

Winter Swans

Owen Sheers

OVERALL SUMMARY

This poem describes a seemingly romantic walk shared by a couple along a lake, the dynamic of their relationship being reflected in their natural surroundings, namely by the appearance and behaviour of the swans in the lake. This involves the **unspoken difficulties faced by the couple that are disguised by a somewhat 'perfect' exterior.**

STANZA SUMMARY

- A couple is shown to be walking together in what is implied to be a heavy downpour.
- The heavy rain muddies the ground beneath their feet, as the reader then discovers that they are walking alongside a lake in a tense silence.
- The couple are stopped by the impressive **'performance'** of a group of swans in the lake, making their synchronised movements appear effortless.
- The swans continue their movements, their appearance likened to **"icebergs"** and **"boats righting in rough weather."**
- As the swans leave calmly and elegantly, the speaker remarks upon their partner's comment that swans **"mate for life"**, noting that they failed to respond to this and merely continued to walk.
- As the couple continue to walk, their hands grow closer as they are naturally drawn to union with each other.
- The wings of a swan are used to depict the image of the couple's intertwined hands.

CONTEXT

- Owen Sheers, a Welsh poet, based the group of poems to which 'Winter Swans' belongs off of his **interpretation of the symbolism behind the Welsh mountain 'Skirrid Hill'**. The word 'Skirrid' meaning 'divorced or separated', he used this as a representation for overarching **themes of death, loss, distancing in relationships and separation from family.**
- Additionally, he wanted to incorporate its natural elements into his work, drawing attention to the lack of **empathy between humans and the natural world around them.**
- Born in 1974, Sheers is a modern poet that is not restricted to popular writing styles such as those in the Romantic era, but the group of poems that he writes in this 'Skirrid Hill' is, of course, very much influenced by nature. The rain at the start of the poem could, arguably, be seen as a nod to his hometown in Wales, where such weather is a regular occurrence.
- He explores identity and relationships in many of his poems.

Key Themes & Analysis

CONFLICT/ OPPOSITION

- The **personification of nature** throughout this poem serves as a means of **reflecting the inner turmoil** of its speakers. In this way, Sheers makes use of strategies similar to those of Thomas Hardy in *'Neutral Tones'*, **taking inspiration from Romantic poetic techniques** involving the **exploration of nature** with regard to the human experience.
- Immediately, a **polar opposition** appears within *'Winter Swans'*. The first line of the poem's first stanza draws attention to **"the clouds"** which had **"given their all"** - **ironic** as the clouds, which merely hang in the sky, are given a determined personality here (the rain they produce sets the tone of the poem, displaying an example of **pathetic fallacy**).
- In contrast, the first line of the second stanza describes the **"waterlogged earth"**. In the same way, there is a **sense of irony** in the **personification of the earth**, **"gulping for breath"**, as it is usually representative of **a stable, grounded nature**.
- The sky and the earth can already be viewed as **opposite polarities within nature**, in this case, the hard earth being softened and sunken by the unlikely strong personality of the clouds.
- Ultimately, this in itself is a **reflection of the conflict** within the relationship being spoken about in the poem.
- **"a show of tipping in unison"** - the swans' completely natural performance of a seemingly rehearsed **"show"** is suggestive of two ideas. Primarily, this indicates a certain **effortless synchronicity within nature**, mirroring that which presumably occurs within the relationship the speaker is reflecting upon.
- That said, its comparison to a **"show"** also **hints at the element of pretence** in this coupling - is the relationship as easy as it seems?
- ^The **sibilance** present here is also an implication of undiscovered or unaddressed secrets within the relationship - some that are being avoided in the same way that the couple **"skirted the lake..."**.
- This idea of two halves of a whole is developed throughout, whilst a certain conflict is presented regarding the togetherness and separation between the two souls involved in the poem. The **theme of contradiction** presented here reflects the inner conflict experienced by the poem's speaker.

TOGETHERNESS / FEIGNED PERFECTION

- The sudden inclusion of a **second person singular pronoun**, **"you"**, within the first line of the fifth stanza places emphasis on the phrase spoken by the speaker's partner, immediately inducing a more personal
- Additionally, the speech of the other party within the relationship – **"they mate for life"** – is a blatant implication of the **solidarity of their partnership** with the speaker, as they comment upon an aspect of nature for which that is being used as a metaphor.
- The commencement of the third stanza with the preposition, **"until"**, **abruptly interrupts the flow** of the poem, just as the winter swans put an abrupt stop to the couple's path. This is perhaps representative of the unexpected obstacles faced by the pair in their relationship.
- The **conceit (extended metaphor) of the swans** continues when they are described with the noun **"porcelain"**. This develops the notion that the **unscathed, flawless appearance** of the couple's relationship is, much like the **"show"**, very performative, and is actually **incredibly fragile** in the same way as porcelain.
- The last line of the poem, whilst adhering to the extended metaphor of **'winter swans'**, is suggestive of the ultimate unity of the couple **in spite of potential turbulence** during their time together, represented by the **"stillness"** of the lake and the calm departure of the swans.
- This unity is presented as what one could describe as a soulmate connection, the swans that **"halved themselves"** embodying the elegance that can ensue with the coming together of two halves of one soul.

Form

LACK OF RHYME

- This poem has **no rhyme scheme and no regular rhythm**, suggestive of uncertainty within the couple's relationship.
- The **ceaseless lack of rhyme scheme** throughout the entire poem symbolizes a somewhat **incoherence**, perhaps reflected in the contrast between its speaker and their partner

TERCETS / TRIPLETS

- This poem consists of **six stanzas of three lines, known as tercets or triplets**, and **a couplet** as its final stanza.
- The triplets are perhaps **symbolic of the obstacles preventing the complete fulfilment and unity of both parties in the relationship**, whilst the couplet represents a final, harmonic acceptance of these differences and a willingness to address or overlook them.

Structure

ENJAMBMENT

- There is **frequent enjambement** (the flow of one line into another without the presence of punctuation) all the way through this poem, inducing a **fluidity** that mirrors the routine of the swans and the eventual comfort and ease the couple find within their relationship as they choose to overcome their difficulties.

Comparisons

Neutral Tones	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p>Loss of Love</p> <p>Both poems refer to the</p> <p>Nature</p> <p>Both poets rely hugely on the natural world to express the emotions they intend to portray.</p>	<p>Rhythmically, both poems are completely irregular, both Hardy and Sheers neglecting to adhere to a certain rhythm. In both senses, this underlines the complication that comes with relationships, and the fact that not everything will go smoothly.</p>	<p>Structurally, these poems differ greatly</p>	<p>As both poets wrote in very different time periods, Sheers as a modern-day poet and Hardy writing in the late 1800s, the historical context behind their poems differs greatly.</p>
Different	<p>WS: The speaker experiences a renewal of love with their partner by the end of the poem.</p> <p>NT: The speaker's attitude towards love remains cynical and hopeless; there is no chance of a reunion between the speaker and the lover of whom they speak.</p>	<p>'Winter Swans' has no rhyme scheme, whilst Neutral Tones adheres to a regular ABBA rhyme scheme throughout.</p>	<p>'Winter Swans' is full of enjambement, completely contrasting Hardy's repeated application of end-stopping.</p>	<p>As a modern-day poet, Owen Sheers is less restricted by popular writing styles of the time and Hardy, writing not long after the romantic era, was surrounded by a huge flux in Romantic features in poetry, arguably influencing his work. Secondly, whilst Hardy's poem is very personal, referring to a real love of his, Sheers writes of a fictional relationship.</p>

When We Two Parted	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p>Loss of Love</p> <p>Both poets explore the difficulties that are faced in relationships</p> <p>Nature</p> <p>Both poets use nature, specifically weather, at the start of their poems to depict their state of mind. In both cases, this entails a somewhat dreary, wet setting during a cold time of year. There is a relatively pessimistic attitude taken towards relationships in both poems.</p>	Not the same	Not the same	Contextually, there is a lot of difference between these two poems, but both writers set out with the intention of using natural surroundings to enhance the portrayal of emotion in their poetry.
Different	<p>Whilst the speaker in 'When We Two Parted' presents a bitter attitude towards their lost love and is seemingly inconsolable, Sheers suggests that these issues can be overcome. Additionally, whilst Sheers focuses greatly on nature, Byron leans more towards a focus on the blatant retelling of emotion, using a semantic field of death to reflect the death of the relationship and the way it haunts him.</p>	<p>Winter Swans has no rhyme scheme and no regular rhythm, completely contrasting Byron's use of an ABABCD CD rhyme scheme along with alternation between 5 and 4 syllables during the first half of the first stanza and between 5 and 6 throughout the rest of the poem.</p>	<p>Winter Swans is full of enjambement and completely lacks any end-stops, contrary to the frequent end-stops present throughout 'When We Two Parted'.</p>	<p>Whilst Byron's poem is very personal, referring to a real love of his, Sheers writes of a fictional relationship. The difference in time periods during which each writer wrote their poems demonstrates a difference in their influences. Byron was incredibly heavily influenced by Romantic poetry as he was alive during the peak of the Romantic era, whilst Sheers, despite his focus on nature which is typical of Romantic poetry, was inspired by particular natural processes and landmarks that he personally found symbolic.</p>