

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**LEDA AND THE SWAN / WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS**

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?

Source: <http://www.online-literature.com/donne/865/>

**I. Introduction**

“Leda and the Swan” by William Butler Yeats (1924) is a symbolist poem that tells the mythological story of rape. The conflict and point of tension is a married woman, Leda’s being “physically” raped by Zeus in the shape of a white swan. The incident is told by an omniscient narrator through violent tones and diction as in the action itself. Via this poem, Yeats draws attention to an enigmatic relationship between modern humans and power. To achieve this goal, meaning in the poem is equally and concurringly produced and enhanced by two elements: language and imagery, which can be seen through transactional reader-response criticism.

**II. Language and Meaning**

Firstly, by using literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt’s *efferent* mode, it can be stated that readers can “focus just on the information contained in the text as if it were a storehouse of facts and ideas that [readers] could carry away with [them],” (158) as Louis Tyson states in his book *Critical Theory Today*. From this point of view, Yeats produces meaning via

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language in terms of word choice, rhythm, and form. At that point, although it is a symbolic poem, Yeats chooses most words that readers can understand easily. There are no misused words or technical terms in terms of *efferent* mode, and readers do not have difficulty understanding the pronouns such as “he”, “it”, and “she” and the possessive adjectives such as “her” and “his” and whom they refer to. Adjectives such as “helpless”, “broken”, “burning”, and “brute” are not loaded or redundant but used only to describe the scenery; in addition, the repetition of some words might make readers think about the events and the images correspondingly. To illustrate, “**caught up**” and “**caught in**” as well as “wings **beating**” and “heart **beating**” help readers understand the dynamism and restlessness of the events in the poem actively. The choice of the verbs “to catch” and “to beat” and repetition makes readers feel the suppression and violence of the rape because the meaning of these verbs and the sound [t] remind them of a kind of sudden attack.

Also, rhythm is another factor that enhances meaning and it can be analyzed through Rosenblatt’s *aesthetic* mode as Tyson explains in his book that readers can “experience a personal relationship to the text that focuses [readers’] attention on the emotional subtleties of its language and encourages [them] to make judgments” (158). From that perspective, it can be concluded that the rhythm in the poem is arranged in iambic pentameter which makes the poem more conspicuous. Besides, readers can easily memorise poems via rhythm easier; that’s why Yeats might have used the rhythm to have readers remember the event (the rape) in the poem. There are mostly ten syllables in each line that make regular sense, and the first syllables of the words are generally stressed such as “**sudden**”, “**staggering**”, “**helpless**”, “**terrified**”, “**feathered**”, “**loosening**”, “**broken**”, “**burning**”, “**mastered**”. As it can be seen easily, among nearly seventeen first-syllable-stressed words, half of them are adjectives. All the words whose first syllables are stressed are to show the impact of the “sudden blow.” These stressed adjectives emphasize the rape’s heavy power and *stress* on Leda as well as destroyed Troy. Through *aesthetic mode*, all of the details in the language told above can help readers to make judgments about power relations in the poem.

Lastly, form is another important element that produces and enhances (Wolfgang Iser’s literary term) *indeterminate* meaning in the poem in terms of structure, stanza and lines, and rhyme scheme. The poem is a sonnet, which is a more traditional way of expression for the modern era. There are two parts in the poem: the octave (first eight lines) and the sestet (last six lines). The first part is mainly about rape and the second part is about the result of rape in history. Rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFGEFG. This scheme creates a kind of violent

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eroticism on readers. In short, language makes the meaning of rape more concrete and perceivable through word choice, rhythm, and form, and indeterminate meaning can be deciphered by these three elements in an easy way.

### **III. Image and Meaning**

Louis Tyson says in *Critical Theory Today*,

“. . . for Iser, though the reader projects meaning onto the text, the reading activities through which we construct that meaning are *prestructured* by, or built into, the text. In other words, Iser believes that the text, itself, guides us through the processes involved in interpreting (projecting meaning onto) it (159).”

By keeping in mind Iser’s point of view about the interpretation of the text, it can be said that meaning in the poem is produced by imagery through figurative devices. The images are mostly figurative, and symbols make the meaning of rape concrete. Readers can feel the physically violent atmosphere with their sense of sight, touch, and hearing from the descriptive words such as “blow” (which has also a pornographic meaning), “beating”, “burning”, “brute blood”, “feathered”, and “staggering”. Figurative language also extends the meaning. For instance, there is parallelism between Leda’s being raped and the fall of Troy since after the rape Leda delivers Helen who causes the Trojan War, and the fall of Troy and Clytemnestra who gets her husband Agamemnon killed. This parallelism also links the idea of the rape of a woman and the “rape” of a city. The second literary device is zeugma. “A shudder in the loins engenders” three things: “The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead.” *Engendering* helps the poet set up a cause-and-effect relationship. In these lines, there is both eponym (“Agamemnon”) and allusion (Trojan War and murder of Agamemnon by his wife and her lover). This can be thought that there is a direct relation between the fact of rape and the change in history (the fall of Troy). Thirdly, repetition of the words “blow”, “breast”, “beating”, and “thighs” have bombastic effects on the poem for they draw readers’ attention to the bodies like a camera that zooms towards the details of the rape. Erotosis is another figurative device in the poem. Three questions are not answered. These questions heighten the tragedy, and the poet wants readers to replace themselves with Leda. Via these provocative questions, Yeats leaves readers to find solutions for that sexual abuse because while reading this poem, every reader watches the scenery in detail, so they should find the answers to the historical results of the rape. For example, critic Janet Neigh identifies

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herself with Leda in her article “Reading from the Drop: Poetics of Identification and Yeats’s ‘Leda and the Swan’”, and her solution and interpretation of rape is like that:

In other words, 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. Rather than dismissing this as a subjective response to the poem 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 (145).

Also, another critic Elizabeth B. Cullingford “answers her questions: the story of Leda and the swan exists on the fringes of high art as a slightly pornographic account of a sexual intercourse between animal and woman,” (58) as Maria Rita Drumond Viana quotes in her essay “Violence and Violation: The Rape in Yeats’s ‘Leda and the Swan.’” And she continues, “by changing it and making it a rape, by exposing a kind of sexual behaviour that had been banned from Irish press and raising controversy, Yeats was being liberal even if complicit with oppression” (58). In terms of reader-response criticism, there are two different indeterminate meanings by two different critics, and they fill the gap according to their points of view. Another device is catachresis such as “feathered glory”. Readers know that the swan who is “feathered” is Zeus, the most *powerful* god of Olympus. It must be “glory” for a god to show his power via his *masculinity*! Personification is the main metaphor because a swan (or god) rapes a woman. Other devices such as synecdoche (“Helpless breast” and “terrified vague fingers”), alliteration (“great wings beating”, “staggering girls”, “holds her helpless”), assonance (“engenders there”, “roof and tower”), apostrophe (“laid in that white rush”), and metaphor (“rush”) which describes Zeus for rape is a fast action, emphasise emotional and physical concentration of the poem. All of these literary devices make the text “poem” which is one of the most important keywords of transactional reader-response criticism.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

To conclude, Yeats tells this mythological story by using all these devices and symbols to show transformation in the twentieth century by force because World War I is a symbolic rape of humankind. Imagery in the poem extends the poem’s meaning in a limited space. Namely, the white swan is a kind of white dust on humans in modern times.

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