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Aggression and Consent in Leda and the Swan

In Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan”, the line between aggression and consent seems to be decidedly vague. Of course, some readers would consider this claim to be preposterous and would even cite the poem as a classic instance of violence. This objection is admittedly valid because “Leda and the Swan” does seek to highlight the theme of aggression in a rather blunt if not decidedly graphic way. The poem is meant to make the readers uncomfortable with how it visually conceptualizes the act of rape between the woman (perceived to be Leda) and the Swan.

However, even with the undoubtful thematic concern of rape and violence, my claim stands not to be that there is not any aggression in the poem but rather that the line drawn between Leda’s consent and the swan’s rape is virtually indistinguishable. While this paradoxical portrayal is decidedly problematic, it is also extremely intriguing because it lets the readers understand the relationship dynamics of Leda and the Swan.

In order to support this claim, therefore, the readers must begin by analyzing the sharp contrasts between the negative and positive depictions of the woman and the swan. Certainly, it seems that Yeats means to show these stark fluctuations right from the beginning where the first part of the verse states a “sudden blow” followed by “wings beating still”. This apparent change from an aggressively urgent to a peaceful tone suggest the very paradox this essay is claiming.

Indeed, the readers could argue that the sharp shift in tone for the first verse is coincidental but in reality, the first verse is just the beginning of the contrasting linguistic patterns of aggression or forced surrender and evident consent. The second verse uses the word “stagger” to imply the possibility that the previous mentioned “blow” has had a brutal impact on the woman. Clearly, the impact has rendered her body as a victim because it possesses the ability to make her unsteady and absorb shock.

This description of a violent assault is, however, followed by a jarringly peaceful action: “thighs caressed”. This part of the second verse seems to reinforce the alternating tones and sexual dynamics between the woman and the swan. The caress suggests an act of affection between lovers but confusingly, this act is ensued after an act of violence which is the blow. As the title suggests, the “wings”, “bill” and “beak” all signal to the assailant being a swan. This distinction by Yeats of the animal being a bird and particularly a swan is important because it chooses to confuse the reader of thinking of the swan as the innocent victim instead of the assailant. Traditionally, the image of swans tends to be elegant and peaceful due to their outward appearance. Ironically, though this stereotype is utilized rather cleverly by Yeats whereby he uses a ‘peaceful animal’ to carry out a violent act so that the impact of the violence neutralizes the mind of the reader. Thereby, the image of the swan is shown to be a violent partner rather than a brutal rapist.

Additionally, Yeats’ choice to use a taboo topic of an interspecies sexual relationship between an animal and a human shock the readers so much that the graphic imagery of the rape is brought to the sidelines. Thus, in a way the readers are also able to normalize the brutal act of rape as something possibly consensual.

The distinction is essential to our argument because the former denotes a toxic consensual relationship, and the latter is categorized as clear rape. The readers could point out that this justification is pointless because anyhow Leda is the victim, and the swan is the assailant. However, for Yeats, it could be argued that it is not simply as it seems and perhaps in a way Leda is responsible slightly if not equally for her own victimization. This observation, while problematic could answer the phrase of “loosening thighs” and “the strange heart beating” which seems to be a euphemism for her sexual desire of the swan. This particular phrase brings and perhaps even solidifies the possibility that the woman Leda is shown to desire if not actively partake in sexual act with the swan.

Indeed, the readers might even go farfetched and connect the Greek myth legend of Leda who was raped by the Greek god, Zeus disguised as a swan. Leda begets Helen of Troy (responsible for the Trojan War) which Agamemnon is killed in. The third stanza mentioned the death of Agamemnon portrays destructive imagery of “broken wall” and “burning roof.” This allusion to Greek myth is quite valuable because the pattern follows that Leda’s sexual relation with the swan triggers the events of the trojan war and Agamemnon death. So, in a way the readers are also led into an interlaced symbolism of destruction and both Leda and the swan being equal perpetrators of that destruction.

However, this is contrasted by the image of the “indifferent beak” in the last stanza where the swan is clearly in power and perhaps the main transgressor of the destruction. Interestingly, these confusing alternations of violence and consent seem to get a satisfying conclusion for the readers when it is mentioned in the first stanza that woman’s body(breast) is “helpless” and in the last stanza that the swan let her “drop”. This coercion into sexual engagement and immediate abandonment after the result of destruction paints Leda as a puppet. Indeed, she might seem to participate and might even feel desire, but it does not erase her role as a victim coerced into equal blame for a heinous act.

Works Cited

"Leda And The Swan" Project Gutenberg. Accessed 8 May 2021.