

The Wild Swans At Coole

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.

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.

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.

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.

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?

Background

Yeats wrote this poem in 1916, when he was fifty one years of age. Coole Park, in Co. Galway was the home of Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats' friend and patron. (Patron – a wealthy or influential supporter of an artist or writer.) In the poem, he reflects on how his life has changed since he was a younger man and walked "with a lighter tread". In reality, Yeats had not been carefree in his youth, but for the purposes of this poem, we must suspend disbelief and take him at his word.

In 1916, Yeats' love, Maud Gonne was widowed. Her husband, Major John McBride, had been executed by the British for his part in the Easter Rising. Maud Gonne went to France to work as a nurse with the war wounded, and Yeats followed her, to propose marriage once again. Once again she refused. In 1917, Yeats married Georgiana Hyde-Lees and moved into Thoor Ballylee, a house near Coole Park.

Analysis

Stanza One

Yeats begins the poem by describing the beauty of Coole Park in the autumn. Details, such as the brimming water and the dry woodland paths bring this peaceful scene to life. The brimming water of the lake contrasts with the dry paths. It is as if the lake and its occupants represent life and growth, while the land – where Yeats stands – is barren. Autumn is linked with slowing down and dying. Does Yeats feel that, at fifty one, he is reaching the autumn years of his life? The swans are counted; there are "nine-and-fifty" of them. Swans mate for life, so why is there an odd number? Is one of them, like Yeats, alone? The repeated 'm', 's' and 'l' sounds in this stanza emphasise the sense of peace and quiet. The tone of this stanza is quite detached. The descriptions are given without any obvious emotion.

Stanzas Two

In the second stanza, Yeats becomes far more personal as he recalls that it is nineteen years since he first counted these swans. Although logic tells us that these are unlikely to be the same swans, we suspend disbelief and accept that this is just an artistic construct. Suddenly, before Yeats can finish his counting, all the swans rise into the air. The run-on lines suggest movement and reflect the swans' flight. The onomatopoeic word "clamorous" effectively captures the clapping and beating of the swans' wings as they soar into the air. They form a ring – a symbol of eternity – and perhaps this reminds Yeats that while he might change, the swans remain the same, and even make the same patterns in the sky every year.

Stanza Three

The poet reflects how everything in his life has changed since he first looked at the swans on this lake. "All's changed". He is not as young or as carefree as he was when he "Trode with a lighter tread". His "heart is sore" as he thinks of the loss of his youth and of his failed romances. The description of the swans' wings in flight, "The bell-beat of their wings" is particularly effective here. The alliteration in "bell-beat" captures and reinforces the steady beat of the birds' huge wings as they fly above his head.

Stanza Four

There is a note of envy in the fourth stanza as Yeats watches the bird "Unwearied still, lover by lover," paddling together in the "Companionable streams". The streams may be cold, but the swans have one another. They are united, and time does not seem to touch them. "Their hearts have not grown old". Wherever they go, "Passion or conquest" are with them. This seems to be in contrast to Yeats' own life. He implies that he is old and tired and heartbroken. The swans can swim in the "brimming" water and fly in the air, but Yeats is limited to the dry woodland paths.

Stanza Five

The poem ends with Yeats wondering where the swans will go next to "Delight men's eyes". Perhaps he means that they, unchanged, will continue to bring pleasure to others who stand as he does now, watching them glide once more on the still water. The poem is set in autumn, and winter will inevitably follow, for the poet. The swans seem untouched by everything and will continue to "drift on the still water". Yeats may be thinking of his creative life or his love life, or both, when he reflects on the changes that time has wrought. The swans are unchanging, content, almost immortal. He is none of these things.

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 an important issue (see Theme)