

Abstract

William Butler Yeats's 1919 collection *The Wild Swans at Coole* marked a transition in his poetry: from early songs rooted in Romanticism, the poet moves towards a style influenced by Modernism. Even though it is beneficial to examine Yeats's work in relation to the two major literary movements, it is necessary to bear in mind that his stance towards both remained problematic. This stylistic ambiguity is apparent in the collection's title poem and its central paradox: the poet's depiction of swans contains aspects of Romanticism and Modernism alike, yet it resists clear classification. Furthermore, swans feature here not only as poetic symbols, but also as physical bodies. Similar contradictory tendencies appear in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan". In this later poem from *The Tower* (1918), the poet emphasizes the symbolic value as well as the physical features of the animal. The swan as a beautiful rapist in "Leda and the Swan" also prompts a feminist reading, bringing us to the dichotomy between the poet and woman as object. This dichotomy is put on display in the last poem I discuss in detail, "Coole and Ballylee, 1931". In it, Yeats thematizes not only his life, but also his work and his relationship with the swans as mirrors of inevitable alienation.

Chapters one and two trace the influence of the two literary movements on Yeats. His own ideas on the movements reveal how much he was inspired by them while rejecting them at the same time. Chapter three then pushes the argument in a different direction, towards Yeats's self-reflection and his evaluation of the creative principle based on contradictions. I try to prove this principle as elementary not only throughout his poetry but also considering his prose. The aim of this thesis is not to place Yeats in any clear-cut category, but to try and understand the creative usage of various contradictions, tensions and oppositions that run across his entire oeuvre.