



## Leda and the Swan

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

Yeats expects his readers to recognize as archetypal the encounter between mortal woman and godhead. A gentler version of Leda's visit from the swan, after all, is the beginning of Christianity. Each event, for Yeats, constitutes the annunciation of a great cycle of history. As the impregnation of Mary by the Holy Spirit sets in motion the Christian era, so does Leda's union with the swan set in motion the heroic age. In conceiving the beautiful Helen of Troy and the vengeful Clytemnestra, Leda conceives love, war--even the evolution of justice. Her encounter with Zeus is the cultural genesis more fully chronicled in Homer's *ILIAD* and Aeschylus' *ORESTEIA*.

To contain these ideas in a sonnet--a form requiring maximum economy of expression--is a challenge that the poet meets with great resourcefulness. For example, he artfully casts his account of the sexual consummation in language at once prophetic of the Trojan War and suggestive of defloration and orgasm: "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower." The full stop in line 11, along with the typographical break, represents the termination of sexual activity and the onset of post-coital lassitude (brilliantly captured in the half-rhyme of "up" and "drop"). The poem's energies seem to flag with the sated swan's.

The question that ends the poem--does Leda have access to the god's knowledge as she experiences his power?--calls to mind the nuances of "knowing." If Leda "knows" the god sexually, does she also "know" his mind?

### Copyright Notice

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:  
<http://www.enotes.com/leda-swan-salem>