The Wild Swans at Coole

POEM TEXT

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?

SUMMARY

The trees are filled with fall colors, and the paths through the woods are dry. It's an October evening and the Coole lake reflects the calm, motionless sky above. I can see fifty-nine swans swimming in the lake, which is almost overflowing with water.

It was nineteen years ago that I was first here and counted the swans. Back then, before I could count them all, the birds suddenly flew up above me in huge broken circles, soaring around on their noisy wings.

Looking at these beautiful birds now, I feel heartache. Everything has changed since I first stood on the shore of the lake at twilight and heard the swans' wings beating like bells above my head. Back then, I used to walk with a lighter step.

The swans are still just as full of life as they were back then. In their loving pairs, they paddle through the cold, friendly water or soar into the sky. Their hearts remain young. Their lives are still filled with passionate desires, with the freedom to go wherever they want.

At this moment, though, the swans float on the calm surface of the lake, distant and beautiful. In the future, where will they build their nests? Where will other men have the pleasure of seeing the swans, when I wake up one day to find that they've flown away from Coole?

THEMES

TIME AND AGING

"The Wild Swans at Coole" is a bleak, mournful poem, in which the speaker returns to a lake in Ireland (the "Coole" of the title) that he first visited 19 years earlier. Here, he observes a group of swans, just as he had years before. But instead of bringing him joy, the swans' beauty and vitality now fill the speaker with a bittersweet feeling. This is because the "unwearied" swans seem to have stayed the same—still filled with passion, mystery, and brilliance—while the speaker's own life has been changed irreversibly by the onward passage of time. In other words, the swans remind the speaker that he himself has grown older and drifted further from the vibrancy and possibility of his youth. With aging, the poem thus suggests, comes a tangible sense of loss for all the life left behind.

The poem is essentially a tale of two moments: the memory of the speaker's first visit to Coole, and the present-day in which he finds himself there again (though it's not clear if has visited in between those two moments). Through comparing these moments, the poem is able to explore the way that the relentless passage of time has affected the speaker, diminishing his lust for life and making him weary.

The poem begins by signaling that the speaker feels himself to be in the "autumn" of his life. The general setting establishes a sense of transition, one which echoes the way that the speaker feels that, ultimately, his hopes and dreams—later phrased as

"passion or conquest"—have passed him by.

Looking at the numerous elegant swans on the lake, the speaker starts to draw a distinction between the time when he first saw them (19 autumns ago) and the present moment. He clearly admires the swans, calling them "brilliant." But "[a]ll's changed" since he first stood on the shore at Coole. The swans' brilliance is a kind of constant—true then and true now—which contrasts with the way that the speaker feels himself to have changed over the years. Back then, the speaker walked with "a lighter tread"; now his age and life experiences make him metaphorically heavier and slower. This, of course, juxtaposes with the ever-present grace of the swans, which, again, appears the same now to the speaker as it was back then.

To that end, the swans' way of being reminds the speaker of how *he himself* used to be. This is drawn out by the way the poem describes the *differences* between the swans and the speaker in the present day, implying that he *used* to have more of the traits he continues to perceives in the birds. Whereas the swans are "Unwearied still," and "their hearts have not grown cold," the speaker can no longer say the same of himself. The poem implies that he *has* grown weary, and his heart *has* grown cold.

It's not specified what exactly has happened in the nearly two decades since the speaker first visited Coole. From the mention of "lover[s]" and "hearts," the reader can presume that, in part, the speaker mourns for lost love. But critics also speculate that, given the timing of the poem's writing, the loss that the speaker feels extends more widely: the poem was written soon after the horrors of the First World War and during the continuing struggle for Irish independence from the British.

That said, the specifics are not really the main point here. What's important is the way that the speaker senses these changes to be irreversible: time can only travel in one direction, and the good times—like the speaker's first visit to Coole—are only memories. In other words, there's no going back. That's why the swans seem to evoke such bittersweet feelings for the speaker. There is something timeless, magisterial even, about their way of being. They also seem free to "wander where they will," and remain "mysterious, beautiful." They remind the speaker of what he has lost to time.

"The Wild Swans at Coole," then, shows an individual struggling to come to terms with the path that life has taken. Ultimately, this speaks to the way that life runs an irreversible course—people can't go back or change the way that things have turned out. The speaker holds on to happier memories, but these are tinged by the sadness that they are fated never to become real experiences again.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-18
- Lines 19-30

NATURE VS. HUMANITY

Nature in the poem is presented as something that is unchanging in its beauty and majesty. This creates a sense of division between the world of nature and that of human beings, which, as represented by the speaker, is acutely aware of the passage of time and plagued by a sense of loss. Nature also seems untroubled by—perhaps even entirely indifferent to—human foibles, the swans continuing to appear full of passion and vigor even as the speaker is weighed down by the hopes, dreams, and disappointments that people experience in life. This doubles down on the poem's gentle sense of isolation and sadness about aging, heartbreak, and perhaps even wider contextual issues like the First World War. These issues, the poem subtly suggests, remain small or insignificant in the face of nature's everlasting grandeur.

Throughout the poem, the speaker projects human thoughts and feelings onto the swans. However, this serves to highlight that this is a one-way relationship—the swans, and nature more generally, go on as they are without any need for the speaker's awe or observations. This hints at the complexity of human life, contrasted with what seems like the more instinctive existence of the swans. Nature is clearly not under the speaker's control; when he first tried to count the swans—a kind of application of human logic and rigor to nature—they soared into the sky "before [he] had well finished." The swans, of course, didn't for him to finish counting, but just did whatever came instinctively to them.

Nevertheless, as the poem goes on, the speaker projects his whole world of human feelings and emotions onto the swans. He characterizes them as "lover[s]" with "hearts" that are set on "passion or conquest" as they please. But the sense of distance between the speaker and the swans remains palpable. That is to say, the swans are just going about their lives in accordance with their nature. They don't seem to doubt themselves or worry about their place in the world—they just inhabit their environment. There's thus something almost comical—and tragic—about the speaker's attempt to view nature through the prism of his own feelings. That said, it's also something that everybody does, and so indicates something fundamental about the human condition: the need for understanding, sympathy, and narrative within the broader world.

Indeed, the speaker wonders in the poem's closing lines if the swans might "some day" have "flown away." It's perfectly possible, of course, that—in accordance with their nature—the swans might do this. This heightens the sense of distance

between the speaker and the swans, thereby also intensifying this sense of fundamental difference between humanity and nature itself. Furthermore, this makes the speaker's life seem small and insignificant. That is, the unchanging—and majestic—nature of the swans is a kind of stand-in for the way in which his own life has had little effect on the world. And while he might have wanted his life to make a difference in the past, now he feels too weary to believe that to be possible anymore.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-12
- Lines 13-18
- Lines 19-24
- Lines 25-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;

The poem opens with four lines of scene setting. The speaker, not yet using the first-person pronoun, gives an account of the Coole surroundings (Coole is located in Ireland's County Galway). The leaves on the trees have begun to change colors, the paths dry, and twilight casts its dim glow upon the water. There is a sense that the season is on the turn: summer has turned to autumn, which in turn will lead to winter. This hints at the speaker's attitude later in the poem—he is in the autumn of his life, anxious that his best days are behind him.

On a similar note, the "still[ness] of the sky in line 4 pre-empts the way that the speaker's life has reached a kind of stasis, and that the more actively engaged days of his earlier years are gone. Likewise, the use of "Mirrors" in this line suggests that this poem is a kind of psychological reflection, a reckoning in which the speaker comes to terms with—or attempts to come to terms with—where his life is at. Consonance is at play through all four lines, with gentle /t/ and /d/ sounds conveying the delicate beauty of the autumnal scene:

> The trees are in their autumn beauty,
> The woodland paths are dry,
> Under the October twilight the water
> Mirrors a still sky;

The alliteration of "still sky" also contributes to the scene setting: the line seems to linger on this /s/ sound, evoking the stillness of the Coole surroundings.

LINES 5-8

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;

Lines 5 and 6, while still part of the opening stanza's general scene-setting, introduce the most important element of what the speaker can see: the swans. The speaker looks out on the lake and counts that there are 59 of them—an oddly specific number that suggests the swans must be very still indeed in this moment, if the speaker has gotten such an exact count!

Line 5 also uses consonance through /m/ sounds to create a sense of abundance to fit with the description of the water as "brimming" (which means that the lake is completely filled with water, to the point that it's almost overflowing):

> Upon the brimming water among the stones

The enjambment between lines 5 and 6 introduces the swans with an element of easy grace and surprise (considering how inactive the scene had first appeared). These lines are the start of the poem's central aim, which is to draw a distinction between two different moments: the poem's present, and the autumn 19 years ago in which the speaker first saw the swans.

And indeed, it's after the stanza break that the speaker makes this distinction clear. The distance between the stanzas hints at the distance in time that the speaker has travelled since that day, 19 autumns ago. It's notable the way that the speaker describes this passing of time, portraying it as something that has happened *to* him—as though his life has been largely out of his control, and this present moment (including his age and situation) has crept up on him unexpectedly:

> The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
> Since I first made my count;

The enjambment here makes line 8 spring into view, mirroring the way that the years have passed the speaker by. It's also worth noting the way he counts the years so specifically, mirroring his counting of the swans.

LINES 9-12

I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

Lines 9-12 deal with the speaker's memory of his first visit to Coole, 19 autumns ago. The speaker recounts how, while tallying up the swans before him, they suddenly "mount[ed]" the air and "scatter[ed] wheeling" above him. Put simply, the swans took flight before he could finish counting them. This

starts to draw an important distinction between the speaker and the swans, and, more generally, between humanity and nature. It shows a degree of separation—the swans, like nature itself, are not beholden to the speaker. They act in accordance with their own desires and needs, unconcerned with the speaker's desire to count them. This separation is important; in making the swans more blatantly external to the speaker, they become more symbolic—figures that the speaker can project his own thoughts and feelings onto.

Line 9 describes the speaker's own actions, and the caesura in the line makes it feel cumbersome:

> I saw, before I had well finished,

This is contrasted with the following three lines, which are enjambed. This gives them a sense of graceful movement evoking the movement of the swans themselves:

> All suddenly mount
> And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
> Upon their clamorous wings.

In just four lines, then, the poem suggests two different movements—the speaker's and the swans'. The rhyme of rings/wings also has a satisfying chime to it, again gently conveying the beauty and grace of these powerful birds. But along with this sense of beauty and grace, there is also a kind of awe at the muscular power of the swans too. Words like "scatter," "wheeling," "broken," and "clamorous" have a vague sense of violence and unpredictability about them, which further contributes to this separation between the speaker and the birds (and between humanity and nature).

LINES 13-18

> *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.*

The third stanza wrenches the poem back into the present-day, after the memory recounted in stanza two. Looking on the swans now—"those brilliant creatures"—the speaker tells the reader that "my heart is sore." The speaker doesn't go into specifics in the poem about *why* he feels this way, but it's also possible that this soreness is not really about specifics. In fact, the speaker states that "All's changed" since the first time he visited Coole and felt "the bell-beat" of the swans' wings above him.

Numerous critics have speculated about the source of the speaker's melancholy, and in doing so tend to equate the speaker with Yeats himself. Written in 1919, it's quite possible that the recent memory of the First World War hangs over the poem, along with the ongoing struggle for Irish Independence (of which Yeats was an important part). Later in the poem, it's suggested through the phrase "lover by lover" that the speaker mourns for lost love too. All of these readings are possible—and, of course, part of the speaker's feeling relates simply to feeling the weight of his age.

Though the speaker is talking about the present moment in this stanza, lines 15 to 18 also touch on the speaker's memory of his first visit to Coole. That "first time" he was there, he "Trod with a lighter tread." That is, his life did not have the heavy, slow, and mournful feeling that it now does. Movement also does literally become more difficult with age, but the speaker is referring mostly to mental heaviness here; he has become bogged down over time and less carefree than he was in his youth.

There's some very effective alliteration in this section. The sound of the swans' wings—situated within that earlier memory—are described as a "bell-beat," capturing both the rhythm of the wings (they're like the steady beating of a bell) *and* the sheer power of the way these wings move the air (they "beat" it). The following line alliterates "Trod" with "tread," which has an almost nursery-rhyme or riddle-like sound to it—subtly indicating the previous lightness of being that the speaker used to feel in his youth.

LINES 19-24

> *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.*

The fourth stanza represents the emotional peak—or low, depending on how it's framed—of the poem. In other words, it marks the point of greatest emotional intensity. The speaker meditates on the figures of the swans before him, personifying them and projecting a world of human emotion and feeling onto them. It's a telling stanza, because the traits that the speaker perceives in the swans offer the reader clues to exactly what it is the speaker feels he himself has lost over the years.

The speaker views the swans as "Unwearied still," implying that he himself *is* wearied (whether by his age, certain events in his life, or, most likely, a combination of both). He counts them "lover by lover," projecting the world of human relationships. Indeed, swans are creatures that mate for life—so it's easy to see why the speaker sees a symbol of love and/or lost love while looking at the birds in their pairs. The diacope of "lover by lover" has a kind of sensuous character that hints at the pleasures and joys of being in love.

Lines 20 and 21 describe the swans paddling in "cold [c]ompanionable streams," and "climb[ing] the air." The speaker sees in the swans a kind of instinctive freedom—they do what

they want, when they want. Implicitly, the speaker doesn't live like this—not anymore, at least. The consonance here in "cold," "companionable," and "climb" further focuses readers' attention to the swans' freedom.

Line 22—"Their hearts have not grown old"—once again perhaps says more about the speaker than it does about the swans. In the swans, the speaker perceives a kind of constancy—they seem just the same as they did when he first saw them, nearly 20 years ago. The comment implies that the speaker feels that his heart, by contrast, *has* "grown old." (It's easy to project Yeats's real-life, on-and-off love affair with the Irish actress and activist Maud Gonne onto this moment.)

Lines 23 and 24 expand on this sentiment, implying that the swans are capable of "passion or conquest" at their whim. This, of course, is another moment of personification—swans don't really think in these terms, but just act in accordance with their nature. All the evidence suggests, then, that the speaker is mourning his *own* loss of "passion or conquest"—perhaps because these were part of his youth, and seem to no longer be a part of his life. Whereas the speaker seems to feel stuck in his age, the swans, to him, represent freedom: they "wander where they will." Again, this suggests that the speaker can no longer act similarly—his life has reached a point of stasis.

LINES 25-30

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?

While the preceding stanzas have dealt with the speaker's memory and the present moment—marking two of his visits to Coole—the final stanza moves on to a discussion of the *future*. First, though, lines 25 and 26 restate the speaker's fascination with the swans:

> But now they drift on the still water,
> Mysterious, beautiful;

The previous stanza made clear that the swans are free to "wander where they will," but here the speaker asserts that, for the moment at least, the swans are content to simply drift about on the calm water. The use of caesura here evokes the stillness of the image being presented, slowing the poem down as the poem moves towards its contemplative final question. The use of "mysterious," in turn, heightens the swans' ultimate unknowability, the sense that the speaker cannot fully understand their nature and instead can only appreciate their beauty from a distance.

Lines 27-30 then constitute one long rhetorical question, as the speaker wonders where the swans will settle down next after they inevitably leave Coole—and the speaker—behind. Though they are at Coole now, there is every possibility they will "build" their nests in other "rushes" in the future, somewhere far away from the speaker. This deepens the sense of distance between the speaker and the swans. The question also juxtaposes the swans' inherent sense of freedom and possibility with the speaker's sense that he is in the autumn of his life, and that his own time is coming to an end.

Indeed, the speaker senses his own mortality here, knowing that the swans—or the next generation of swans—will "delight" *other* "men's eyes" when the speaker is no longer around to see them. The swans' will continue on just as they always have been, unaffected by whatever happens to the speaker. The use of rhetorical question ends the poem on a note of doubt. This is a bleak, contemplative poem, and so ending on a note of uncertainty makes perfect sense: the speaker feels a sense of loss, but he doesn't really know what to do with it or how to make sense of it. The swans, however, just keep on acting in their nature, free from the world of human doubt and uncertainty.

SYMBOLS

THE SWANS

The swans are representative of the majesty and power of nature. They are beautiful creatures that move gracefully, but they are also strong and powerful. Their wings are "clamorous"—or noisy—but also like the beating of bells, evoking a sense of awe and wonder from the speaker. They act according to instinct and will, and as such also, for the speaker, represent a kind of freedom from human anxieties and logic. Note how, on his first visit, the speaker wanted to count how many swans were on the lake but they suddenly flew away before he could finish—demonstrating both their unpredictable power and the fact that they are detached from the speaker's control. In a way, then, the swans represent not just the majesty of nature but also its indifference to humanity's conflicts and struggles—which, in turn, seem all the more insignificant in the face of nature's everlasting grandeur.

Indeed, the speaker uses the swans as a kind of symbol for constancy as he takes stock of his life. While sensing himself to have changed beyond recognition, the swans remain filled with passion and vitality. They don't seem to have changed at all since his first visit, which only serves to make the speaker melancholic. The much-repeated fact about swans mating for life plays on his mind, as he perceives them as "unwearied" "lover[s]." Furthermore, their "hearts have not grown old." By implication, the speaker *is* wearied, and his heart *has* "grown old." They function above all, then, as a kind of mirror that the speaker holds up to his own life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-6
- Lines 10-12
- Line 13
- Line 17
- Lines 19-24
- Lines 25-26
- Lines 27-30

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used sparingly in "The Wild Swans at Coole," but to great effect. Line 4, for example, alliterates in the phrase "still sky." The focus on this hushed /s/ sound momentarily quiets the poem, matching with the phrase's idea of calm stillness.

The next important example doesn't come until just over halfway in the poem—in fact, two examples come close together:

> The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
> Trod with a lighter tread.

"Bell-beat" describes the effect of the swans' wings on the air as they flew over the speaker during his first visit to Coole. The alliterative /b/ sounds have a muscular rhythmic quality, mimicking the strength and sound of the birds' wings. Shortly after, as if subconsciously wanting to imitate the swans, the speaker alliterates in a description about himself. The play of "Trod" with "tread" has a nursery-rhyme or riddle-like sound, convey the way that the speaker *used* to walk more lightly. On his first visit to Coole, he was more optimistic about life, and, of course, younger. Now he feels the heaviness of his steps.

The next meaningful example comes in line 19. In this stanza, the speaker strongly personifies the swans:

> Unwearied still, lover by lover,
> They paddle in the cold
> Companionable streams or climb the air;

The repeat of "lover" here—which is also diacope—has an almost luxurious sound, hinting at the pleasures and joys of being in love (which the speaker seems to mourn for). Note that this effect from the /l/ sound is further boosted by consonance in these lines ("paddle," "cold," "companionable," and "climb"). The repeated hard /k/ sound again focuses readers' attention on the swans' actions.

Line 23 also uses alliteration effectively:

> Passion or conquest, wander where they will,

The three /w/ sounds seem to do their own wandering through the line, evoking the swans' freedom and grace of movement.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "s," "s"
- **Line 8:** "m," "m"
- **Line 10:** "s"
- **Line 11:** "s"
- **Line 17:** "b," "b"
- **Line 18:** "Tr," "tr"
- **Line 19:** "l," "l"
- **Line 20:** "c"
- **Line 21:** "C," "c"
- **Line 22:** "h," "h"
- **Line 23:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 29:** "w," "w"
- **Line 30:** "f," "f"

CAESURA

Caesura is relatively rare in "The Wild Swans at Coole," appearing in just four lines. The first example is in line 9:

> I saw, before I had well finished,

This is the speaker's memory of his first visit to Coole, during which the swans suddenly flew off while the speaker was in the middle of counting them. The caesura here feels deliberately cumbersome, helping to draw a distinction between the two very different types of movement: the speaker's and the swans'. To that end, this caesura is best understood when looked at in the context of the rest of the stanza. The three lines that relate to the swans' movement (lines 10 to 13) are enjambed, carrying with them a sense of power and grace that contrasts with the plodding pace of line 9.

The next caesura, in line 15, has a more ponderous sound to it, fitting with the speaker's contemplative mood as he stops to consider how much has changed since that first visit:

> All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,

The caesura in line 19 is particularly interesting:

> Unwearied still, lover by lover,

This caesura creates a small, secluded area for the phrase "lover by lover" to appear. This speaker is projecting thoughts of romance and companionship onto the swans, and the caesura cleverly places these two hypothetical lovers side-by-side in their own little world.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** “,”
- **Line 15:** “,”
- **Line 19:** “,”
- **Line 26:** “,”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is a subtle but important device throughout "The Wild Swans at Coole." The first stanza uses a delicate /t/ sound throughout (for example: "trees," "autumn beauty," "October twilight") to help mirror the delicate beauty of the autumn's day on which the poem is set. Also note the unmistakable shared /m/ sounds in line 5 with "brimming" and "among," which together convey a kind of abundance that reflects both the "brimming water" and the large number of swans that the speaker can see.

The /m/ sound then reappears at the start of the second stanza; given that sound has been associated with a sense of abundance, consonance here reflects just how many years have gone by since the speaker first came to Coole to see the swans. The swans themselves are also connected via the /n/ sound to the number of years that have passed, suggesting just how impactful this vision of the swans has been on the speaker:

> Are nine-and-fifty swans.
> The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
> Since I first made my count;

Later, consonance of /l/ and /d/ sounds enhances the already strong effect of alliteration in the fourth stanza:

> Unwearied still, lover by lover,
> They paddle in the cold
> Companionable streams or climb the air;

Both of these sounds are pleasant to the ear. The /l/ sound is particularly luxurious, and given that it's sonically connected with the idea of the swans being "lovers," perhaps subtly suggests this sense of togetherness pervades all the swans' actions; that is, the repetition of the /l/ sound reminds readers that the swans are "paddling" and "climbing" in pairs.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “t,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 2:** “d,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 3:** “n,” “d,” “t,” “t,” “t,” “t,” “r”
- **Line 4:** “rr,” “r,” “s,” “s,” “t,” “s”
- **Line 5:** “mm,” “m,” “n”
- **Line 6:** “n,” “n,” “n,” “f,” “f,” “t,” “n”
- **Line 7:** “n,” “n,” “n,” “m,” “m,” “n,” “m”
- **Line 8:** “n,” “m,” “m,” “n”
- **Line 10:** “t”
- **Line 11:** “r,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 12:** “r,” “r”
- **Line 15:** “t,” “t”
- **Line 16:** “t,” “t”
- **Line 17:** “b,” “b,” “b,” “d”
- **Line 18:** “Tr,” “d,” “tr,” “d”
- **Line 19:** “ll,” “l,” “l”
- **Line 20:** “dd,” “l,” “ld”
- **Line 21:** “C,” “m,” “l,” “m,” “cl,” “m”
- **Line 22:** “h,” “h,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 23:** “n,” “n,” “w,” “n,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 24:** “n,” “n”
- **Line 25:** “t”
- **Line 26:** “t,” “t”
- **Line 27:** “ll,” “b,” “l”
- **Line 28:** “B,” “l,” “l”
- **Line 29:** “l”
- **Line 30:** “f,” “f”

DIACOPE

Diacope is used just once in "The Wild Swans at Coole." It appears in line 19:

> Unwearied still, lover by lover,

It's a clever use of the device that packs in a lot of meaning to such a small space. First of all, the phrase sounds pleasant, the consonance of the two gentle /l/ sounds chiming together and echoing the "still" from earlier in the line. But the phrase also works with the caesura that comes after the word "still," meaning that the two "lover[s]" are placed in their own little clause—in other words, in their own little world. The repetition of "lover" emphasizes that the swans pair off, that their entire identities are, in the speaker's eyes at least, defined by their sense of companionship. Swans do indeed pair off and mate for life, so on that level this instance of personification has the ring of truth about it. But it also suggests that perhaps part of the speaker's sadness stems from not being paired off himself, from not being one of those "lovers" "paddling" through the "cold companionable streams" of life together.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** “lover by lover”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "The Wild Swans at Coole." Overall, it contributes to the beautiful sound of the poem, allowing the phrase length to vary from short lines to sentences that elegantly drape across stanzas.

More specifically, enjambment is used primarily to convey the

swans' graceful movement. Whereas lines that deal with the speaker himself are often made more cumbersome by caesura—inserting notable pauses in the middle of lines—there are key moments in which discussion of the swans is accompanied by enjambment. The first of these is in lines 10-12:

> All suddenly mount
> And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
> Upon their clamorous wings.

The speed with which these lines unfold evokes the powerful yet graceful movement of the swans, the phrase unfolding over the lines like the swans' wings unfolding over the speaker. It's a sudden burst of movement, and it contrasts with the plodding pace created by the caesura in line 9.

This is mirrored by the poem's closing lines, in which the swans are similarly depicted as flying away. The enjambment evokes the increasing distance between the swans and the speaker:

> By what lake's edge or pool
> Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
> To find they have flown away?

As each phrase soars right over the line break, enjambment makes these lines feel inevitable—a force the speaker cannot stop, just as he cannot stop the swans from one day flying away from Coole.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "water"
- **Line 4:** "Mirrors"
- **Line 5:** "stones"
- **Line 6:** "Are"
- **Line 7:** "me"
- **Line 8:** "Since"
- **Line 10:** "mount"
- **Line 11:** "And," "rings"
- **Line 12:** "Upon"
- **Line 20:** "cold"
- **Line 21:** "Companionable"
- **Line 28:** "pool"
- **Line 29:** "Delight," "day"
- **Line 30:** "To"

PATHETIC FALLACY

Pathetic fallacy is used primarily in the first stanza of "The Wild Swans at Coole." Here, the speaker describes an unmistakably autumnal scene:

> The trees are in their autumn beauty,
> The woodland paths are dry,
> Under the October twilight the water
> Mirrors a still sky;

Autumn, of course, is a time of transition, with the trees shedding their leaves ultimately in preparation to growing new ones in the Spring. This gently hints at the poem's psychological atmosphere. The speaker is revisiting a place that he first went to nineteen years ago (and it was Autumn then too). Now, he feels his age, and is wrapped up in general feeling of melancholy and regret. The setting mirrors the way in which he too is in the Autumn of his life, sensing that the Spring of childhood and the Summer of young adulthood are lost to the passage of time. This, too, is evoked by the time of day—"twilight." Just as the speaker's life can be compared to the turning of the seasons, it also maps onto the passing of a day. In other words, he is in the evening/night of his life.

The mention of the water in line 3 is important too, specifically the way it "[m]irrors a "still sky." The use of "Mirrors" shows that this is a poem of contemplative reflection, and the stillness of the sky hints at the speaker's sense of stasis when he considers where he is in life.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "The trees are in their autumn beauty, / The woodland paths are dry, / Under the October twilight the water / Mirrors a still sky;"
- **Lines 20-21:** "cold / Companionable streams"
- **Line 25:** "still water"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is an important part of "The Wild Swans at Coole." It doesn't really kick in until the fourth stanza, though prior to that the poem does hint that the swans have special significance for the speaker—which in turn suggests that something about their way of being tells him about his own life. The first mention of swans—in lines 5 and 6—is not a moment of personification, but rather a statement of the speaker's observation:

> Upon the brimming water among the stones
> Are nine-and-fifty swans.

Lines 10 to 12 come closer to personification, but still aren't quite there. The use of "clamorous" has a literal meaning of making loud noise, but it also has an undertone of personification in the sense that it is usually a word applied to people.

In the fourth stanza, though, there's no mistaking the personification. Here, the speaker projects thoughts and emotions onto the swans, implicitly comparing them to himself. They are "unwearied still"—as though they ought to be wearied

(that is, tired, exhausted by life) like he is. They travel "lover by lover," and "their hearts have not grown old." They are said to engage in "passion" and/or "conquest." Of course, these concepts don't really apply to swans—they just go about their business, acting in accordance with their natural instincts. That's part of the reason that the speaker is able to look upon them as symbols of his own life—or, more accurately, what his own life has lost. The "passion" and "conquest" that he is *really* talking about are those of his own life, in the days of his youth.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-24:** "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."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

There is just one rhetorical question in "The Wild Swans at Coole," but it is an important feature. It occurs in the poem's closing four lines:

> 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?

The poem has moved through a number of discernible stages to get to this point. The first stanza set the scene, the following two dealt with the speaker's memory, and the fourth with the feelings that the speaker projects onto the swans. This final stanza is a kind of glimpse into the future, and it is not a hopeful one. Sensing that his best days are behind him, the speaker imagines the swans flying off somewhere else, away from Coole. They have a freedom that allows them to do so, and this freedom contrasts with the way in which the speaker feels stuck. Accordingly, asking this question at the end of the poem allows it to end on a note of doubt and uncertainty, better reflecting the speaker's mind than if the poem were to end on some kind of grand statement.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-30:** "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?"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is a subtle presence in the poem, used sparingly throughout to add emphasis to various phrases or enhance the poem's sense of melody. In line 7, for instance, at the start of the second stanza, note the many /aw/ and /uh/ vowel sounds in "autumn has come upon me." The insistence of these sounds subtly suggests the inescapable passage of time; the sounds "come upon" the phrase just as the years relentlessly "come upon" the speaker. Later, the long /i/ vowel reappears in lines 15 to 16 with "I," "twilight," and "time." Again, assonance connects the speaker himself—the "I"—to the passage of time.

This happens yet again in the final two lines of the poem, where the long /i/ sound returns even more forcefully. It's paired with assonance of the long /a/ vowel to create multiple moments of internal rhyme in the poem's final couplet:

> Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
> To find they have flown away?

The strong assonance here instills the speaker's final thoughts with a sonic intensity not yet seen in the poem. Interestingly, earlier in the stanza the swans themselves are connected to the short /i/ and /uh/ sounds via the assonance of "drift," "still," "mysterious," "beautiful," "will," "build," "among," and "rushes." In terms of sound alone, the swans' existence thus feels lighter, more carefree than the speaker's.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "au," "u," "o," "u," "o"
- **Line 15:** "I," "i," "i"
- **Line 16:** "i"
- **Line 22:** "ow," "o"
- **Line 25:** "i," "i"
- **Line 26:** "y," "ou," "i," "u"
- **Line 27:** "A," "o," "u," "i," "ui"
- **Line 29:** "i," "eyes," "I," "a," "a"
- **Line 30:** "i," "ey," "ay"

VOCABULARY

Twilight (Line 3, Line 15) - The period just before total darkness in the evening. "Twilight" is also often used metaphorically to refer to the later years of a person's life.

Brimming water (Line 5) - This means that the lake is totally filled up with water, almost to the point of overflowing. The lakes in the real-life Coole Park are technically known as turloughs, and are seasonal, sometimes drying up completely at other points in the year.

Nine-and-fifty (Line 6) - An old-fashioned way of saying 59.

Wheeling (Line 11) - This refers to a circular motion.

Clamorous (Line 12) - This means that the birds' wings are very noisy as they beat above the speaker's head.

Bell-beat (Line 17) - This is Yeats's way of describing the sound of the swans as they fly. It alliterates, which gives it a rhythmically regular sound—like the tolls of a ringing bell.

Trod / Tread (Line 18) - This refers to the way the speaker walks. He used to walk more lightly, with a spring in his step—now life is getting the better of him and he feels heavy.

Unwearied (Line 19) - This means that the swans do not seem tired or resigned (unlike the speaker), and are still full of vigor and life.

Companionable (Line 21) - Relaxed, friendly, and, above all, sociable.

Attend (Line 24) - This means something like "visited upon them," or the way that servants "attend" upon kings or queens. "Passion" and "Conquest" still occur in the lives of the swans—according to the speaker—whereas they are absent from his own life now.

Rushes (Line 27) - Rushes is a generic term for grass-like plants that often grow near lakes or similarly damp environments.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Wild Swans at Coole" consists of five sestets (six-line stanzas). Though each stanza includes the same number of lines, variations in meter and line length keep the poem interesting and unexpected.

Swans are elegant—and powerful—creatures, and the poem's subtle but strong movement from start to finish gently quietly represents this. But the poem's form also allows it to maintain an air of doubt and uncertainty, as though it is searching for its final form and may never find it. This, of course, represents the other key presence in the poem: the speaker himself. His mindset is somewhat meandering, his words describing a general sense of loss without the ability—or perhaps willingness—to pinpoint its exact source.

In terms of the way the poem unfolds, the first stanza sets the scene and anticipates the speaker's mood—the dry woodland paths, autumn leaves, and twilight setting all suggestive of time passing and something coming to an end. The second and third stanzas deal primarily with the speaker's memory of his first visit to Coole, while the fourth stanza can be fairly described as the personification stanza—the height of the speaker's projection of human feelings and emotions onto the swans. The final stanza then takes a doubtful look into the future, with the speaker wondering where the swans might build their nests in Autumns to come.

METER

The best way to describe the meter in "The Wild Swans at Coole" is controlled but varied. The poem is *generally* governed by iambs, metrical feet which follow an unstressed-stressed (da DUM) rhythm. This might give the poem a sense of weary, plodding momentum, which is in keeping with the contemplative mood.

But the poem's lines vary greatly in terms of the *number* of metrical feet per line. The shortest are trimeter—three-foot lines—and the longest are pentameter (five). Generally speaking, each sestet follows a pattern in terms of the amount of stresses in each line, but as is clear from below, there are many variations throughout:

1. Tetrameter or pentameter - four or five feet ("The trees | are in | their au- | tumn beauty")
2. Trimeter - three feet ("The wood- | land paths | are dry")
3. Tetrameter or pentameter - four or five feet ("Under | the Oct- | ober | twilight | the water")
4. Trimeter - three feet ("The first | time on | this shore")
5. Pentameter - five feet ("Upon | the brim- | ming wa- | ter a- | mong the | stones")
6. Trimeter - three feet ("Are nine- | and-fif- | ty swans")

As is clear above, many lines often incorporate an extra syllable at the end, giving them lines a lilting, almost mournful quality. The first line is a good example:

> The trees | are in | their au- | tumn beauty,

In fact, this extra syllable appears in the first line of almost every stanza. Take the fifth:

> But now | they drift | on the | still water,

This extra syllable at the end gives the line a falling sound, momentarily undermining the usual reliable sound of iambs.

The overall effect of the complexity described above is that, on one level, the poem refuses to settle. This subtly conveys both the tired but restless mind of the speaker *and* the unpredictable movement of the swans.

RHYME SCHEME

Each stanza of "The Wild Swans at Coole" follows the same rhyme scheme:

> ABCBDD

The overall effect of these steady, yet not overwhelming, rhymes is to create a sense of graceful movement throughout the poem. This mirrors the movements of the swans, which are powerful yet beautiful in the way that they navigate the world. Apart from the first stanza, the couplets at the end of each sestet chime together neatly. The first pair, in lines 5 and 6, is not quite a perfect rhyme: stones/swans is instead a slant rhyme. This gently suggests the swans' independence from the speaker, the way that they are not beholden to the human

world and form.

SPEAKER

"The Wild Swans at Coole" is written from a first-person perspective, though the introduction of the "I" is delayed until line 8 (in the second stanza). The speaker is implied to be an older man, perhaps someone in the "autumn" of his life. It's clear, too, that the speaker of the poem is not in a very optimistic place. He feels the weight of years on his back as he revisits a spot he first came to 19 years prior, and seeing the seemingly everlasting beauty and freedom of the swans causes him to reflect on his own mortality. His "heart is sore," indicating the pain of heartbreak (from a past love or perhaps from the way his life has turned out in general). He projects human emotion onto the swans, saying more about *himself* than the birds (this is true in the fourth stanza especially).

There has been much speculation about the source of the speaker's melancholy, with some critics pointing to the timing of the poem's composition. It was written not long before the end of the First World War, and during the ongoing struggle for Irish independence (which Yeats was involved in). But part of the poem's power is in the way it captures a general feeling without becoming too specific.

Do note as well that the gender of the speaker is not specified in the poem. This guide has opted to use "he" for two reasons. Firstly, it eliminates too much confusion from repeated use of "they" in reference to both the speaker and the swans. Secondly, this poem is often interpreted as an autobiographical one on Yeats's part. He certainly visited Coole, and much of the sentiment in the poem is in keeping with his written thoughts elsewhere.

SETTING

Setting plays an important role in "The Wild Swans at Coole." As the title suggests, the setting is Coole, an area of natural beauty in Ireland. The season is unmistakably autumn and evokes a sense of winding down, or of something coming to an end. The woods are "dry," the leaves are beginning to change color and fall, and it is "twilight"—not yet night, but getting close. The setting clearly reflects the speaker's situation—he is implied to be in the "autumn" of his own life.

It's also important that this a setting being *revisited*. The speaker has been here before at least once (and perhaps more times). The place itself, then, functions as a kind of marker of time, with the environment and the swans appearing to be pretty much the same to the speaker as when he first visited 19 years prior. Accordingly, this puts him in a reflective and contemplative mood. Indeed, it is the way in which he senses himself to have changed—while Coole remains the same—that provokes the speaker's air of melancholy and resignation.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Along with Seamus Heaney, William Butler Yeats is one of Ireland's most prominent poets. He was born in 1865 and began writing around the age of 17. Yeats's influences were wide and diverse, including the English Romantics—figures such as Wordsworth ("I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), Blake ("London"), and Keats ("To Autumn")—and the French Symbolists, such as Stephen Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud. Irish mythology and folklore were also especially formative of his work, particularly given his desire for Ireland's political independence from England.

This poem appeared in Yeats' 1917 collection of the same name. It is a mournful, reflective poem, which many critics take to be written in the voice of Yeats himself. Indeed, Yeats did visit Coole, where he stayed with his friend Lady Gregory, an Irish theater practitioner. The speaker is in a contemplative mood, but the poem doesn't specify why. Certainly, aging and heartache seem to be in the poem's atmosphere—but critics also note the timing of the composition: written shortly before the end of the First World War and during the Irish struggle for independence from the British, it's possible that these subjects inform the poem too.

The poem itself is non-specific about its historical setting, but it was written during what came to be known as Yeats's middle period. The poems from this time tend to be more direct, with less reliance on symbolism and a more active—and frustrated—engagement with his more consistent subjects, like Ireland and love.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The year 1917, by all accounts, was a weary one for humanity. The First World War had not yet ended, and the influence of that conflict is seen in other poems by Yeats such as "The Second Coming." WWI resulted in millions of human casualties, while techniques like trench warfare devastated the land on which battles were fought. Given the extent of the war's destruction, the swans' seeming indifference to the speaker's heartache in the poem feels all the more powerful; it's as though nature doesn't concern itself with even humanity's most epic conflicts.

This poem doesn't specify a point in history, but it is certainly situated in a specific place. Set in Coole, an area in Ireland's Country Galway, it's hard not to read Yeats's passion for Irish independence into the poem too—even if it isn't mentioned specifically.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — A reading of the poem on YouTube. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdic4rNp_gY)
- Yeats In His Own Voice — A recording of Yeats reading some of his most famous poems. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2FT4_UUa4I&t=86s)
- Yeats and the Supernatural — A clip discussing Yeats, faeries, and Irish occult tradition. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcqKe3e3ze4)
- Yeats and Irish Politics — A clip from a BBC Radio show that looks at Yeats's relationship to his home country. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WazmPbLzuRI)
- "No Country for Old Men" — This documentary takes an insightful look at Yeats's life and work. Its title—which you may recognize from the Oscar-winning film of the same name—comes from Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgC6RpseAWQ)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- When You Are Old

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