

## ENGLISH: YEATS

### Yeats

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The three poems of W.B Yeats, *Leda and the Swan*, *The Second Coming* and *Easter 1916* all explore notions of creation and destruction within a framework of Yeats' own philosophical and spiritual beliefs. However, creation and destruction are not explored as purely antithetical by Yeats but rather as different and equally apparent parts of life. *Leda and the Swan* explores the possibility of creation as dependent on the existence of destruction within a mythological context. *The Second Coming* however sets religious paradigms within the creative force of the gyre in contrast to the destructive force of the anti-Christ of *The Book of Revelations*. *Easter 1916* uses a more literal historical setting to explore the effect of the destruction of the young rebel lives on the future of Ireland. In all three poems Yeats explores the permanent cycle of both creation and destruction as the force that sustains all things' existence, in the past, present and future.

The prominent relationship between creation and destruction in *Leda and the Swan* is used to represent a change of era in Yeats' historical model of gyres. Yeats uses the Greek myth of the rape of Leda by Zeus, a pivotal moment where deity and mortal are coupled, interpreting it as an 'annunciation that founded Greece' because it conceived Helen whose birth led to the birth of the entire classical era.

The poem begins with the forceful act of violence by the swan as an experience of horror by the powerless girl. This image is depicted through the word choice in the first quatrain: 'staggering girl', 'caught' and 'helpless', as she experiences a loss of control. The sexual act by its nature is supposed to be a creative force because a new creature is born from it. However, because it is a forced act by Zeus, it is destructive of Leda as she loses her virginity, symbolized by the phrase, 'the broken wall.' The volta of the sonnet at the climax of the sexual act signals the historical repercussions of the seduction. Here, the word choice of 'engenders' suggests the begetting of future generations from this union, setting a new cycle of history in motion. However, the rape has also been a catalyst of absolute destruction and its consequences have unfolded over decades of disaster in the Trojan War, shown by the accumulation of images of destruction, 'the broken wall, the burning roof and tower and Agamemnon dead'.

Through *Leda and the Swan* Yeats addresses the question of what drives the cycles of history. It is clear that Yeats was fascinated by the patterns in history, the cycles that repeat and the far-reaching effects of epoch-making events. In the poem, the destructive act of the rape triggered a seminal creation, which ultimately had enormous ramifications that resulted in death and destruction. Thus, the complex relationship between creation and destruction is seen as part of an inevitable cycle of change, which began in ancient history and has impacted the nature of man's development today.

Like *Leda and the Swan*, *The Second Coming* describes the creation of a new era in terms of the gyres but set in religious paradigms. Yeats believed that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation, as history reached the end of the outer gyre and began moving along the inner gyre. He believed that the current historical period, the Christian era was coming to an end having lasted for 2000 years, the length of an age, and would be replaced by the antithesis, anti-Christ. Written in and influenced by the context of WWI and the Russian Revolution Yeats comments on the destroyed state of modern society and prophesies the inevitable creation of a new period of history which will cause further destruction.

The sense of this inevitability of change is seen to resonate throughout the whole poem. The repetition of 'surely' in the second stanza conveys a sense of helplessness as if what is going to happen, the creation of a new era, can't be averted in any way. The vivid image of 'the centre cannot hold' and 'mere anarchy is loosed' is depicted, with both political and societal implications of the collapse of an established order. As the world experienced great chaos, Yeats predicts this current system will soon make an unbridled transition into a new religious cycle that is controlled by

an unrelenting power known as the 'beast'. Thus the Christian era referenced by the 'rocking cradle' will end, and as the gyres continually turn, the unavoidable new order of the 'rough beast', which is a religious reference to the Antichrist, is approaching. Similarly to 'Leda and the Swan', Yeats concludes with a rhetorical question about 'what rough beast... slouches towards Bethlehem?' to express his ambiguity of the approaching unknown. This expresses the immensity and threat of the beast and foreshadowing of a force of greater destruction.

Through the Second Coming Yeats envisions the destruction of society as the end of the Christian era and what follows is the beginning of a new era, which is violent and destructive. Hence, once again, Yeats presents the cyclical nature of creation and destruction and the inseparable nature of these two elements in the cycle of history.

In his poem, Easter 1916, Yeats presents a different approach to creation and destruction from Second Coming and Leda and the Swan by focusing on the contemporary civil concerns of society. The poem commemorates the key leaders of the uprising who were executed as a result of the political event.

Yeats opens the poem through the portrayal of life before the event, the use of 'vivid faces' show the faces of the revolutionaries are embedded in his memory. However his descriptions of his interactions with them prior to the event, through repetition of 'polite meaningless words,' indicate the insignificance of their exchange. He then proceeds to produce ordinary descriptions of the leaders in stanza two to depict their humanity with all its imperfection. Yeats describes these leaders in their ordinary context to depict the ability of common citizens to inflict change. This is shown through the elevation of the rebels from fools in 'motley' to immortal, heroic martyrs, pioneers of the new Irish nationalist state which emerges and ultimately, the revolutionary era they have engineered. Thus, they will be remembered 'wherever green is worn'. Yeats depicts the overall irreconcilable extremes of the Easter Uprising through the oxymoron in 'A terrible beauty is born' describing the tragedy in the death of the rebels but also the life-changing and redefining moment for the Irish, 'all changed, changed utterly,' that resulted from this event. Hence the relationship between destruction and creation are seen to be two sides of a coin that are opposites yet inseparable.

Throughout all three poems, Yeats' represents the complex connection between creation and destruction as part of a permanent cyclical sequence. Henceforth he firmly rejects the idea that creation and destruction are antithetical but rather as different and equally apparent parts of life. It can be concluded that Yeats' vision concerning the interconnectedness of creation and destruction is timeless as it embodies the past, present and future. Leda and the Swan explores how this cycle marked the beginning of a history of destruction and the repercussions that followed while the Second Coming forewarns the creation of an inevitable dark future as the cycle continues to turn through history. And finally, Easter 1916 addresses the immediate aftermath of what Yeats' belief is a change in the ages. Therefore, Yeats explores the enduring yet complex relationship between destruction and creation as a delicate balance, affecting each other as well as sustaining humanity's existence in the cycle of history.