

The Wild Swans At Coole

By William Butler Yeats

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Background

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 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

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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

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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

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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,
Trode 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 'trode 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

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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

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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)

