Winter Swans

SUMMARY

The clouds were exhausted. Over two days, they had rained all the water they had to give. Now there was a break in the rain, and so you and I went for a walk.

The sodden and muddy ground beneath us seemed to gasp for air with every step. We walked around the edge of the lake, distant from one another and not talking.

Then we saw some swans that stopped us in our tracks. In unison, they dipped their heads and long necks into the water. As though they were transferring heavy objects from their bodies down to their heads, they half-disappeared under the water.

When they did so, their remaining visible feathers looked like icebergs. The swans lingered underwater and then resurfaced, looking like boats rebalancing during a choppy storm.

You mentioned how swans pair up for life, as they flew away. They looked like pieces of porcelain flying over the water, which was becoming less choppy. I didn't say anything back to you, as we continued our walk in the afternoon sunlight.

We walked slowly around the lake's pebbles and sand. I saw that, without us thinking about it, our hands had traversed the gap between us as if swimming, and found each other. They were clasped over one another, and they looked like a pair of wings coming to rest when a bird lands.

THEMES

LOVE AND PARTNERSHIP

"Winter Swans," on the surface, is a straightforward poem about a couple going for a walk. They head to a lake and observe a group of swans bobbing their heads under the water. But despite its apparent simplicity, the poem explores what it actually means to be a couple—that is, to play an active role in a partnership. At the beginning of the poem there seems to be tension between the speaker and his lover, but as they walk outside and look at the swans, they seem to quietly realize the value of their love and subtly commit to one another once again. By the end they are reconciled, walking off into the poem's distance holding hands. Coursing through the poem, then, is the idea that relationships take dedication and perseverance through rough patches—but also that they are *worth* that perseverance. Love requires work, the poem suggests, but it deserves people's attention and effort.

At its outset, the poem sets up a kind of post-argument scene, with the weather reflecting the sour mood between the couple. The clouds have rained for two days and the personified earth "gulps" for air (a reference to the sound it makes underfoot because it is "waterlogged"). The couple "skirt[s]" the lake—hinting that, though they are physically together, they are avoiding one another emotionally. They are "silent and apart." Overall, this section speaks to a perfectly natural but nevertheless difficult aspect of relationships: disagreement and conflict. The poem also seems to imply here that staying silent doesn't really achieve any resolution in such moments.

But it's at the lake that things start to change—specifically when the couple watches the swans dunking their heads in and out of the water. They look like "boats righting in rough weather," subtly suggesting to the couple the possibility of finding their own calm after the storm. It's at this point that the silence between the pair is broken, as the speaker's partner points out that swans "mate for life." In other words, the swans provide an example of commitment, dedication, and partnership.

This seems to remind the couple of both the value of their love, and of the fact that sustaining and developing that love requires effort. "Mate for life" doesn't just speak to the long-term nature of the couple's relationship, but also *equates* "mating" with "life." That is, relationships (and mating) are linked directly with "life," underscoring their importance to being human. Perhaps it's realizing—or remembering—this significant idea that undermines the argument that the couple had been having prior to the poem's opening.

Inspired by the example of the swans, the poem implies that the couple re-commits, as the speaker points out that their hands "had, somehow, / swum the distance between us." The speaker notices that their hands are "folded" like "a pair of wings settling after flight." "Settling" is a key word, with connotations of long-term commitment. The simile here, comparing held hands to settled wings, suggests that a relationship is a place of comfort and relief, like a home, to which a couple can always return.

In the end, then, the poem has shown the value of love while also insisting that love isn't always smooth sailing; instead, it requires work, commitment, and understanding. In other words, love is a partnership dependent on dialogue and cooperation—and in this case it's the graceful duos of swans that inspire the couple to remember the value of their partnership.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 4-6
- Lines 6-8

- Lines 9-12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Lines 14-20

HUMANITY AND NATURE

At the start of the poem, the speaker and his lover are in a kind of angry stupor as they go for a walk by a lake. But looking out on the natural scenery, particularly on a group of swans, changes their mood entirely, and even seems to inspire them to re-commit to one another. Thus, even though the poem begins by showing the way that people sometimes look at nature and view it through the prism of their own feelings, by the end the poem has demonstrated nature's power to affect people's frame of mind. The natural world in "Winter Swans" is ultimately presented as a model for how things should be—a place to which people can turn for inspiration and guidance.

The first few lines use both the pathetic fallacy and personification to indicate the way that the speaker and his lover view the world around them as a reflection of their own narrative—they seem to have fallen out with another and are barely speaking, and the weather has been awful to match. It has been raining relentlessly, a natural symbol of the couple's misery. The way in which the muddy ground "gulp[s]" for breath under every step (because it is so "waterlogged") provides an image for the way in which the couple's relationship is suffocating, trying and failing to get the "air" it needs to continue.

Indeed, the couple initially embrace the atmosphere of conflict and frustration. The way the mud seems to gasp beneath them conveys their exhaustion, perhaps even the fact that their relationship is close to its metaphorical death. They "skirt" the lake, using it as an obstacle to keep their distance from another—to remain "silent and apart."

But then a group of swans appears, and the couple watch the birds gracefully dip their heads into "the dark water." The swans seem stable and calm, even as they go through a dextrous series of movements, dunking their heads under the water in unison. It's this grace and togetherness that gently suggests an alternative way for the couple to handle issues. That is, the swans function as a vivid alternative to the couple's current situation. And not only do they seem graceful and together, but, as the speaker's partner points out, they also mate for life. In other words, they provide a symbol of love that seems pure, simple, and true.

As the couple continue to walk and the bad mood between them fades away, they become close again, holding hands. The combination of metaphor and simile that the speaker uses here is telling: the couple's hands "sw[i]m" towards one another and ended up "folded" together like the wings of a swan. This draws a clear link between the natural world and its effect on people: the couple have reconciled, and it is framed in such a way that makes the connection to the swans loud and clear.

Implicitly, then, the poem seeks to remind its reader of the importance of nature in human life. In other words, nature isn't just something to be observed passively, but it can actually have real and significant effects on the way that people feel. In particular, nature offers reminders of simplicity and beauty—as in the figure of the swans—which in turn have a positive impact on the two people in the poem, both as individuals and as a couple.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 4-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 16-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

The clouds had ...
... at our feet

In the first two stanzas, the poem immediately launches into its use of pathetic fallacy. The rainy weather mirrors the bleak state of the couple's relationship. The speaker says that "The clouds have given their all," as if they are exhausted, just like people, from raining. This in turn sets up a clear link between the natural environment and the mood of the poem's two main characters: the speaker and his partner. (A quick note: the poem does not specify the speaker's gender, but to make it easier to read this guide uses male pronouns).

The fact that the "clouds had given their all" hints that the couple, too, have reached some kind of end-point. Two full days of rain have fallen; rain, of course, is often associated with misery and sadness. But now the rain has stopped, and the couple have an opportunity to take a walk. The alliteration of line 3, in which three out of the four words begin with /w/, anticipates the description of the earth as "waterlogged" in the first line of stanza 2:

> in which we walked,
> the waterlogged earth

This repetition of /w/ sounds gives the lines a sort of trudging, heavy quality, mimicking the feeling of having soggy mud underfoot as you walk.

The second stanza, beginning with "the waterlogged earth," intensifies the opening pathetic fallacy into personification,

making the link between the couple and their environment even more pronounced. Now, the "waterlogged earth" is described as "gulping for breath at our feet." The consonance of the two /g/ sounds is similar to the sound of a gulp, and the enjambment in stanza 2 creates a further sense of breathlessness as the lines topple into each other.

Of course, mud doesn't really need to breathe in the way that humans do—but describing it as struggling for breath relates to the way that the couple, metaphorically speaking, are themselves struggling for breath. Whatever they've been arguing about has nearly broken them, and so their relationship is in this sense close to death. This is the cue for the swans to arrive.

LINES 6-8

as we skirted ...
... tipping in unison.

In line 6 ("as we skirted ..."), the speaker describes how he and his partner "skirt[]" around the lake. To "skirt" something is to avoid it, hinting at the way the couple is declining to confront the issue between them. Perhaps, of course, they are both exhausted from confronting it already! The lake functions as a way of separating the couple, who are "silent and apart."

Line 6 cleverly represents this temporary separation in two ways. First of all there's the caesura at "lake," dividing the line into two parts (similarly to the couple's current situation). The line also uses consonance effectively:

> as we skirted the lake, silent and apart,

In each of the line's two divided parts, one sound dominates: /k/ and /t/ respectively. These two sounds feel isolated from one another, creating another subtle mirror for the frostiness between the speaker and his lover. The sibilance echoes this, as /s/ sounds give the lines a hushed quality.

But just as the couple is at their most "silent and apart," nature provides an intervention. Using the surprise element of the stanza break—while continuing the same sentence—the poem suddenly introduces the swans. The couple is taken aback by the sight, which "stop[s]" them. This happens in the literal sense that they stop walking, but also in the sense that the swans provide a much-needed interruption to the couple's sour atmosphere.

The swans' behavior is intriguingly ritualistic. The way that they tip themselves into the water—in "unison"—provides the couple with an instinctive and refreshingly simple image of togetherness. The assonance of the third stanza's second line—with its use of the short /i/ sound—makes the line itself perform this idea of "unison" and togetherness:

> with a show of tipping in unison.

It is at this point that the poem's first sentence finally ends—eight lines later! This long first sentence suggests that all the natural and human activity in the poem has been leading up to this meeting with the swans.

LINES 9-12

As if rolling ...
... in rough weather.

In lines 9-12 ("As if rolling weights ... like boats righting in rough weather"), the poem uses figurative language to describe the movements of the swans, who are tipping forward and dipping their heads and slender necks into the lake.

The image of "rolling weights" uses a simile to convey the way that the swans have graceful control of their movements. Furthermore, the way that "they halve[] themselves" is a kind of subconscious reminder of what it means for a couple to break up and become two individuals again rather than a unit. In the same sentence, the poem employs metaphor, describing the swans as "icebergs of white feather." This also has an underlying connection, relating to the threat of shipwreck that icebergs pose to ships. Between the simile and the metaphor, then, the poem subtly discusses the possible trauma of the couple breaking up.

But after the caesura in line 11 ("icebergs of white feather, paused") the swans offer an alternative to breaking-up or destruction. They stabilize themselves—not that they were ever out of control—"like boats righting in rough weather." This simile hints, in other words, at the possibility of the poem's human couple "righting" themselves and staying together. The alliteration between "returning," "righting," and "rough" is the way these lines come to rest, anchoring to one particular stable sound.

LINES 13-14

'They mate for ...
... the stilling water.

Line 13 ("'They mate for life' ...") is an important moment in the poem—it's the first time either of the two people within the poem actually speaks. Looking out at the swans as they dunk their heads in the water, the speaker's partner mentions a well-known fact about swans: they "mate for life." (It's worth noting as an aside that swans do sometimes break up too!)

Though the reader doesn't learn too much about the couple's relationship, the overall impression is that they've been together for a long time. The sight of the swans—and the reminder of their mating behavior—help the couple put their own relationship into context, and move beyond their initial fallout. Implicitly, the speaker's partner is actually stating his or her own commitment to the relationship. It's a reminder to both the speaker and the speaker's partner of what is at stake.

Line 14 ("porcelain over the stilling water") deploys another

metaphor, this time comparing the swans to "porcelain." Porcelain is a fragile but beautiful ceramic material, and a metaphor—like the mention of icebergs in line 11—of the potential destruction of the couple's relationship. In the same line, though, the water is described as "stilling." Gently, this suggests that the couple's relationship can and will stabilize again, after the turbulence of their long and heated argument.

LINES 14-18

I didn't reply ...
... distance between us

After the caesura of line 14 ("... stilling water. I didn't ..."), the tension between the speaker and the speaker's partner starts to subside. Though the speaker doesn't immediately reply to the partner's comment about swans' mating habits, the statement—and the sight of the swans—clearly has an impact. The couple goes on walking, the arrival of the "afternoon light" signaling a transition. The enjambment between line 14 and 15 ("I didn't reply / but as we moved") gives the sense that the speaker is deep in thought, his words coming quickly.

Line 16 ("slow-stepping in the lake's shingle and sand")—the start of the sixth stanza—signals an important shift in the poem. It's in this stanza that the couple starts to reconcile their relationship, moving towards the poem's final image of them holding hands. They continue their walk, "slow-stepping" as they go. This line has a strong presence of sibilance, which has a slow sound when spoken out loud *and* captures the actual sound of the still-wet ground as the couple walk:

> slow-stepping in the lake's shingle and sand,

It's fair to say that much of what has been happening has taken place under the surface. Emotions are riding high, and both people involved are thinking deeply about their situation—but hardly any words have been spoken. The use of metaphor and simile thus far has given subconscious context, or subtext, to this situation, and it's at this point in the poem that the two individuals involved find themselves making up in a way that seems instinctive and almost subconscious too.

It's as if the swans have set an example which, without needing to be voiced, has shown the couple the simple fact that if they love each other, that's really the most important thing. This is a testament to the power of nature: how it can affect people and alter their moods, as well as offer examples of ways of being.

And so it is that almost without realizing it, the couple starts holding hands again. The speaker doesn't even really know how this came to be: it happened "somehow." The metaphor in line 18 shows how important the vision of the swans was to this change of attitude: the couple's hands have "swum the distance between us," like swans in water, in order to be reunited together.

LINES 19-20

and folded, one ...
... settling after flight.

The last two lines—19 and 20—are part of the same sentence begun all the way back in line 14 (from "I didn't reply" all the way down to "and folded, one over the other, / like a pair of wings settling after flight"). The speaker relates how the couple is now holding hands, the tension from their earlier argument now fading away.

The closing two lines continue the metaphor begun in line 18—when the speaker said how the couple's hands have "swum the distance between us." This metaphor makes it clear how closely related this section—and this change in attitude—is to the swans. The couple's hands are

> ... folded, one over the other,
> like a pair of wings settling after flight.

In other words, a direct link is drawn between nature and the couple's relationship. Nature has provided a reminder of the importance of love and togetherness.

The caesura in line 19 ("folded, one") gives this section a cautious but tender sound, while also drawing attention to the simile comparing hands to swans' wings. "Settling" is an important word here, hinting at the way the bad feelings between the speaker and his partner have come to rest, no longer seeming so important. The word also plays on the idea of "settling down"—a long-term commitment between two people. Finally, it's also significant that the poem breaks with its regular form here. Whereas all of the previous lines have been organized into tercets—three-line stanzas—the poem ends on a couplet. The clue is in the name: the use of a *couplet* conveys the reconciliation of the *couple*.

SYMBOLS

THE SWANS

It's obvious from the title of "Winter Swans" that the swans are an essential part of this poem. Indeed, their entry into the poem marks the turning point for the speaker and his partner. The swans symbolize long-term companionship. After all, "They mate for life."

The swans are mysterious and beautiful, putting on a display of majestic and graceful movement in unison which manages to shake the couple out of their stupor. Perhaps, too, the way that the swans' beauty has nothing to do with language or intellectual thought reminds the couple that sometimes the solution to a problem is more simple than they think—in this case, they just have to let the problem go and remember to value their love.

The swans offer a specific example of companionship and togetherness. The speaker's partner reminds them both out loud—in the only words that either of them says in the poem—that swans "mate for life." This helps put the couple's own relationship in perspective, reminding them of what is at stake.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-14:** "with a show of tipping in unison. / As if rolling weights down their bodies to their heads / they halved themselves in the dark water, / icebergs of white feather, paused before returning again / like boats righting in rough weather. / 'They mate for life' you said as they left, / porcelain over the stilling water."
- **Line 20:** "like a pair of wings settling after flight."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears throughout "Winter Swans." In general, it helps to amplify the imagery and emotional heft of certain phrases. The first example is in lines 3 and 4. At this point, the poem is setting its scene, using pathetic fallacy to indicate that the speaker and his partner have been arguing and that the mood is still tense: it's been raining, and the earth is sodden with water. The couple is trudging over the damp ground, hinting at the way that they are also trudging through their relationship. Alliteration is used skillfully to show this:

> in which we walked,
> the waterlogged earth

These relentless /w/ sounds extend across the stanza break, conveying the persistent difficulties of the couple's relationship.

The alliteration that occurs across lines 6, 7, and 8 is specifically sibilance, so it's covered more extensively in that section of the guide. In brief, though, the whispering /s/ sounds here in "skirted," "silent," "swans," and "stopped" help build a sense of the hushed, tense atmosphere).

Another key example of alliteration is in lines 11-12:

> ... paused before returning again
> like boats righting in rough weather.

Here, the poem is describing the graceful, almost ritualistic, movement of the swans. In "unison," they dunk their heads under the water, rotating their bodies downwards. The repeated /r/ sounds add a sense of sure-footedness to the lines, conveying the swans' easy ability to stabilize themselves after doing so. This process of "righting" themselves also works as a kind of symbol for the couple, subtly inspiring them to reconcile their relationship; the use of alliteration, then, helps focus readers' attention on a particularly important moment in the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 4:** "w"
- **Line 5:** "f," "f"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s," "s"
- **Line 9:** "h"
- **Line 10:** "h," "w"
- **Line 11:** "w," "r"
- **Line 12:** "r," "r"
- **Line 13:** "l," "l"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "h," "h," "s"
- **Line 18:** "s"

ASSONANCE

Assonance first appears in line 2, with the repeated /a/ sounds in "two days of rain and then a break." These long sounds help give a sense of the stretch of time during which it has been raining, and, as seems the rest of the poem seems to indicate, the couple has been arguing. Later, the shared /aw/ sound of "waterlogged earth" conveys a sense of heaviness in keeping with the soggy ground being described.

Another interesting moment of assonance is found in line 8, via the short /i/ vowels in "with a show of tipping in unison." Here, the speaker describes the graceful and almost ritualistic movement of the swans as they dunk their heads in the water. They appear to do it in "unison," conveying a natural togetherness. The uniformity of the vowel sounds here means that the words in the line are also in unison, gently reinforcing the image of the swans.

Yet more evocative assonance appears in the poem's final two stanzas. These lines are filled with repeated sounds in quick succession—first the /a/ of "and sand" and "hands"; followed by the very similar /ah/ of "that had"; followed by the /uh/ "somehow swum," "us," "one," and "other"; and finally ending with the long /o/ in "folded" and "over." If all that feels a bit overwhelming, that's essentially the point; this moment marks the height of the poem's emotional intensity, as the speaker and his partner begin to hold hands, almost without even consciously attempting to do so. The slew of assonance adds melodic intensity to match the heightened emotions of these final moments.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “a,” “a,” “ea”
- **Line 3:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 4:** “a,” “o”
- **Line 5:** “ee”
- **Line 6:** “e”
- **Line 7:** “a,” “o”
- **Line 8:** “i,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 9:** “i”
- **Line 11:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 12:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 13:** “e,” “a”
- **Line 15:** “o,” “ou,” “oo”
- **Line 16:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 17:** “a,” “a,” “a,” “o”
- **Line 18:** “u,” “u”
- **Line 19:** “o,” “o,” “o,” “o”

CAESURA

Caesura appears a handful of times in "Winter Swans." It's first employed in line 6, as the speaker describes how he and his partner are in the fallout of an argument. Though they are walking together, they're also keeping their distance and avoiding conversation. Brilliantly, the caesura divides the line into two distinct units—exactly like the two people involved:

> as we skirted the lake, silent and apart,

The next example of caesura is in line 11. This is quite different from the one shown above. Now, the speaker talks about the majestic movements of the swans as they tip themselves into the water. The caesura balances the line, subtly conveying the swans' own command of balance and movement:

> icebergs of white feather, paused before returning
> again

Line 14's caesura is different still. After having watched the swans, the speaker's partner mentions that swans "mate for life" (which, of course, is part of a reflection on the couple's own situation). The speaker notes how he doesn't reply immediately, though the implication is clear that he is thinking about what he has seen and what his partner has said. The full-stop caesura creates a pause that stands in for his own silence:

> porcelain over the stilling water. I didn't reply

The poem's other caesuras are in lines 17 and 19, as the speaker relates the way that the couple joins hands and seem to recommit themselves to their relationship. The effect of the caesurae is quite subtle here, but perhaps borrows from the earlier example in line 11. In other words, the graceful balance and movement of the swans is matched—in a small and humble way—by the way that the lovers' hands find each other:

> I noticed our hands, that had, somehow,
> ...
> and folded, one over the other,

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** “ lake, silent”
- **Line 11:** “feather, paused”
- **Line 14:** “water. I”
- **Line 17:** “hands, that had, somehow”
- **Line 19:** “folded, one”

ENJAMBMENT

"Winter Swan" is a delicate poem. Though formally organized into tercets—three-line stanzas—up until the ending, the poem's actual phrases often stretch across a number of clauses and lines. Enjambment (along with caesura) is a key tool in creating this flowing sound. The first enjambment appears at the end of line 2, the white space at the end of the line evoking the break in the bad weather:

> two days of rain and then a break
> in which we walked,

Lines 4-6 are also enjambed. Here, the speaker describes—through personification—the way in which the squelchy earth seems like it is gasping for breath with every step he and his partner take. Stretching the sentence across the lines provides this breathless sound, as one line topples into the next without pause for, well, breath:

> the waterlogged earth
> gulping for breath at our feet
> as we ...

In line 9, the enjambment suspends the sense of the sentence, conveying the way in which the swans' movements inspire awe and contemplation in the couple (especially since this enjambment also occurs across two stanzas):

> As if rolling weights down their bodies to their heads
> they halved themselves in the dark water,

Line 11 is also enjambed, meaning the sentence is divided into two neat sections, suggesting the unison of the swans' movements and anticipating the couple's reconciliation:

> ... before returning again
> like boats righting ...

Perhaps the most interesting enjambment comes between the poem's final two stanzas, as the speaker describes the couple's hands having "swum the distance between us / and folded ..." Fittingly, line 18 is enjambed, its full meaning "swimming" right across the stanza break to "fold" over the next sentence.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "break"
- **Line 3:** "in"
- **Line 4:** "earth"
- **Line 5:** "gulping," "feet"
- **Line 6:** "as"
- **Line 7:** "us"
- **Line 8:** "with"
- **Line 9:** "heads"
- **Line 10:** "they"
- **Line 11:** "again"
- **Line 12:** "like"
- **Line 14:** "reply"
- **Line 15:** "but"
- **Line 18:** "us"
- **Line 19:** "and"

METAPHOR

Metaphor is an important part of "Winter Swans," and often overlaps with its use of personification. For instance, in lines 4 and 5, the speaker describes the "the waterlogged earth / gulping for breath at our feet." The earth doesn't *literally* gulp for breath; this is a figurative way of talking about the mushy, squishy sound the sodden ground makes as the couple walks over it.

Another interesting metaphor comes in line 11, during the section in which the speaker describes the majestic movements of the swans on the lake. Here, the swans are described as "icebergs of white feather." Apart from being an arresting visual image, the use of "icebergs" helps to give the reader a sense of the couple's mood. Icebergs are associated with a quiet threat of destruction—think of the Titanic!—and this suggests the way in which the couple's relationship is on the brink of ending. Subconsciously, this reminds the couple of the way in which they face a choice between staying together or splitting up. Also during the discussion of the swans, line 14 characterizes the birds as "porcelain over the stilling water." Porcelain is a delicate and beautiful ceramic material. Again, the implications are subtle but important. Love is a delicate and beautiful thing, and is, for this particular couple at this particular time, close to being broken.

In the poem's ending, the couple's hands find each other again as the bad feeling lifts. In a kind of reverse personification, the *human hands* are related to the *swans* that the couple has just been watching:

> I noticed our hands, that had, somehow,
> swum the distance between us

This sets up the simile in the last line (which compares the hands to wings at rest), and also shows the important influence that the swans—and, by extension, the natural environment—have had on the couple's perspective. The literal and metaphorical distance between them has closed, and they are together once again.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "the waterlogged earth / gulping for breath at our feet"
- **Lines 10-11:** "they halved themselves in the dark water, / icebergs of white feather"
- **Line 14:** "porcelain over the stilling water"
- **Lines 17-18:** "our hands, that had, somehow, / swum the distance between us"

PATHETIC FALLACY

Pathetic fallacy is used primarily in the poem's opening section. The clouds are described as having "given their all" in terms of rain. Apart from the common association of bad weather with bad feelings, this also conveys a sense of exhaustion. Though the speaker never gives much detail about the particulars of the couple's situation, the pathetic fallacy combines with the fact that they are "silent and apart" to make it clear that they have been arguing, and are perhaps on the brink of breaking up.

This pathetic fallacy extends to the way in which the ground is sodden and "waterlogged." Each step seems difficult, the mud sounding as if it too is on the brink of dying. In other words, the natural environment seems to reflect and even intensify the couple's bad mood. Except, however, for the significant fact that the rains have now *ended*. This anticipates the way in which the speaker and his lover eventually come back together, ending the poem holding hands after the subtle inspiration of the swans. That's why, though it's not a prominent phrase, the "afternoon light" of line 15 is an important part of the pathetic fallacy. There is light after the dark patch that the couple has been going through.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "The clouds had given their all - / two days of rain and then a break / in which we walked, / the waterlogged earth / gulping for breath at our feet / as we skirted the lake"
- **Line 14:** "stilling water"
- **Line 15:** "the afternoon light"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is a part of "Winter Swans" from start to finish.

In the first line, the clouds are described as having "given their all." This relates to the sheer amount of rain that has been falling, but the use "give" implies a degree of agency. In other words, the speaker is saying it has rained so much that the clouds seem positively exhausted—which, of course, seems to mirror the speaker's own feelings regarding his relationship.

This personification is then echoed by the second stanza, which describes "the waterlogged earth /
gulping for breath at our feet." This is a reference to the squishy sound the mud makes as the couple walk over it. Mud, of course, doesn't need to breathe in the way that humans do. But characterizing it as such helps with the atmosphere of exhaustion that mirrors the fraught feeling between the poem's two characters. "Gulping for breath" suggests being close to death, in turn conveying the way that the couple's relationship could be at an end.

When the couple watches the swans, the latter are heavily personified. They put on a "show [...] in unison," as though performing for the couple. This "show" is significant, reminding the couple of the importance of their love. It's also worth noting how that the poem's ending essentially reverses this personification. In other words, the speaker doesn't imbue the natural world with *human* characteristics, but instead seems to imbue himself and his lover with characteristics drawn from *nature*. The way that the speaker and his partner come back together—though holding hands—is portrayed through simile and metaphor as relating to the swans; their hands have "somehow swum" together and "folded" over each other like birds at rest, descriptions that suggest how deeply the swans have affected the couple.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The clouds had given their all -"
- **Lines 4-5:** "the waterlogged earth / gulping for breath at our feet"
- **Lines 7-8:** "the swans came and stopped us / with a show of tipping in unison."
- **Lines 17-18:** "hands, that had, somehow, / swum the distance between us"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance is closely associated with the swans in this poem, as well as with the environment through which the couple walks. It is first used in line 6:

> as we skirted the lake, silent and apart,

The /s/ (and occasional /sh/) sound has a hushed quality. This helps the reader to imagine the poem's setting in the calm of a storm, and also to feel the quiet tension between the speaker and his partner. Later, it's gentleness also conveys the way that the swans move gracefully through the water:

> until the swans came and stopped us
> with a show of tipping in unison.

In the poem's second-to-last stanza, this sibilance is picked up again with renewed intensity. Notice the /s/ sounds in "slow-stepping," "shingle and sand," "noticed," and "somehow, swum the distance between us." Because /s/ sounds are often associated with whispering or quiet, the use of sibilance here helps tone down what are rather emotionally intense lines; though this is a meaningful moment for the couple, it isn't defined by some loud or grand gesture. Instead, the sibilance reflects the fact that holding hands is a subtle, gentle reminder that the couple remains committed to each other. It also continues to evoke the serenity of the area through which the couple walks.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 8:** "sh," "s"
- **Line 13:** "s"
- **Line 14:** "c," "s"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s," "s," "sh," "s"
- **Line 17:** "c," "s," "s"
- **Line 18:** "s," "s," "c," "s"

SIMILE

There are three similes in "Winter Swans." The first comes with the entry of the swans into the poem. From lines 7-12, the speaker describes the swans' behavior. They move gracefully, dunking their heads in the water "in unison." The simile used here conveys control and an almost circus-like idea of performance:

> As if rolling weights down their bodies to their heads
> they halved themselves in the dark water,

In this same section, the poem uses its second simile. The way that the swans rebalance themselves after dipping in the water is likened to "boats righting in rough weather." Again, this relates to control and grace of movement. But the implications are also about something coming to rest, a kind of calm after a storm. This subtly anticipates the way that the couple will, by the end of the poem, find their own sense of calm and balance after their falling out.

And it's in this ending that the poem uses its final simile. Showing the impact of the swans, the couple's hands find each other in an act of reconciliation that contrasts with the way that they were previously "silent and apart." This coming-together of the hands is described as being "like a pair of wings settling

after flight," conveying togetherness and a restoration of calm.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "As if rolling weights down their bodies to their heads / they halved themselves in the dark water,"
- **Line 12:** "like boats righting in rough weather."
- **Line 20:** "like a pair of wings settling after flight."

VOCABULARY

Waterlogged (Line 4) - This means damp and full of water, reflecting how much it has been raining.

Skirted (Line 6) - This means to go around the edge of something. On a literal level, it refers to the speaker and his partner walking around the edge of the lake—but it also relates to the way they are avoiding talking about their problems.

Tipping (Line 8) - Here, the swans are dipping and dunking themselves into the water. Swans have a graceful sense of balance, and the use of "tipping" conveys their delicate but purposeful movements.

Righting (Line 12) - This relates to balance and means returning to the correct position, as in a boat that has been rocking about but is now floating upright again.

Porcelain (Line 14) - Porcelain is a beautiful but delicate ceramic material. It is white unless artificially colored.

Stilling (Line 14) - This is similar to the earlier use of "righting," conveying the way that the water's surface is becoming flat and motionless again after the swans have left.

Shingle (Line 16) - Shingle is a large number of pebbles. A number of beaches in the U.K., for example, are shingle rather than sand.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Winter Swans" is formally organized into tercets—three-line stanzas—right up until the final two lines. The poem ends on a couplet—a two line stanza—because this helps convey the way that the speaker and his lover have come back together after their argument. The couplet, in other words, signals their re-coupling.

Read in this way, the tercets suggest some extra element or distance that has come between the couple. This could be the argument itself, or the general bad mood that they are both in—a kind of unwanted third party. At any rate, the three-line structure signals an imbalance in the couple that the final, two-line stanza resolves.

Additionally, the poem varies its phrases and line length, so that sentences sprawl and unwind over several stanzas. The poem's free verse form helps grant it this flexibility. This in turn allows the poem to move gracefully through its chronological discussion of the couple's walk, hinting at the graceful—and significant—movement of the swans on the water.

METER

"Winter Swans" does not use a discernible metrical scheme, which means it is written in free verse. Of course, the language still has stressed and unstressed syllables, and the poem plays with these stresses to its advantage.

For instance, there is a moment in the first stanza in which an iambic rhythm (da DUM) briefly appears:

> two days | of rain | and then | a break
> in which | we walked

At first, this rhythm mimics the patter of rain. Then, it captures the motion of walking, stressed syllable following unstressed syllable like one heel after another.

Sometimes, the lack of strict meter allows the poem to create a cumbersome feeling, like the couple's trudge through the mud in the second stanza:

> the waterlogged earth
> gulping for breath at our feet

This first line piles on stress to capture the thick, squelchy mud, while the second line spaces out the stresses to mimic the gasping effect it describes.

At other times, as in the discussion of the swans, the stresses can flow gracefully, hinting at the movements of the swans:

> As if rolling weights down their bodies to their heads

Here, the unpredictable stresses "roll" out in a pattern that is both irregular and graceful, just like the swans' necks as they stretch into the water.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no rhyme scheme in "Winter Swans." This contributes to the poem's attempt to authentically portray the discordant state the couple finds themselves in. That is, whereas rhymes represent a kind of sonic union between words, the lack of rhymes suggests that some sort of unity has been *left out* of the poem. The poem's couple is going through a difficult time, finding it hard to resolve their differences. The poem's lack of rhyme reflects this.

That said, the poem does employ some incidental rhymes near the end that represent moments of harmony. For instance, in the fourth stanza the speaker compares the swans to

> icebergs of white **feather**, paused before returning again
> like boats righting in rough **weather**.

Here, rhyme captures how the swans return to upright positions, slipping back into place like the repeated sounds of these words. These similar sounds mirror the similarity in motion between swans and boats. This, in turn, mirrors the speaker's own desire to "right" his relationship with his lover.

Another similar rhyme occurs in the second-to-last stanza:

> slow-stepping in the lake's shingle and **sand**,
> I noticed our **hands**

Once again, the rhyme represents a moment of harmony. Here, as the speaker and his lover begin walking again, their hands instinctually join together in a clasp—just as the rhyming words are joined together by sound.

Apart from these two moments of rhyme, the poem basically follows the conventions of its time. That is, "Winter Swans" was written at a time (the early 2000s) when it was—as it still is—common for poets to avoid rhyme. Instead, the poem employs a fairly standard form of free verse that uses devices like assonance, alliteration, and enjambment to achieve a sense of artfulness.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Winter Swans" uses the first-person point of view throughout. The reader doesn't learn too much about the speaker's identity specifically, but it's clear that he is in a relationship with the other person in the poem (the "you"). (Though the gender of the speaker is unspecified, this guide has used the male pronoun simply to help differentiate between the speaker and the swans more clearly.) The speaker mostly speaks in terms of "we," but at key moments does say "I." This means that even the pronouns contain a miniature version of the poem's conflict. That is, there is a "we," but there is also an "I" and a "you." That "we" is under the threat of permanently separating, breaking down into "I" and "you."

In his telling of the poem's story, the speaker shows an affinity with nature. This doesn't mean that he's an expert, but more that he is capable of being affected—emotionally and intellectually—by the natural world. Indeed, it's the sight of the swans that seems to spark the speaker's reconciliation with his partner. This all happens without too much thought, the speaker only "notic[ing]" the way that his hand and his lover's find their way to one another *after* it's happened.

SETTING

"Winter Swans" is set outside by a lake after a period of heavy rain. This natural setting is important, because it's through the observation of nature that the poem's couple comes to see the value of their love. The poem opens with pathetic fallacy, which is an important part of the scene-setting. The "two days of rain" mirrors the difficult patch that the couple is going through, and the "waterlogged earth" shows that, metaphorically speaking, they are on difficult and cumbersome terrain.

But just as the natural setting can reflect the couple's bad mood, and even perhaps intensify it, the natural world is also capable of affecting things for the better. Indeed, it is the majestic "show" of the swans—as they dip and dunk their heads, necks, and bodies into the water—that shakes the couple out of their stupor. The swans offer a kind of model relationship of love and companionship: "They mate for life." In other words, the natural world gently shows the couple a different way of being. By the poem's ending, the natural setting even influences the way that the speaker sees the human world. He holds hands with his lover and notices that together their hands look like swans' wings.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Owen Sheers, born in 1974, is a British poet from Wales who also works as a TV presenter, playwright, and anthologist. He grew up in Wales, later completing an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, an institution at which the poet Denise Riley also teaches.

Sheers's poems often engage with the natural world, focusing on questions of place and humankind's relationship to its environments. Indeed, he anthologized a collection of poems by various poets under the title *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, the chapter headings of which show his belief in the importance of poetry grounded in an attentive sense of place: "London and Cities," "Villages and Towns," "Mountains and Moorland," "Islands," "Woods and Forest," and "Coast and Sea."

This is certainly not the first poem to feature swans front and center! Inquisitive readers could compare the role of the swans in this poem with those in two of W.B. Yeats's poems, for example: "Leda and the Swan," and "The Wild Swans at Coole." While the first of these poems relates to Greek myth, the second shares a tendency with this poem to see the swans as symbolic figures capable of teaching something to their human observers. A more contemporary comparison would be "Why the Swan" by Andrew Lambeth.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Owen Sheers was born in 1974 and is currently active as a

poet; his first collection was published in 2000. Sheers is from Wales, which is part of the United Kingdom. Currently, the U.K. head of state is Queen Elizabeth II—she has been on the throne since 1952. Technically speaking, the Queen owns all of the unmarked mute swans within the U.K. Indeed, due to a long-established legal context, the royal family are the pretty much the only group legally allowed to hunt swans (the only others are the attendees of St John's College at Cambridge). Perhaps this association of swans and royalty is relevant to the way that the former are often perceived as glamorous creatures.

The swans that appear in this poem are known as mute swans. The clue as to why is in the name itself—they don't make much noise, especially when compared with other swans or birds more generally. The mute swan was a trading commodity during the Middle Ages, and they were often exchanged between noblemen. Though they have a reputation for grace and majesty, swans are in fact capable of acting quite aggressively towards humans—they are powerful and muscular creatures.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with Owen Sheers — Owen Sheers answers question in a piece produced by the Welsh Joint Education Committee. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeB9zK1DtOo)
- "The Wild Swans at Coole," by W.B. Yeats — A poem that features swans by one of the 20th century's most famous Irish poets, William Butler Yeats. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43288/the-wild-swans-at-coole)
- More Poems by Sheers — A valuable resource containing other poems by Sheers—and recordings. (https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/owen-sheers)
- Swans Themselves — A BBC article that looks at the history—and some of the myths—relating to swans. (http://www.bbc.co.uk/earth/story/20141204-the-truth-about-swans)
- "Why The Swan," by Andrew Lambeth — Another contemporary poem in which swans play an important role. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2019/jan/14/poem-of-the-week-why-the-swan-by-andrew-lambeth)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER OWEN SHEERS POEMS

- Mametz Wood

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