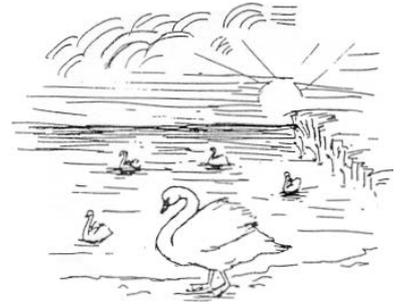


The Wild Swans at Coole ~ W. B. Yeats

This justly famous poem, first published in 1917 towards the end of the First World War, established Yeats's reputation as a poet.

Coole refers to Coole Park in County Galway in Ireland and home of his friend, Lady Gregory, a writer herself and patroness of the Irish arts. From 1898 Yeats spent all his summers at Coole which he loved and which he felt represented a vanishing world of grace. The values of this vanishing world are represented by the swans, beautiful, graceful and utterly self-contained. They contrast starkly with the ugly, strife-torn world of man.

1. a) Explain fully how the serenity of the scene is established in the first stanza.
b) What does this mood of serenity add to your impression of the swans?
2. Why does the poet refer to the number of swans as 'nine-and-fifty' instead of fifty nine swans?
3. How is the immense power of the swans conveyed in the second stanza?
4. What reveals that Yeats knows these swans well?
5. It seems that the Yeats that watched and counted the swans was a happier man. How is this revealed?
6. Why does Yeats use the phrase 'bell-beat' to describe the sound of the swans' wings?
7. In the fourth stanza some of the admirable qualities of the swans that Yeats feels men have lost are made clear.
 - a) How is the swans' complete harmony with the elements demonstrated?
 - b) What is implied by 'unwearied still' and 'their hearts are not grown old'?
 - c) What is implied by 'lover by lover'?
8. The swans' perfect control of their passions (passions that dominate men) is conveyed metaphorically. Explain the metaphor implicit in 'Passion or conquest, wander where they will,/ Attend upon them still'.
9. a) What does the word 'drift' in the final stanza suggest about the swans?
b) How is this suggestion expanded upon in this stanza?
10. How would you describe the poet's mood as he observes the swans?
 - a) desperate?
 - b) angry?
 - c) sad and yearning?Substantiate your choice.
11. The rhyme scheme of 'The Wild Swans at Coole' is generally a regular abcdd. Where is this rhyme scheme not strictly adhered to, and why?
12. What is the emotional effect of the final line of the poem?



A note on the poet: W. B. Yeats is one of the greatest modern poets; his work, published in the early years of the twentieth century, has influenced many other poets. An Irishman, he felt deeply the oppression of his people by the English and much of his poetry is written in support of the fight of the Irish for freedom and independence. His work is intellectually demanding and always structured with great care; read some of our other favourites: 'The Second Coming', 'A prayer for my Daughter', and 'Easter 1916'.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS: *Wild Swans at Coole*

1. The scene's serenity comes from the peaceful image that the phrase '*autumn beauty*' conveys, reminding us of the reds, golds and browns of the leaves, and the calmness of the weather in that season. Yeats describes the still sky reflected in the quiet water of the lake and the gentle sound of the water running over the stones.
 - b) The serenity of the scene seems to enhance the swans' serenity. They are in perfect unity with it, graceful and untroubled by the chaos in the world of man.
2. '*Nine-and-fifty*' suggest more strongly the large number of swans. The old fashioned nature of the phrase also adds to the impression of the swans' grace and timelessness.
3. '*Mount*' suggests far more strongly than 'fly up' the controlled power of the swans. This impression is augmented by the words '*wheeling*' and '*great broken wings*' which convey the arching splendour of their flight from the lake.
4. The words '*nineteenth autumn*' and the fact that Yeats has lovingly counted these swans every year makes clear how well Yeats knew and valued the swans.
5. Yeats refers to himself as profoundly changed from the man who nineteen years before had '*trod with a lighter tread*'. Now his '*heart is sore*'. He has lost his joy in life and his optimism, no doubt as a result of the cataclysmic events of the war, and the failed Irish uprising of 1916.
6. '*Bell-beat*' suggest that the sound of the swans' wings was rhythmic and harmonious as is the sound of the bell. The image thus adds to the impression of the swans' beauty and harmony with their surroundings.
7. a) The reference to the streams as being '*companionable*' to the swans suggests how at home they are in the cold fresh water. This ease they have with the cold water is apparent too in the easy way they treat the air. They '*climb*' it and '*mount*' it, suggesting how at home they are in this element.
 - b) Unlike Man, weary and old, with his hopes dead, the swans are full of energy and the joy and power of youth.
 - c) Swans mate for life and Yeats sees this as an ability for commitment which humankind has lost. (Perhaps his unrequited love for Lady Gregory adds to his feelings here.) Man, unlike the swans, is fickle and his loves shortlived.
8. '*Attend upon them*' suggests that their passions are their servants and are thus perfectly under control. The swans then are unlike men, who are the slaves of their passions.
9. a) '*Drift*' suggests that the swans have complete freedom and that they move with graceful ease on the water.
 - b) The swans' freedom to wander where they will is reinforced by the poet's revelation that they might one day mysteriously disappear and choose to live and build their nests on the shores of another lake.
10. The poet's mood is sad and yearning. The poet feels a strong sense of yearning when he looks at the swans because he feels that they have qualities that are lacking in himself. He, in common with men in general, is not self contained and serene, and he is not in harmony with the elements as the swans are.
11. The rhyme scheme is not strictly adhered to in the opening stanza, where '*stones*' ghost-rhymes with '*swans*'. The effect is to emphasize the swans as subject matter and central concern in the poem.
12. The final line '*To find they have flown away*' has a sense of the poet's being left bereft; he might awake one day to find these gracious creatures gone, and yet another of the ever-decreasing joys of his life would be taken from him.

