The Wild Swans At Coole

Coole Park, in Co. Galway, was the home of Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats’ friend and patron.

W.B. Yeats wrote this poem in 1916

He was fifty one years old

The woman he loved, Maud Gonne, had been widowed when her husband was executed for his part in the 1916 Rising

Yeats proposed to her once more. Once more, she refused.

Yeats was in low spirits when he wrote this poem.
Happier Times...

In 1917, the year after he wrote this poem, Yeats married Georgiana Hyde-Lees and the they moved into Thoor Ballylee, a house near Coole Park.
Coole Park

History

• The home of the Gregory family, built in the late 1700s

• In 1927, Lady Gregory sold the house and lands to the Irish government

• Lady Gregory died in 1932

• The house fell into disrepair and was demolished by the state in 1941

• The lands are open to the public all year round
First Stanza
The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans

- Describes the beauty of Coole Park in autumn
- Details, such as the ‘brimming water’ and the dry woodland paths, bring the scene to life
- Contrast between brimming water of the lake and the dry path
- The lake and the swans represent life and growth
- The land on which Yeats stands is dry and barren
- Autumn and twilight (dusk) are associated with slowing down and even with dying
- Does Yeats feel that he is reaching the autumn years of his life?
- There are nine-and-fifty swans: swans mate for life. Is one of them alone?
- The repeated ‘m’, ‘s’ and ‘l’ sounds emphasise the peace and quiet
- Tone of the stanza is detached: no obvious emotion
Second Stanza
The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings

• Yeats becomes far more personal: the word ‘I’ is used repeatedly
• It is nineteen years since he first counted these swans
• The swans are unchanging: they are there every year, seemingly the same, while Yeats ages
• The movement of the rising swans is captured by the run-on lines
• The onomatopoeic word ‘clamorous’ effectively captures the clapping and beating of the swans’ wings
• The swans form ‘broken rings’: rings are symbols of eternity but these are ‘broken rings’, perhaps linking to Yeats’ lost love? The ‘broken rings’ could also be the rings of spirals as the swans rise
• The image of the spiral of swans linking the water and the sky could be a symbol of the swans’ being both of heaven and earth while man is tied to the earth
Third Stanza
I have looked upon those brilliant creatures, 
And now my heart is sore. 
All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight, 
The first time on this shore, 
The bell-beat of their wings above my head, 
Trod with a lighter tread.

• Yeats reflects on how his life has changed since he first looked at the swans

• He is not as young or carefree as when he ‘trod with a lighter tread’, which means ‘stepped with a lighter footstep’

• His ‘heart is sore’ as he thinks of the loss of his youth and his failed romance

• The alliteration in ‘bell-beat’ captures and reinforces the steady beat of the birds’ huge wings as they fly overhead
Fourth Stanza
Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest,
Wander where they will,
Attend upon them still

• Note of envy
• Yeats watches the birds who are not old and tired: they are ‘unwearied still’
• The birds stay in their pairs: ‘lover by lover’
• The streams may be cold, but the swans have one another and are warmed by that
• Time does not touch the swans: ‘Their hearts have not grown old’
• Has Yeats’ heart grown old?
• Contrast between Yeats’ life and that of the swans: they have ‘Passion and conquest’ wherever they are
• The swans can swim in ‘brimming water’ and fly high in the sky, but Yeats is limited to the dry woodland paths
Fifth Stanza
But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake’s edge or pool  
Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?

- Yeats wonders where the swans will go next to bring delight to others
- They, unchanged, will bring pleasure to all who stand, as he does now, watching them glide on the still water
- Poem is set in autumn: winter will follow for Yeats
- Swans are untouched by passage of time
- Yeats may be reflecting on his creative life and his love life when he thinks of the changes time has wrought
- The swans are unchanging, immortal and utterly content
- Yeats is none of these things
Theme and Exam Focus

THEME: The passage of time and the loss of youth, creative vision and love

This poem could be used to answer a question on:
• Old age
• A poem I would recommend
• A poem which captures the imagination
• Sound effects or musical qualities
• Interesting imagery
• A poem which deals with important issues (see theme)