

## Transgenerational Burden in W. B. Yeats's Poem "Leda and the Swan": A Feminist Study

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### Abstract

The transgenerational burden presented in W. B. Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" is examined in this research from a feminist standpoint. As shown in the legendary retelling, the analysis explores the many layers of patriarchal power relations and their long-lasting effects on succeeding generations. The text uses feminist literary theory to explain how Yeats's depiction of Leda's terrible encounter with the holy swan incorporates larger societal meanings and sustains repressive mechanisms that have an ongoing effect on society. The transgenerational burden arises from the offspring of this encounter. The children born to Leda carry the weight of their divine parentage and the complexities of their intertwined lineage. The examination scrutinizes the interplay of gender roles, agency, and the consequential burdens borne by women, revealing the poem as a nuanced commentary on the enduring legacy of patriarchal dominance. Through this exploration, the study contributes to the broader discourse on gender in literature, shedding light on the intricate intergenerational complexities inherent in Yeats's poetic explanation. The Leda and the Swan myth highlights the enduring consequences of patriarchal power dynamics and their role in shaping transgenerational burdens within the narrative.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal power, subordination, feminism, trauma, transgenerational burden, division

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### Introduction

The narrative of Leda and the Swan is a well-known Greek myth in which Zeus, disguised as a swan, seduces or rapes Leda. The effects of that encounter are the source of the myth's transgenerational dilemma. Leda becomes pregnant and gives birth to two sets of twins: Helen and Polydeuces (Zeus' offspring) and Castor and Clytemnestra (Tyndareus' children). When we look at the twins' descendants, we see the transgenerational issue at work. The Trojan War begins with Helen's kidnapping by Paris and has far-reaching implications for both the Greek and Trojan generations involved. These people's actions and destinies have an impact on future generations, creating a cycle of violence, betrayal, and sorrow. As a result, the transgenerational issue in Leda and the Swan is found in the consequences of

Zeus' acts, which touch not just the immediate progeny but also their successors, molding the path of Greek mythology and literature.

The poem "Leda and the Swan" appears to be the foundation of the conventional gender stereotype of the aggressive man and the inherently submissive or passionate feminine. Zeus is, however, giving Leda a significant amount of influence when he creates Helen, her daughter, and Clytemnestra. This paper, approaching the subject from a feminist standpoint, contends that the fabled Leda in W. B. Yeats's work harbors a potentially violent, disruptive, and destructive power inside her womb. Leda suffers not just in her own age as a result of her subservience to the male patriarchy, but also in the generations that follow. Helen, Clytemnestra, Pollux, and Castor all have a significant impact on the history of Greece and, subsequently, western civilization.

Traditional Irish poets sometimes glorified women by creating idealized representations of them that misrepresented and misunderstood actual women. Patriarchal domination has permeated every aspect of society under the cover of innovation, prominence, and contamination, making it occasionally difficult for gullible readers to understand. The long-standing poem "Leda and the Swan" helps examine the negligence, or thoughtlessness to oneself, that is in so far the characteristics of the most heavily patriarchal text. Other examples of Yeats's poems include the binary opposition of male hegemony and female subordination underlying Irish cultural ethos, nationalism, and the burden of transgenerational aspects. "Leda and the Swan" narrates the legendary story of Leda being sexually assaulted by Zeus, a Greek deity, while posing as a swan. This incident sets the stage for Helen of Troy's birth. Thus, it seems that the poem is telling the sensual tale of Greek mythology's Zeus and Leda.

### **Historical Perspective:**

According to March (2001), the beautiful woman Helen of Troy in the Greek myth, "over whom the Greeks and Trojans warred for ten long years" (p.457) is claimed to be the daughter of Zeus and Leda, the Spartan king Tyndareus's wife. Greek mythological princess Leda is reported to have seen the offspring of Zeus and Helen, as well as Castor, Timandra, Philoreus, Phoebe, and Clytemnestra, all of whom are fathered by Tyndaneus. Helen was conceived from an egg after Zeus, assuming the guise of a Swan, had charmed Leda into becoming pregnant. March also brings with it another mythological link that clarifies Helen's birth and reveals that Nemesis is Helen's mother. Once more appearing erotically as a swan, Zeus has slept with Nemesis, who has assumed the form of a goose, leading to the creation of an egg. Leda received the identical egg from a shepherd and, as Helen is Leda's real mother, Leda had stored it in a box until Helen. Thus, in this mythical tale of Zeus penetrating himself before a mortal lady for his own purposes of sexual fulfilment, patriarchy is explicitly represented. But according to the current assertion, manliness was elevated to a high standard in mythology, placing male characters at the center, and this means that male dominance over females is a transgenerational burden. The recent age has also seen the dominance, division, and prejudice as incomplete projects.

The concept of transgenerational trauma is a fascinating and complex area of study. It delves into how historical traumas, often rooted in events like genocides, can have lasting psychological effects that

span across multiple generations. The weight of such traumas can manifest in various ways, impacting the mental health and well-being of descendants. Here Kizilhan et. al. assert as:

“Historical traumas that also date back several generations seem to be important for the psychological burden of their descendants. Consequently, we want to take a closer look at the topic of transgenerational trauma, in particular despite, or precisely because of, the still-developing and preliminary conceptualization of the subject and the lack of research on other genocides besides the better-explored Jewish Holocaust.” (Kizilhan et al. 3)

Lensing through transgenerational trauma beyond the Jewish Holocaust is crucial for a more inclusive and thorough comprehension of the psychological burdens inherited by descendants of individuals who experienced historical traumas. It opens the door to a broader discussion on the complexities of intergenerational impact and coping mechanisms in the face of such challenging histories.

The events are retrospectively analyzed and there would be the traces of psychological deterioration or trauma which is explained by Dhungana as, ‘all forms of remembering trauma the first result in the process of “Working through” the other is based on denial and result in “acting out” (Dhungana p.127). In the context of remembering trauma, these two processes represent different ways individuals cope with their experiences. "Working through" signifies a more constructive and introspective approach, while "acting out" involves more external and potentially harmful expressions of the distress associated with trauma. The choice between these processes can significantly impact an individual's mental health and well-being in the long run.

## **Data Analysis and Presentation**

Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" transports the reader back to the earliest, pre-Christian age, epoch of devastation, savagery, and warfare. The speaker opens with a description of a scene with strong segments: "A sudden blow" (p.121), which makes it clear that the strong God Zeus is abusing the mortal human Leda. In this context, Vågerö & Rajaleid highlight: Transgenerational response along the male line may well be epigenetic and triggered during the slow growth period (Vågerö and Rajaleid p. 233). This sentence raises the possibility that some characteristics or actions inherited by men may be impacted by epigenetic variables, which may be triggered in periods of sluggish social advancement. From a feminist standpoint, it can draw attention to the investigation of the historical and social contexts in which gender-specific features are transmitted and exhibited. The phrases "staggering girl," "helpless," and "terrified," which come after (p.121), clearly state that Leda is taken prisoner by violent means. Similar to how her "loosening thighs" (p.121) suggest that at originally they were both clinched together, Leda makes an imperfect attempt to "push" Zeus apart. Leda's anguish, perplexity, surrender, and resistance to sexual abuse are thus elevated in the poem, highlighting her delicate nature. Leda is a human lady who is completely unable to oppose a god's "feathered glory" and "white rush" since she has been left with "helpless breast" and "terrified vague fingers" (p.121). Consequently, Leda was taken prisoner by the powerful, hideous Swan.

Similar to this, the poem's portrayal of this union in the current research gains a sensual intensity from certain words and phrases like "thighs," "caressed," "nape," "hold" (p.121) her defenseless breast against his breast, and then "feathered glory" (p.121) and "shudder in the loins" (p.121). Heard, with

the reference of transgenerational concept, states: Transgenerational epigenetic inheritance also has the potential to be adaptive and, in some cases, might even respond to environmental challenges with major implications for heredity, breeding, and evolution (Heard and Martienssen p. 95). According to this paragraph, features that are inherited through epigenetic mechanisms may be able to adjust to changing environmental conditions, which can have an impact on breeding, evolution, and heredity. It suggests more significant ramifications for biological processes by highlighting the dynamic character of heredity and its possible influence on how species adapt to shifting environmental situations.

Furthermore, the poet describes Leda's attempt to push Zeus away as "vague," and at last, her thigh "loosens." This shows that Leda's body is unable to sense the mysterious heart of the holy Zeus. This is what the poetry does so well—it portrays the defenseless, innocence, and obedience. Thus, the current study demonstrates the pitiful state of women and patriarchal dominance.

Yeats connects the poem to the mythological figure of Agamemnon, who was married to Leda's daughter Clytemnestra. According to the tale, Helen's sister was seduced and kidnapped by Paris; her abduction served as the catalyst for the disastrous, unheard-of, and unpredicted Trojan War. Similarly, Menelous's brother Agamemnon was the leader of Helen's brother-in-law's army, which he led to Troy for the benefit of his sister-in-law Helen. To appease the God of the Wings, he offered his daughter as a sacrifice, which infuriated Clytemnestra. She fell in love with Agamemnon when her husband Agamemnon was away. Additionally, Clytemnestra and Agamemnon devised a scheme to kill Agamemnon. The terrible murder in question relates to the abrupt assassination of Agamemnon in his own palace following his triumph in Troy. What is more, there is a great deal of destruction when Troy eventually reduces to ruins. In legend, Helen, the sexually reviled woman, is the one who starts the destructive wars instead of Achilles or Agamemnon. The guy, however, was the one who tried to woo Leda with sexual advances. Thus, according to legend, Zeus ejaculates into Leda's womb and bears Helen, who later shapes mythological history and is responsible for Troy's collapse and the valiant Greek king Agamemnon's death. The act of rape itself caused destruction, shattered history, and brought an end to the old kingdom's system of rule. Zeus's rape of Leda was not the sole reason for the demise of Greek civilization; patriarchy also held women responsible for the world's devastation. As a result, patriarchal hegemony—which is practiced both consciously and unknowingly—does not disappear.

## **Figurative Language in “Leda and the Swan”**

### **Alliteration**

The poem's opening stanza employs alliteration, a poetry method that involves repeating a consonant note in a line. Consider the concluding line, "He holds her helpless breast upon his breast" (p.121), which repeatedly employs the sounds /h/ and /b/ to convey the terror and anguish of Zeus's attack on defenseless Leda. Similar to this, the second stanza uses alliteration extensively in instances where two bodily parts combine in an unsettling fashion. Zeus's "feathered glory" (p.121) and Leda's "fingers" serve as excellent examples here. The noises for "body," "beating," and "feel" (p.121), respectively, are /f/ and /b/, which mirror Leda's submission and also resemble the characters' heartbeats. The /b/ sound in the lines "broken" and "burning" (p.121) in the third stanza both allude to the collapse of Troy and

connect them to the "brute blood" (p.121) that flows through Zeus's veins and is essential to the realization of that catastrophe.

### **Synecdoche**

It also poses the debate between fate and free will. In the poem "helpless breast," for example, "terrified vague fingers" (p.121) and so on. If this action is predestined, Leda might not be able to fend off her assailant. Synecdoche can also be employed to convey Leda's disjointed interpretation of the event. Here, "dark webs" and "great wings" (p.121) as well as the characters' emotions are separated.

### **Euphemism**

Although the goal is to create a sexless picture, they do the exact opposite in this instance. For example, the euphemism "feathered glory" (p.121) refers to the parts of Zeus's genitalia, and another significant one is "shudder in the loins" (p.121), which stresses the moment of ejaculation and the animal grotesqueness of sex at the start of the sestet. A tone that is confused is created when the sensuous or beautiful contrast with the horrific. Yeats seems to be endorsing or encouraging rape; using phrases like "vague" and "loosening thighs," he even implies that Leda would not want to resist (p.121).

### **Rhetorical Questions**

Yeats explores the events that spark whole histories through his use of rhetorical questions in The Trojan War. This suggests a picture in which Leda's rape triggers the end of history and the start of the modern age. "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" (p.121) is another example of a rhetorically unclear question. Leda may have been able to access Jupiter's divinity during her seduction and developed the ability to predict the future, according to theory.

### **Illusion**

A type of literary technique known as illusion refers to anything that is not contained in the text. The references typically relate to biblical characters or legendary figures and events. The poet finds the reference in the third line of the poem, which reads, "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower." Agamemnon is dead as well (p.121). This claim emphasizes how Zeus is trying to have a relationship with Leda, which causes Troy's collapse and the demise of Greek culture.

### **Enjambement**

Enjambement is the poetic device in which a concept flows from one line to the next without stopping at a line break. It also refers to breaking a phrase up into many lines. "So mastered by the brute blood of the air" is what this says. "Did she use his power to put on his knowledge before the uncaring beak could let her drop?" (p.121). The sentence begs the issue of whether she used his connections to get his knowledge and protect herself before she faced the possibility of hurt or indifference from a person of power represented by the "uncaring beak."

### **Symbolism**

Literal meanings are not the same as symbolic ones. By using symbols, concepts and attributes are given symbolic significance. Many symbols, such as "thighs," "feathers," and "heart" (p.121), are used throughout the poem to depict the act of seduction.

### **Imagery**

The use of imagery helps readers experience the world through all five senses. The lines "So mastered by brute blood of the air," "By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill," and "Before the indifferent beak could let her drop (p.121)" are examples of the imagery the speaker employed in this poem. These words have powerful imagery, depicting how Zeus's violent onslaught and Leda's impregnation caused a satirical transformation across the history of Europe and civilization.

### **Critical responses on "Leda and the Swan"**

The Mayor of Casterbridge, a well-known story by Thomas Hardy, illustrates the appalling state of women. He declares:

"To shake loose from one's wife; to discard that drooping rag of a women, with her mute complaints and maddening passivity; to escape not by a slinking abandonment but through the public sale of her body to a stranger, as horses are sold at a fair; and thus to wrest, through sheer amoral willfulness; a second chance out of life-it is with this stroke, so insidiously attractive to male fantasy, that The Mayor of Casterbridge begin."(Hardy p. 84)

In this passage, women are viewed as commodities. It is obvious that a woman who identifies strongly with masculine culture will encounter this scenario frequently. Regarding Susan and Michael Henchard's relationship, the author remains closed-minded. It does not, however, appear at this early point that she is moping, whining, or passive. Nevertheless, she plays a passive role. She is incredibly stretched by being a woman and additionally burdened by her kid, therefore she is unable to extract another chance from life. In addition to selling his wife, Henchard also sells his sole female kid at the fair. Sons are not meant to be sold on the open market in patriarchal societies, but girls are eventually up for sale. Henchard is selling all of his rights to the world of women in this instance. Therefore, the excerpt depicts women's subjugation, recklessness, commodity status, and patriarchy as a dominant idea.

Anthology of myths told to Muni Agastha, a saint, by Lord Kumar, the eldest son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Ganga, is known as the Swasthani Barta Katha in ancient Hindu mythology. The female is portrayed as a submissive in the narration. For example: "the story shows a common girls, Goma, being cursed and condemned for not complying with social norms." Goma was just seven years old when she is later sentenced to marry Shiva Sharma, a man who is seventy years old. On the other hand, "Should our society still appreciate the act of Bishnu after the rapes Birenda at her own home?" Does Birinda deserve a grotesque punishment like rape for her husband's misdeeds? (Dahal 2010, p. 26) These allusions criticize the notion that men should assume central roles in Hindu mythology as well.

One well-known feminist writer who addresses the topic of female dominance is Virginia Woolf. She says: "Women live like bats or owls, labour like beasts, and die like worm (Woolf, p. 222)". The situations of women are discussed in this paragraph. Women are straightforward and diligent in their

job, even while they are at home. She never questions males who behave badly against women in particular ways. They toil and suffer for nothing more than their families. And last, women pass away like worms, lacking feeling and sympathy for the tasks they were supposed to perform for their families. Women are positioned on the peripheral of the feminine archetype, with males at the center. As a result, female dignity is diminished and patriarchy is entrenched.

Simultaneously, feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir states:

“The women, employing their erotic attraction, can induce young men and even fathers of families to scatter their patrimonies, without ceasing to be within the law. Some of these women appropriate their victims’ fortunes or obtain legacies by using undue influences; this role being regarded as evil those who play it are called “bad women.”(Beauvoir 59)

The efforts of women are viewed as less important and valuable in the household. The family's male members use hooks and crooks to spread needle misinformation for no good purpose. Even now, women are unable to speak out against patriarchy. It is not appropriate for women to rebel for the sake of legacy. Some women are viewed as evil or nasty women if they choose to violate it. Similar to this, Leda, a lady in Yeats' poem, is also raped, but she is powerless against the god Zeus.

## **Conclusion:**

In nutshell, this paper has looked at how feminism represents Leda's victimhood. The current study demonstrates that women are just considered objects. Here, women are forced to participate in sexual activity with males, and when the man ejaculates, feels content, and runs off, mental sickness or retardation develops and psychological issues arise. In addition to causing sadness, sexual objectification can cause women to internalize it and objectify themselves as a result. In the text, Leda is objectified as a passive object to be brutally raped and desired. Leda is at the center of several conflicts. She is in direct bodily struggle with Zeus, much as women in Yeats's day were in direct conflict with men. Just as individual conflicts affected the movement of power between Ireland and Great Britain, Leda is shown as a part of a political affair in which her actions contribute to the cyclical shift in power that happens in the universe. Leda stands for an understanding of the possibilities for transformation. Zeus, however, remained in charge, and Leda profited greatly from his aggression. She acquired important information and insight that is necessary for a weak person facing a strong force. Consequently, patriarchy serves as a cross-generational burden for the valorization of women, since it was not only the practice of treating women like dolls in ancient times but also a pattern that continues to this day.

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