Leda and the Swan Study Guide

Leda and the Swan by William Butler Yeats

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Introduction

William Butler Yeats's daring sonnet describing the details of a story from Greek mythology□the rape of Leda by the god Zeus in the form of a swan□was written at the height of the poet's career, the same year he received the Nobel Prize for literature. "Leda and the Swan" is a violent, sexually explicit poem that has all of the lyricism and complexity of Yeats's later work, with its plain diction, rhythmic vigor, and allusions to mystical ideas about the universe, the relationship of human and divine, and the cycles of history. It can be seen as a poem about the way a single event is to be understood as part of a larger scheme; the result of the god's assault on Leda is the birth of Helen of Troy, the subsequent destruction of early Greek civilization, and the beginning of the modern era. It has also been suggested that the poem, which was first written (and later revised in this present form) during the Irish Civil War of 1922-1923, is intended to draw attention to the violence that beset Yeats's homeland during that time.

"Leda and the Swan" has been considered one of the most technically masterful poems ever written in English. In the work, Yeats uses the fourteen lines of the traditional sonnet form in a radical, modernist style. He calls up a series of unforgettable, bizarre images of an immediate physical event using abstract descriptions in terse language, while at the same time offering a distanced view of that occurrence in the sweep of time. Yeats himself considered the poem one of his major accomplishments, and in addition to praising its economy of language and skillful use of rhythm, critics have seen it as a fine example of how ideas that were central to the poet's life found expression in his poetry.

Author Biography

William Butler Yeats was born on June 13, 1865, in the Dublin suburb of Sandymount. His father was a lawyer and a well-known portrait painter, and his mother was the daughter of a shipping merchant. Yeats began writing verse in his teens shortly after entering the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. There he became interested in the occult, which remained a lifelong passion. In 1887, Yeats moved to London, where he became acquainted with some of the leading literary figures of his day. He also joined the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky, where he furthered his interest in occult practices and magic.

In 1889, Yeats's first volume of poems, *The Wanderings of Oisin,* appeared to critical acclaim. The same year he met and fell in love with Maud Gonne, a passionate activist deeply committed to Irish nationalism. Under Gonne's influence, Yeats became increasingly involved in Ireland's political struggle for independence from Britain. Yeats was also active in societies that attempted an Irish literary revival. Together with Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory, whom he met in 1896, he founded the Irish Theatre, which was to become the Abbey Theatre, and he served as its chief playwright for many years.

In part because of the hatred and the bigotry of the Nationalist movement, Yeats became increasingly disappointed by the Irish cause, and his poetry is full of protests against it. He was further disillusioned with Irish politics when, in 1903, Maude Gonne, having turned down his own marriage proposals, married a Nationalist activist. Yeats's attitude is reflected in the works written during his middleage years in which he writes unsparingly of Ireland as a "blind, bitter land." In 1916, Maude Gonne's husband, together with other Irish freedom fighters, was executed in the Dublin Easter Rising, prompting Yeats to write "Easter 1916," in which he eulogizes the dead heroes but offers also an honest appraisal of their activities. Maud Gonne refused yet another proposal from Yeats, and in 1917 he married Georgie Hyde-Lees, who shared his interest in mysticism and spiritualism.

By this time, Yeats was a well-known figure. He was appointed to the Irish Senate in 1922, the same year that the Irish Civil War broke out. The following year, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Although he received the prize chiefly for his dramatic works, his significance today rests on his achievement as a poet. Yeats's most highly acclaimed work was actually written after he received the Nobel Prize. He finished a first version of "Leda and the Swan" (which was titled "Annunciation" originally) the same year he won the prize and had it published in 1924 in a new, radical magazine called *Tomorrow.* Yeats said he was inspired to write the poem after contemplating on Ireland's place in world politics. He revised the poem six times, and it appeared in its final form in *The Tower* in 1928. That volume, together with *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) and *Last Poems and Plays* (1940) confirmed Yeats's reputations as one of the most influential twentieth-century poets writing in English. When he died on January 28, 1939, in Roquebrune, France, he was considered indisputably to be the greatest poet that Ireland had every produced.

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?

Plot Summary

Title

The title of the poem is important, because it is the only indication of the characters who are the subject of the poem. In the poem, Yeats assumes that the reader is familiar with the myth referred to in the title. Throughout the fourteen lines, he never uses the names of either of the characters. Zeus's name in fact appears neither in the title nor the text of the poem; the reader is expected to understand that the swan is an incarnation of the all-powerful god.

Lines 1-4

The structure of the sonnet is Petrarchan, an Italian form of the sonnet that characteristically divides its theme into an octave, in which a problem or emotion is stated, and a sestet, in which the problem or emotional tension is resolved. There is a clear separation between the first eight lines (the octave) and the final six (the sestet).

The octave is divided into two four-line stanzas, or quatrains. The first quatrain opens with a recounting of the occurrence in mid-scene. It begins abruptly, as the swan assaults Leda with "a sudden blow," which is most likely a reference to an act of sexual penetration. The use of that simple, powerful phrase (not a complete sentence) and a break before the line continues emphasizes the explosive violence of the act.

Line 1 continues with a description of the great swan hanging in the air above the girl with its wings beating. There is a pun on the word *still;* the bird's wings continue to beat and are also still as it hovers above without moving. In line 2 there is a description of Leda that indicates her physical (and perhaps psychological) state, as she staggers under her assailant. The swan has its body over Leda as she falters under him; he caresses her thighs with his webbed feet. There is an almost sensuous description in the phrase "her thighs caressed," but this is followed immediately by the grotesque image of the swan's "dark webs" in line 3 and the image of Leda's neck in his bill as he holds her helpless against him. The swan is never referred to directly as a swan, but its presence is expressed in ordinary images like "great wings" and "dark webs" that in the context of the poem seem quite extraordinary. Leda is simply "the girl" who is caught in the bird's beak like a small helpless animal. In line 4 the crushing movement of the girl pinned against the bird is reinforced by the repetition of the word *breast* as the two are joined together unwillingly as one.

Lines 5-8

The second quatrain of the octave continues with a description of the rape, but it is presented here in the form of two rhetorical questions. How, asks the speaker, can this mere mortal girl resist the power of this beast-god as he subjugates her? And how can she help but feel the beating of his heart (or his sexual organ) as he lies with her? Leda's fingers are "terrified" and "vague" because they are powerless amidst the "feathered glory" that surrounds her; and she acquiesces to the assault because she is helpless to resist; she cannot push the god's body from her "loosening thighs." She loses her identify with the continuing attack; she is no longer even "girl" but merely "body" laid in a "white rush" (referring to the bird's feathers but punning on an image of ejaculation). She feels the pulsation of the bird's "strange heart" (which, again, could refer to its penis) against her. Again in this stanza the picture of the bird is rendered in simple images using a combination of abstract and concrete descriptors that emphasize its divine and incomprehensible nature: it is a "feathered glory" with a "strange heart." The details of Leda's psychological state and physical body are presented with skillful compression and interconnectedness, with references to her "terrified" fingers and "loosening thighs."

Lines 9-11

In the final sestet the poem moves away from the description of the rape to its effect, shifting from an immediate physical description of the present to an abstract dramatization of the future. While the first part of the poem concentrated on the physicality of the act, the last stanza steps back from the present and situates it in the larger pattern of history. Also, while the first two stanzas of the poem had references to the whiteness of the swan and the blackness of its webs, the images in the final stanza are vivid with references to fire and blood.

Line 9 begins with the swan's orgasm and ejaculation, the "shudder in the loins" that, it is explained, engenders, or gives rise to, a startling series of events. The act of rape just described, the speaker says, spawns "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead." This compressed line and a half describe the fall of Troy (walls broken and roofs burned) and the death of Agamemnon at the conclusion of the Trojan War. That is, with the union of Leda and the swan will come the birth of Helen, and with that the series of events that culminates in the siege and fall of Troy, which signals the collapse of early Greek civilization and ushers in a new, modern age. The phrases "broken wall," "burning roof," and "tower" also have sexual connotations. The broken wall refers to the breaking of the female hymen in sexual intercourse; the burning roof refers to the vagina; the tower is a symbol of the phallus. Fire traditionally symbolizes sexual passion and represents the divine union with the human.

The break in line 11 is the only deviation from the traditional form of the sonnet, and the division stresses the completeness of thought presented in the previous eighteen words that express a vast historical process. This single event, the impregnation of the mortal

woman Leda by the god Zeus signals the beginning of a new time in history. Here, in a few short lines, Yeats makes reference to his theory of history that claims that every two thousand years a new era of civilization is ushered in because of the reversal of the gyres. The mortal Leda is caught in this cosmic pattern, a helpless victim of divine forces that use her merely as a means to a larger end.

Lines 12-14

After the break in line 11 the speaker again changes tenses (this time to past) and ends the poem with another question. The use of the past tense serves to further distance the act and see it in terms of its historical significance. The speaker asks if Leda, as she was taken and ravaged so savagely by this "brute blood of the air," the god in the form of a swan, knew the consequences of what was happening to her. When she is violated by and in union with the god, does she come to some sort of divine knowledge? Does she know, as he obviously must because of his divinity, that this act portends the end of a civilization? In these lines, the description of the swan as the "brute blood of the air" identifies Zeus with a cosmic force; he is a being that is physical, animal, and divine. The poem ends in the last line with an image of the swan, after its orgasm, as it releases its captor carelessly from its beak. He has satisfied his desire and lets her drop, indifferent to his victim's terrifying experience. The question the reader is left with is whether Leda knew that her experience would inaugurate a new cycle and whether in her terrifying union with the god she gains some type of mystical or cosmic insight.

Themes

Mythology

"Leda and the Swan" is a difficult poem to grasp fully on a casual reading because it assumes considerable background knowledge on the part of the reader of the event being described and its place in Greek mythology. The poem is also inspired by Yeats's strange and difficult theory of historical cy- cles. Even when one is acquainted with Yeats's sources and theories, the poem is a challenge for the student because of the complexity of the ideas to which it makes subtle reference. However, the lyrical quality and force of description in the poem can be appreciated even by those who find the ideas hard to follow. Thus the poem can be enjoyed on two levels. It is both a chilling, bizarre description of a violent act of rape and a sophisticated exploration of Yeats's ideas about the nature of cosmic history and the place of humans in it.

The ancient Greek myth that Yeats used as the source of his poem is that of Leda, the daughter of the Aetolian king Thestius. According to one version of the myth (there are at least half a dozen variations), the beautiful mortal Leda caught the eye of the god Zeus (the ruler of the Greek deities) after she had married the Spartan Tyndareus. Leda resisted the god's advances, and so he seduced her in the form of a swan. Leda gave birth, by laying eggs, to four children: the twin girls Helen and Clytemnestra and the twin boys Castor and Polydeuces. Helen, greatly famed for her beauty, later married Menelaus but then fell in love with Paris, and the couple fled together to Paris's homeland of Troy. Menelaus's attempt to win back his wife gave rise to the Trojan War. Under the command of Menelaus's brother Agamemnon (also the husband of Clytemnestra), the Greeks besieged Troy for nine years, and the city finally fell. On Agamemnon's return home to Mycenae, he was murdered by his wife and her lover. The Trojan War's lasting impact was that it marked the end of the ancient Greek mythological era and the birth of modern history.

Most accounts of the Leda myth do not describe it in terms of rape but as a seduction, yet in his poem Yeats emphasizes the unwillingness and terror of the mortal victim at the mercy of the beastgod. It is not an account of Zeus winning over Leda but of a brutal sexual assault. It is often suggested that Yeats might have based the poem on the Michelangelo painting of the Leda story (he owned a reproduction of it) or a picture of a bas-relief from an art history book, but it is likely that with the poem the poet is creating his own, idealized version of the scene.

Violence and Helplessness

Yeats wrote "Leda and the Swan" during the turbulent days of the Irish Civil War. In 1922, Britain and Ireland signed a treaty that established the Irish Free State, which gave Ireland some measure of autonomy but kept it under the firm authority of Britain. This resulted in civil war between supporters of the treaty and its opponents. Yeats, who

became an Irish senator in 1922, supported the Free State, but he deplored the violence used on both sides in the war. Yeats declared that his inspiration for "Leda and the Swan" was his meditation on Ireland's place in world politics. For centuries Ireland had struggled for independence against Britain. Although there are no explicit references to Ireland or to politics in the poem, the subjugation of Leda can be seen as reflecting the brutality inflicted upon Ireland by its powerful aggressor, and the violence of the poem can be seen as an emblem of the violence of the civil war.

The focus of the poem is the violent rape, which is presented in intensely physical terms. Throughout, the helplessness of the mortal girl is contrasted with the incomprehensible and overwhelming power of the bird-god. The diction of the poem points to the swan's domination and strength ("great wings," "beating still," "feathered glory") in contrast to Leda's passivity (she is "caught," "caressed," "helpless"). The violence of the poem is also heightened by the use of the tightly controlled form of the sonnet, which describes the rape in spare but forceful terms. The act that Yeats describes brings forth a new era and civilization, and the poem thus seems to indicate that all such far-reaching transformations in history must have violent and incomprehensible beginnings. Also, with the description of the "broken wall, the burning roof and tower" that are the result of the brutal assault of Leda, Yeats seems to be suggesting that violence generates continuing violence in human history.

Annunciation

"Leda and the Swan" is one of Yeats's several "Annunciation" poems. In fact the original version of the poem, published in 1924 was called "Annunciation." In the Christian tradition, the Annunciation is the announcement by the archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would have a child by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended upon Mary and fulfilled the angel's words. The result of this union between the divine and human was Jesus Christ, whose birth signaled the destruction of an old order and ushered in a new age and a Christian civilization. In "Leda and the Swan," Yeats describes an annunciation of a quite different type as the god Zeus, also in the form of a bird, descends upon Leda and impregnates her with Helen, who will be the cause of the destruction of Greek civilization and give rise to a new modern era. Yeats thus sees the rape of Leda by Zeus as an event parallel to the annunci- ation to the Virgin Mary. The children of Mary and Leda changed the world, and the moment of their conception is a pivotal moment for the universe. For Yeats, the annunciation is a moment in which the supernatural energy of a god is mingled with the human to revitalize a declining civilization.

In "Leda and the Swan," as with Yeats's other annunciation poems such as "The Magi," "Two Songs from a Play," "The Mother of God," and "The Second Coming," the violence and terror of the union of god and human is stressed. Yeats implies that any union of human and divine must be a horrifying experience. However, he thinks that there is a possibility that in that moment of merging, the mortal may attain supernatural or transcendent insight. Thus the speaker at the end of the poem asks if Leda, as she is

mastered by the "brute blood of the air," gains through her experience some form of divine knowledge and divine power.

The Cycle of History

Yeats viewed history as cyclical and believed that every two thousand years a new era would be ushered in that would be the antithesis, or opposite, of the one that was being replaced. Again, although he makes no overt reference to his theory of history in the poem, Yeats uses the subject of Leda and the swan to illustrate a moment in which the cycle is begun anew. The use of tense in the poem calls attention to the timelessness of the event and so the cyclical nature of history. The rape is described in the first eight lines using present tense, but, as seen in lines 9 to 11, the act engenders consequences that are yet to be experienced in the poem□they are in the future. The poem ends using the past tense, making it clear that the events described have already taken place. The entire effect is to convey the sense that the rape is more than an assault on a particular woman at a static moment in history, but it is also a symbol for universal and recurring□although certainly violent, painful, and destructive□elements of human experiences.

In "Leda and the Swan," Yeats also seems to be pointing to his mystical theory of the universe, although he makes no overt references to it. The poem describes a moment that represents a change of era according to Yeats's historical model of gyres, which he describes in his prose work *A Vision.* In that book, Yeats conceives of history as composed of two cones rotating in opposite directions. Every moment of time moves through these spirals and so contains two opposite but interpenetrating movements, as one cone widens and the other narrows. The spiralling motions are called gyres. The times of the greatest turbulence in history are when the gyres reverse their motions, which happens every two thousand years

The rape of Leda by Zeus is an event that brings forth such a reversal. It brings forth a new era, one that is antithetical to the civilization out of which it sprang and which it replaces. Another example of an event that comes from the reversal of the gyres, according to Yeats, is the annunciation and descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove to the Virgin Mary, which resulted in the birth of Christ. He held, in fact, that this event brought forth a reversal of the era that was spawned by the rape of Leda as described in "Leda and the Swan."

Style

Recurring Image

The swan is an image that is found in many of Yeats's poems. (His poetry, in fact, is full of birds of various sorts, from eagles to owls to parrots, but the swan is the most frequently recurrent bird sym- bol.) Although what the swan represents evolves in Yeats's poetry, it seems for him to be essentially a symbol of mystery and passion. In "Leda and the Swan," the swan is mysterious, divine, incomprehensible, violent, and brutally passionate. The use of the swan and other recurring images in Yeats's poetry also serve to draw his entire body of work into a coherent whole. By using certain images over and over again, he creates a shorthand that allows readers to recognize complex ideas that may not be explicitly mentioned in a particular poem but are the focus of other works. The swan in some of Yeats's other works, such as "The Wild Swans at Coole," "The Tower," and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," represents wildness, rage, bitterness, and unsatisfied desire, and some of those thoughts will echo in this poem to a reader familiar with Yeats's poetry.

Modernist Sonnet Form

"Leda and the Swan" is a sonnet, a traditional fourteen-line poem written in iambic pentameter. The poem uses the rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet for the first two quatrains (fourline stanzas), and the rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet for the last six lines: *abab cdcd efgefg.* (The rhyme scheme of the first two quatrains of the Petrarchan sonnet is *abba abba;* the rhyme scheme of the last six lines of the Shakespearean sonnet is *efef gg.*) However, the subject matter of the work is extremely nontraditional□most sonnets are about love or public matters, not violent rape. Yeats breaks with tradition and creates a sonnet in a daring modernist style. The poem is full of such paradoxes, or oppositional elements, which is one of the sources of its richness. For example, the sonnet is one of the most precise and tightly controlled forms of poetry, but Yeats chooses this structure to describe a situation of explosive power and intensity. An act of force and violence is described within a structure of order and control. The poem is written in iambic pentameter, so it moves along in a steady, pulsating way. But Yeats uses phrases to break up the traditional meter□there is an abrupt break after the opening words, for example, and again after the description of what is engendered by the union: "And Agamemnon dead." The total effect is of a rhythm that reflects the event being explicated: a throbbing sensation is created that is broken up by dramatic moments of even greater intensity. The line break in the middle of the sestet is the only nontraditional element in terms of the sonnet's formal structure, and it is used to emphasize the sudden end of the rape and to distance the reader from the event. The rhyme used in the poem is traditional for the sonnet form, but the mixture of perfect and imperfect rhymes ("push" and "rush" in lines 5 and 7, "up" and "drop" in lines 11 and 14) add variety and interest.

Language

Because Yeats uses such a narrow, tightly ordered structure for his poem, he uses words to their maximum effect. The language and images in the poem are a mixture of concrete and abstract, which conveys a sense of the immediacy of the event as well as its greater cosmic significance. The swan is never referred to as a swan, for example, but as "feathered glory" and "brute blood of the air," which emphasizes its physical presence as well as its incomprehensible and divine nature. The use of body parts (and not their names) to refer to Leda and the swan ("thighs," "fingers," "nape," "beak," "webs," "bill") again stresses the physicality of the act. The diction in the poem is extremely simple, but the images created from them are vigorous (the "white rush," for example, calls up an otherworldly image of the swan, as it indicates its physical whiteness as well as it power).

The use of strong, simple verbs ("caught," "hold," "push," "drop") further emphasizes the sense of action. Yeats also plays on words a great deal in the poem, thus communicating several meanings in the confines of taut phrases. The images of the "broken wall, the burning roof and tower" are references to the siege of Troy but are also sexual allusions. With the phrase "the staggering girl" he draws attention to Leda's physical as well as her psychological state. Yeats manages to communicate extremely complex ideas about the ushering in of a new era through the violent union of human and divine and the cycle of history in very few words. He does this by presenting vivid images that have multiplicity of meanings and by carefully changing the tense in the poem from present to future to past to draw attention to the timelessness of the action that he has depicted in such immediate terms.

Historical Context

The history of Yeats's homeland of Ireland has been one of struggle for self-determination since the twelfth century, when Britain was formally granted overlordship of the island. In addition to the fight for independence and home rule, Ireland has, since the seventeenth century, been beset with a bitter religious contention between Catholics and Protestants. When Yeats wrote "Leda and the Swan" in 1923, Ireland was in the midst of a bloody civil war that was the result of the Anglo-Irish conflict as well as the discord between the largely Catholic south and the Protestant north.

The failure of the British government to implement home rule led, in 1916, to the Easter Rising, during which many prominent leaders of the movement for independence were killed. The militant organization Sinn Féin, which had been founded among Irish Catholics, emerged as the dominant nationalist group during that time. They declared themselves the Irish Assembly and proclaimed an Irish republic in 1918. The group was outlawed by the British and began then to wage war underground.

The Anglo-Irish War that broke out in 1919 saw guerrilla attacks by Irish insurgents (later called the Irish Republican Army□or IRA) on British forces as well as vigorous retaliations by the British. Yeats staunchly supported the Irish cause and strongly denounced the British, in particular the tactics used by the Black and Tans, the British antiterrorist forces. In 1920, a new Home Rule bill provided for the partition of Ireland into two separate entities. A 1922 treaty with the British finalized the partition of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. However, the Irish Free State and most Irish Catholics refused to recognize the finality of the par- tition because the close relations between Northern Ireland and Britain posed a threat to the Catholic minority in the north, and civil war broke out. Although Yeats had always supported the Irish against the British, choosing sides in the struggle of Irish against Irish was difficult for him. He elected to back the Irish Free State and was even appointed to a six-year term in the new government's Senate. The bitter civil strife ended in April 1923.

Much of Yeats's poetry written during the Anglo- Irish and Civil Wars reflects his bitterness toward those conflicts. The poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is a harsh and relentless portrait of the destruction of civilized values and the helplessness and hopelessness left in its wake. "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1923) is a pessimistic poem that speaks of meaningless violence, social chaos, and a fallen world.

"Leda and the Swan" makes no overt references to politics, the Anglo-Irish struggle, or the civil war, but it may be seen as representing the violence of the political events during the time. Yeats declared that he wrote the poem as he was meditating on the Irish situation, although he says, "as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it." No doubt the poem's tone of brutal violence and subjugation took its inspiration from the political events facing Ireland. The use of diction like "sudden blow," "staggering," "caught," "helpless," "terrified," "broken," "dead," and "brute blood" are certainly evocative of the savagery of war. Some critics have gone as far as to suggest that in the poem, Leda may be viewed as a symbol for Ireland,

helpless and staggering underneath the brute power of her mighty British conqueror. Leda may also be seen as representative of the people and the swan as the force of law and tyrannical government.

It is also significant that the original version of the poem, called "Annunciation," was written during a time when the new Irish government was beginning to institute censorship laws that targeted works whose content was counter to Catholic morality. Yeats had been a strong supporter of the Irish novelist James Joyce whose work *Ulysses* was embroiled in a famous and lengthy censorship battle in Britain and the United States before it was published in France in 1922. In writing "Leda and the Swan," Yeats apparently hoped to arouse controversy and to flout what he thought were unjust laws targeting freedom of expression. The poem was denounced as obscene by much of the Catholic press.

Critical Overview

When Yeats first published a version of "Leda and the Swan" in 1924 in the radical monthly paper *To-morrow,* it was met with criticism from many conservatives who deplored its sexually explicit subject matter. Yeats later revised the poem (not because of the criticism but because he constantly reworked his poetry), and it appeared in his prose work *A Vision* in 1925 in a slightly amended form and as an epigraph to a lengthy discussion of his cyclical theory of history. The poem was revised four more times and appeared in its final version in the 1928 collection, *The Tower.* That volume was received enthusiastically by reviewers, and it is still regarded as one of the poet's greatest works.

Some early readers again found the sexual explicitness of "Leda and the Swan" troublesome, but for the most part it was greatly admired. Contemporary critics have been extremely generous with their praise of the poem. John Unterecker, in his *Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats,* calls it "a nearly perfect sonnet," and Balachandra Rajan considers it "one of the most unimprovable poems ever written." Many critics have commented on the poem's intricacy of thought within the narrow confines of the sonnet, remarking at the masterful use of language and rhythm to create lyricism and complexity. A few commentators have faulted the work for its oblique references to the poet's complicated philosophical theories. Yvor Winters, for example, in his article "Leda and the Swan," says that the ideas in the poem "constitute Yeats's private fairy tale," and that they are "foolish." A few feminist writers, notably Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, have found that the poem "flirts with pornography" because of its violently sexual nature and the subjugation of Leda. Others, such as Scott C. Holstad, have suggested that in the poem Yeats plays out a rape fantasy that is the result of his unrequited love for Maud Gonne. Even critics who have found the topic of the poem troubling or distasteful, however, have conceded that "Leda and the Swan" is one of the most technically brilliant poems ever written in the English language. Yeats's choice of diction and his use of language, imagery, and rhyme, it is agreed, contribute to a powerful total effect. As Richard Ellman has written in his *The Identity of Yeats,* "He gathers his intensity and force, which have hardly been equalled in modern verse, by creating, with the aid of symbol, myth, and ritual, patterns where thoughts and feelings find unexampled voice."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kukathas is a freelance editor and writer. In the following essay, she discusses Yeats's choice of a brutal rape as the subject of his poem "Leda and the Swan."

When "Leda and the Swan" was first published in 1924 (in a version somewhat different than the final form that appears in modern collections of Yeats's verse), it aroused criticism from the Catholic press in Ireland because of its sexually explicit subject matter□the violent rape of a mortal woman by a god who had taken on the form of a swan. Yeats published the poem in a radical journal and hoped to stir up controversy in order to make the point that he opposed the country's repressive attitude toward "immoral" literature.

In the early twenty-first century, "Leda and the Swan" is hardly considered an indecent work and is heavily anthologized in poetry collections as one of the finest poems written in English. While few people would argue that the poem is anything but brilliant in its technical mastery of language, some contemporary readers might still find the content of the poem troubling or objectionable because of its sexual□and perhaps sexist□nature. Is Yeats's poem sexist? Should female readers be offended by the content of the work?

The readers of "Leda and the Swan" who criticized it when it was first published did so because they thought that a sexual subject was not an appropriate topic for a work of art. More than seventy years later, sexual themes are not generally considered unsuitable for literary expression. Some feminists, however, object to the use of sexist themes in art because they perpetuate the subordination of women. The portrayal of women in television or films as being primarily objects of sexual interest, for example, is condemned as detrimental to women's status as equal members of society. The question to be explored here, then, is whether by offering a graphic image of female degradation in "Leda and the Swan" Yeats produced a sexist work and if the treatment of his female character detracts from the poem's status as great literature.

Sexism is defined in *Webster's* dictionary as "behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex." It is difficult to say whether in "Leda and the Swan" Yeats is presenting stereotypical portraits of Leda as female and Zeus as male. The action described is a rape, and in that situation there is clearly an imbalance of power between the assailant and the victim. The male Zeus is clearly the strong, domineering figure and the female Leda is the weak, defenseless one. He has her "nape caught in his bill" like a small animal, and he "holds her helpless." However, simply to describe a scene in which two people of the opposite sex are shown in a particular situation is not necessarily to foster the idea that those are their natural roles. What would be more disturbing is if a woman's attitude to her assault in such a situation is characterized in terms that present an incorrect but often accepted picture of how women respond to rape. Does Yeats's characterization of Leda promote any such picture?

One often used stereotype of women is that they somehow invite rape by being seductive and alluring and that in some sense they actually want to be violated by their attackers. Clearly in Yeats's poem Leda does not invite Zeus's advances. The poem begins abruptly, and there is a clear sense that Leda is as shocked by the "sudden blow" as the reader is. She is "staggering," so she has obviously been caught off guard both physically and mentally by the massive bird. The action of the first four lines is described in terms of the swan's movements, and Leda is entirely passive. Another stereotype that is used often by rapists who claim that their sexual actions are justified is that women actually enjoy the force of rape and that in some sense their participation is consensual. As the rape begins in the first stanza, Leda appears to be a completely unsuspecting and unwilling victim of a forcible act. However, the sensual overtones of the poem also imply that the rape being described is not simply an act of violence but in some sense an erotic act. Leda's thighs are "caressed," and the swan "holds her helpless breast upon his breast" in a position that suggests intimacy or even lovemaking. As the poem progresses, there seem to be additional hints that there is in fact some consent on Leda's part.

In the second stanza, the poem moves to an examination of Leda's state of mind. It is presented in the form of two questions:

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?

The use of the interrogative to describe Leda's condition in this stanza adds a dimension of ambiguity in terms of her response to her predicament. On the one hand, she simply cannot resist: she is not being attacked by any ordinary assailant, after all, but being seized here by the all-powerful leader of the gods. How could she fight back in such a case? For this reason she appears to be stunned: her "terrified vague fingers" indicate that she is numbed by the experience. However, the use of the interrogative could point not only to the impossibility of resistance on Leda's part but to the fact that she finds the god irresistible in a sexual sense. Even though in the second stanza the poem focuses on Leda's physical and psychic state, the words used to describe her point of view hardly seem inappropriate for a woman who is being victimized.

In the midst of Leda's violation the swan is described as the "feathered glory." Leda's thighs are described not as being violently pried apart but as "loosening," perhaps in response to the rapist, again suggesting that this is a consensual act. The next two lines of the poem stress the union of woman and god. The use of the word *body* without a pronoun could imply that their two bodies are one; both together "feel" the strange heart beating. The heart is a traditional symbol of love, and the use of that word again seems hardly fitting in the context of a forcible and violent rape.

In the last stanza, there is further ambiguity with the line "A shudder in the loins." Again there is no pronoun before "loins," and it may be that the shudder is not only on the part of the swan but is felt by Leda, too. That a bestial rape would give rise to anything but

horror seems unthinkable, but the ambivalence of the description again forces the possibility that there is some mutual enjoyment that results from the sexual union. At the end of the poem, after it is learned that the union between Leda and the swan-god brings about a turbulent sequence of events□the siege of Troy and, by implication, the destruction of ancient Greek civilization□ another question is posed, this time about the effect of the rape on Leda: "Being so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood of the air / Did she put on his knowledge with his power. . . ." Did Leda gain some type of insight, some knowledge about the nature of the cosmos and human history? Again, the use of the verb *caught up* can be read as being ambiguous. Leda was caught up and mastered by the god, but *caught up* can also imply being intensely involved in the act and complicit in some sense.

Although the various references do not show explicitly that Leda is a willing partner in the union with Zeus, the erotic tone of the poem and the hints at acquiescence in the act on Leda's part are unsettling. They do seem to point to the stereotype that women derive pleasure from forced sexual intercourse and, perhaps by extension, that they are somehow not entirely without blame in acts of vi- olence against them. However, to see the poem merely as an instance of Yeats's sexism would be a mistake. Although there seem to be various clues that Yeats thinks of Leda as being erotically caught up in the event, it is obvious at the end of the poem that what has been described is a violent and contemptible abuse of a woman by a callous and indifferent aggressor.

After the speaker asks if in the union Leda "put on his knowledge with his power," it becomes clear that the god has used the mortal woman for nothing more than his sexual gratification. The swan discards her unceremoniously□he lets her drop from his "indifferent beak"□and the question is left as to whether in her horrific subjugation by a god Leda also participated somehow in the divine. Yeats uses the heightened eroticism of the act as presented throughout the poem to add to the confusion and complexity of what has taken place, and the final question gains additional force after the event has been depicted in such a manner. The rape is described in terms that are brutal, bizarre, terrifying, and erotically charged, and these various aspects contribute to the incomprehensible nature of what has taken place. Yeats's suggestions that Leda was somehow caught up in the act are used not to point to women's supposed consent to acts of violence but to add to the terrifying confusion she feels as she is not only physically raped but has her humanity violated by an indifferent god.

Although "Leda and the Swan" does seem to characterize a woman's participation in rape in ways that are found in negative and demeaning stereotypes, Yeats's intention in the poem seems not to offer a commentary on women's nature but on the terror and irresistible draw that comes with contact with the divine. The portrayal of the female rape victim thus should not be seen as sexist because what is presented ambiguously as consent on the part of Leda is used not to foster a stereotypical portrait of women but to depict the terrifying power of the god that is irresistible even in its horror and brutality. Part of the power and brilliance of Yeats's poem is that it is so unsettling, that it presents in a tightly controlled sonnet a multitude of feelings□horror, repulsion, and sexual confusion. The use of Leda's manipulation by the god and the reader's sense that she is held completely at his mercy both physically and mentally does not detract from the

greatness of Yeats's poem but contributes to its intensity and adds a further dimension of complexity to this technically brilliant work of literature.

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "Leda and the Swan," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Perkins is an associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College and has published widely in the field of twentieth-century British and American literature. In the following essay, she explores the mythological elements of Yeats's poem and how they relate to its overall themes.

In Greek mythology, Leda was the daughter of Thestios, king of Aetolia, and wife of Tyndareus, king of Sparta. The legend tells that one day Zeus, the ruler of the Greek gods, came to Leda in the form of a swan and seduced her. As a result, she bore two eggs; both would develop into two offspring each, Castor and Pollux from one egg and Helen and Clytemnestra from the other. Helen would become the breathtakingly beautiful Helen of Troy and would trigger the eventual destruction of Troy, the disintegration of early Greek civilization, and the introduction of the next cycle of Greek civilization, known as the classical age. Yeats's dramatization of this moment of annunciation in "Leda and the Swan" reveals his own spiritual and historical philosophy.

In his study of Yeats in *A History of Modern Poetry,* David Perkins notes that the poet "thought of himself as a person of religious temperament who had been deprived of religion by nineteenthcentury science." In this sense, Yeats was a modernist, a term that came to be applied to a group of artists and writers who produced works in the early decades of the twentieth century. Modernists like Yeats became disillusioned with traditional beliefs in religion, political systems, and society in response to political events and the works of such scientists and thinkers as Darwin, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and Frazer. The devastation of World War I compounded the modernists' revolt against conventional values.

Perkins comments that in this atmosphere of cynicism, Yeats still felt a need

> to sense a spiritual depth and mystery in the universe and, beyond this, an ultimate coherence and meaning. . . . [He also felt] an imaginative need for concrete symbols in which the mystery could be invoked and contemplated. His religious quest was more urgently motivated by metaphysical and imaginative hungers than by moral ones.

Unable to accept the lack of faith in any established institution or doctrine, Yeats searched for other avenues to explore in an effort to establish his own worldview. Perkins explains that Christianity was "from his point of view, impossible to believe, and his religious needs drove him to other traditions." One tradition that Yeats explores in "Leda and the Swan" is Greek mythology.

Yeats employs the myth of Leda and Zeus to illustrate his theories on the cycle of history. His book *A Vision* outlines his thoughts on historical cycles as well as his theory that the universe is made up of opposites, or antitheses, and that harmony can only be

achieved through a merging of these opposites. Both of these theories figure prominently in "Leda and the Swan."

The cyclical theory of history expressed in *A Vision* centers on his idea that history moves in two-thousand-year cycles, each cycle representing a civilization that begins with a gripping mystical conception and birth. Yeats determined that the annunciation of Mary and the birth of Christ initiated the Christian era of 1-2000 A.D., and earlier the annunciation of Leda and the birth of Helen initiated the classical era of 2000-1 B.C. In his famous poem "The Second Coming," Yeats describes the end of the present two-thousand-year cycle and speculates that a new figure will emerge as a reflection of the new era as Christ represented the old. Yet his cynicism over the traumatic events of the early part of the twentieth century□World War I as well as the troubles experienced in his native Ireland□prompts a dark vision of the new Messiah in his question at the end of this poem, "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

The myth that dominates the first cycle of history is illustrated in "Leda and the Swan," especially in the third stanza when the speaker notes that the result of Zeus raping Leda will be the destruction of Troy and the early Greek civilization: the act "engenders . . . / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead."

The poem also illustrates Yeats's theory that each era is ushered in by an act of violence, which hits the reader immediately in the first stanza. The poem begins with "a sudden blow" as Zeus enters in the form of the swan with his "great wings beating," grasping "the staggering" and "helpless" girl as he begins to rape her. B. L. Reid, in his article on Yeats for *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* notes that the speaker's point of view is that of

> an amazed and awed accidental bystander, elected voyeur and granted powers of empathy with Leda's physical experience and with some part of her mental experience. . . . [Then the poem] plunges straight ahead until the god in the swan has worked his will in this exalted rape.

Commenting on Yeats's style, Reid notes, "When Yeats boldly breaks his eleventh line he breaks, graphically, the body of Leda, the roofs of Troy, the body of Agamemnon, and the hearts of many men and women."

A merging of opposites also occurs in the poem, reflecting Yeats's view that in life a synthesis of antithetical forces must occur in order to establish permanence and a sense of harmony. Through his poetry, Yeats explores oppositions between art and reality, imagination and moral responsibility, intellect and passion. In "Leda and the Swan," Yeats asks whether a synthesis has occurred as Zeus's "brute blood" masters Leda in the final stanza: "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" Critic Charles A. Raines, in his article "Yeats' Metaphors of Permanence," concludes,

> Leda must feel the strange heart beating because a synthesis of Zeus' superhuman characteristics and Leda's human characteristics has taken place. . . . If [Zeus'] knowledge and power are obtained by Leda it must be because the supernatural has intermingled with the body, and this must be so for the result of this combination is Helen, who is considered by Yeats to have provided a source of order in the sense that she began the classical Aegean age which, for Yeats, represents permanence. Helen is considered a progenitor of permanence because she represents a synthesis of life (Leda) with the spiritual (Zeus), which produces permanence.

Perkins notes that the poem ends with the speaker's questioning whether any synthesis has taken place in the coupling of Zeus and Leda. He echoes Raines when he comments, "combining knowledge and power, the god in the form of a swan is a symbol of antitheses reconciled," but he questions whether Leda gains Zeus's knowledge:

> the antithesis Yeats poses at the end of the poem is that between the supernatural and the human. The supernatural is a whole or unified being, and the question is whether even in a fleeting moment the human is capable of such completeness.

The complex symbolic structure of "Leda and the Swan" makes it difficult to come to any absolute conclusions about the experience between Zeus and Leda. The poem does, however, provide an excellent example of Yeats's theories on the cyclical nature of history and how the opposing forces of life fit into those theories.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Leda and the Swan," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

The Nobel Internet Archive maintains a Yeats web page at http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/ literature/1923a.html (last accessed April 2001) with links to other interesting sites.

An audiocassette titled *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats,* which features eighty-five of Yeats's best known verses, including "Leda and the Swan," was released in 1996 by Dove Books Audio.

The myth of Leda and the Swan has been the subject of numerous works of art, including sculptures and other decorative works from ancient times: Correggio's painting "Leda with the Swan" (1531-1532); Tintoretto's painting "Leda and the Swan" (1570-1575); Van Dongen's watercolor "Leda and the Swan" (1922); and Salvador Dali's painting "Leda atomica" (1949). Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo also produced paintings of the Leda myth, but both paintings have been lost□although a number of reproductions and copies of the artists' sketches survive.

Topics for Further Study

Research the different forms of the Leda myth as they are told in ancient Greek sources. Examine how the story is represented in various paintings and sculptures from classical to modern times. □

Find examples of sonnets written in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries and compare their themes and structures to those used by Yeats in "Leda and the Swan." What are the main similarities among the poems? What are the major differences?

In Greek mythology, Zeus took the form of a swan to seduce Leda and transformed himself into a bull to win over the princess Europa. Investigate similar accounts of such metamorphoses in myths from other traditions, including those of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Compare and Contrast

1922: Ireland is partitioned, after a treaty deal with the British, into Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. Britain maintains control of both provinces, and the Irish Civil War is fought between those who support the partition and those who oppose it.

1949: The Republic of Ireland is proclaimed, and the country withdraws from the British Commonwealth. The British Parliament affirms the status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. Many Irish, including those supporting the outlawed Irish Republican Army (IRA), continue to call for unification.

1969: British troops are sent to Northern Ireland to contain continued violence that includes terrorist acts by the IRA and police retaliation. In 1971, imprisonment without trial is introduced in Northern Ireland as a measure to counter terrorism. In 1972, on what comes to be known as "Bloody Sunday," British soldiers shoot and kill thirteen protestors at a civil rights march in Londonderry. The British abolish the Northern Ireland Parliament and impose direct rule.

1998: A historic Northern Ireland peace agreement is reached. An accord is ratified by large majorities in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

1924: "Leda and the Swan" is condemned by members of the Irish Catholic clergy and press as filth.

1959: An unexpurgated version of D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is published for the first time in the United States. The novel, which explores in explicit detail the sexual relationship of a man and women from different social classes, had been deemed obscene and had been suppressed from publication for more than thirty years.

1989: The live performances and song lyrics of the rap music group 2 Live Crew's album *Nasty as They Wanna Be* provoke intense controversy. Some characterize the group's work as obscene, while others defend the band against censorship.

1999: An exhibition of works by British artists called "Sensation," which includes a painting of the Virgin Mary decorated with elephant dung, appears at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. New York mayor Rudolph Guiliani freezes the museum's annual subsidy of more than $7 million, calling the exhibit sick.

What Do I Read Next?

Numerous poets have used the story of Leda as a source for their poetry. The most famous of the poems about the Greek myth are Rainer Maria Rilke's "Leda" (1908), in *Selected Poems,* H. D.'s (Hilda Doolittle's) "Leda" (1921) in *Hymen,* and D. H. Lawrence's "Leda," in *Pansies* (1929).

The 1928 volume *The Tower,* in which "Leda and the Swan" was published, is considered one of Yeats's finest collections of poetry. It includes some of his most famous works, including "Sailing to Byzantium," "Among School Children," and "The Dying Swan."

The Greek Myths (1960), by Robert Graves, retells the creation myths and the legends and lives of Greek gods and heroes.

Yeats's *Mythologies* (1962) is an anthology of Irish legends and tales of the occult that reflect the poet's deep interest in myth and preserving and celebrating Irish history and culture.

Further Study

Ellmann, Maud, "Daughters of the Swan," in *m/f,* Vol. 11-12, 1986, pp. 119-62.

This essay uses the methods of pscyhoanalysis and deconstruction to explore questions of gender and sexuality in Yeats's poems and pays special attention to "Leda and the Swan."

Ellmann, Richard, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks,* E. P. Dutton and Co., 1948.

This is an informative introduction to Yeats and his ideas that combines biography and criticism.

Fletcher, Ian, "'Leda and the Swan' As Iconic Poem," in *Yeats Annual,* No. 1, edited by Richard J. Finneran, Humanities Press, 1982, pp. 82-113.

This book discusses the use of the Leda myth in other works of literature and art and uses them to illuminate Yeats's treatment of the story.

Young, David, *Troubled Mirror: A Study of Yeats's "The Tower,"* University of Iowa Press, 1987, pp. 73-84.

Young provides a detailed account of the collection in which "Leda and the Swan" first appeared, exploring how the poems interact and discussing Yeats's poetic method.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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