

focuses on a violent act, the disguised god's rape of a human woman. There's a complicated history here, as is often the case in Yeats's work. According to the myth, Leda gave birth to two sets of children after having been raped. One egg produced the twins Castor and Pollux, rendered immortal and "heavenly" in the night sky; out of the other egg came Leda's daughters, Helen and Clytemnaestra—the eventual wives of the Greek kings Menelaus and Agamemnon, respectively. The Trojan War resulted from Helen's abduction by Paris, who was the son of King Priam of Troy. The "broken wall, the burning roof and tower, and Agamemnon dead" is how Yeats refers to the nine-year-long siege of Troy by the Greeks. This poem talks about "A sudden blow" and "a white rush"; the moment "engenders" consequences that will last long after this particular action is done.



William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

For a brief biography of William Butler Yeats, see Chapter 17.

AS YOU READ Think about the differences between this bird and the birds described in "Sailing to Byzantium" (Chapter 17).

Leda and the Swan (1924)

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.

5 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
 10 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?

An image such as that of the swan and the swan's mate, for example, is a good thing to consider in the image pattern you are developing. The following poem by William Butler Yeats is in the image pattern. Were the poem about Leda to involve the kind of bird Yeats has in mind? (in Chapter 17), or if that poem had involved a flock of swans? It is distinctive. This swan is thoroughly physical, not something useful to contrast the two varieties of birds in the two poems. As to the Greek myth on which "Leda and the Swan" is based, the poet who has taken the shape of a bird and descended to earth. The poet

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"I can't imagine any writer or any artist doing anything of any good without knowing some or a lot of what preceded him." Conversation with Stephen Dunn

Stephen Dunn

Writing from Reading

Summarize

1 Do these three stanzas tell a story?
Summarize the action in each.

Analyze Craft

2 How is the present linked to the past?

Analyze Voice

3 What does the speaker feel toward his remembrance? What words give you clues as to his feeling?

4 Who is speaking in the poem?

Synthesize Summary and Analysis

5 Compare the two experiences of music in the poem—the two pianos, the two musicians.

Interpret the Poem

6 What does the speaker mean by "manhood is cast down"? What in his childhood does he long for?

The speaker connects the occasion of the woman singing to him in the twilight hour with the set of emotions it calls up. His adult attention to the singer, his child's love for his mother, his deeply felt memories of long-ago evenings—all these come together in the image of the "Piano." The musical instrument that the speaker looks at and the one he remembers are both different and the same. When the speaker weeps "like a child for the past," it's clear that memory takes precedence: "the flood of remembrance" carries him away. So "the glamour" that would seem to attach to a woman "singing to me" with "the great black piano appassionato" in fact belongs to the recollection of past childhood, and the singer who begins "Softly, in the dusk," bursts merely into "clamour" in the present scene.

An image such as that of the piano is central to any lyric poem, and one of the first things to consider is the image pattern you discover as you read. An indelible part of the following poem by William Butler Yeats is the image of a swan, its "feathered glory." Were the poem about Leda to involve the kind of bird Yeats writes of in "Sailing to Byzantium" (in Chapter 17), or if that poem had involved a flock of swans, the poems would be less distinctive. This swan is thoroughly physical, not something "out of nature," and it's useful to contrast the two varieties of birds in the two poems.

According to the Greek myth on which "Leda and the Swan" is based, the swan is the god Zeus who has taken the shape of a bird and descended to earth. The poem

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