

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Love & Relationships

Winter Swans - *Owen Sheers*

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WINTER SWANS

Owen Sheers

Brief Summary

A couple are walking along together, in a brief patch of good weather after two days of rain, and come across some swans. It is suggested that the couple have had an argument or disagreement which has separated them, however by the end of the poem they have reunited.

Synopsis

- Introduces two characters walking in a break between bouts of rain and bad weather
- Speaker mentions they're walking around a lake
- They're stopped in their journey after seeing some swans in the water
- The character the speaker is addressing says that the swans mate for life
- The speaker and addressee start holding hands, suggesting they've started to make up after a disagreement or conflict
- The speaker compares their hands together as the swan's wings after settling from flying.

Summary

Context – Sheers is a Welsh poet // work tends to focus in relationships and how people live together in society // from his most famous collection 'Skirrid Hill' (2005)

Form – no rhyme scheme or constant syllable line count

Structure - enjambment to reflect fluidity of conversation // couplet used // caesura

Language – natural imagery // juxtaposing language // pathetic fallacy // strong semantic field of pairings

Key Points – introduces two characters walking in a break between the bad weather // swans are used as symbol of love and unity

Context

Owen Sheers (1974 -)

Sheers is a Welsh poet, actor and TV presenter whose work tends to focus on exploring identity and relationships, along with how people live together in society, and this poem combines these themes succinctly.

From "Skirrid Hill" (2005)

A collection which was described by The Guardian as 'beautifully elegiac'. It has the themes of disintegration and breakdown running through it, though Winter Swans opens employing this theme before the couple rekindles their love.

KEY THEMES	NATURE, UNITY VS SEPARATION, RESOLUTION, CONFLICT
RELATIONSHIP	ROMANTIC
LOVE	ROMANTIC, DISTANT



Winter Swans

Sheers' poem centres on a couple who are clearly having **issues communicating**, and are presented as **emotionally separated** as the poem opens. He uses a range of poetic devices, including the metaphor of the lake for the couple's issues, and the swans as a symbol of unity. It is a poem which explores the difficulties and idiosyncrasies within relationships, maybe to reassure the reader that everyone has arguments sometimes.



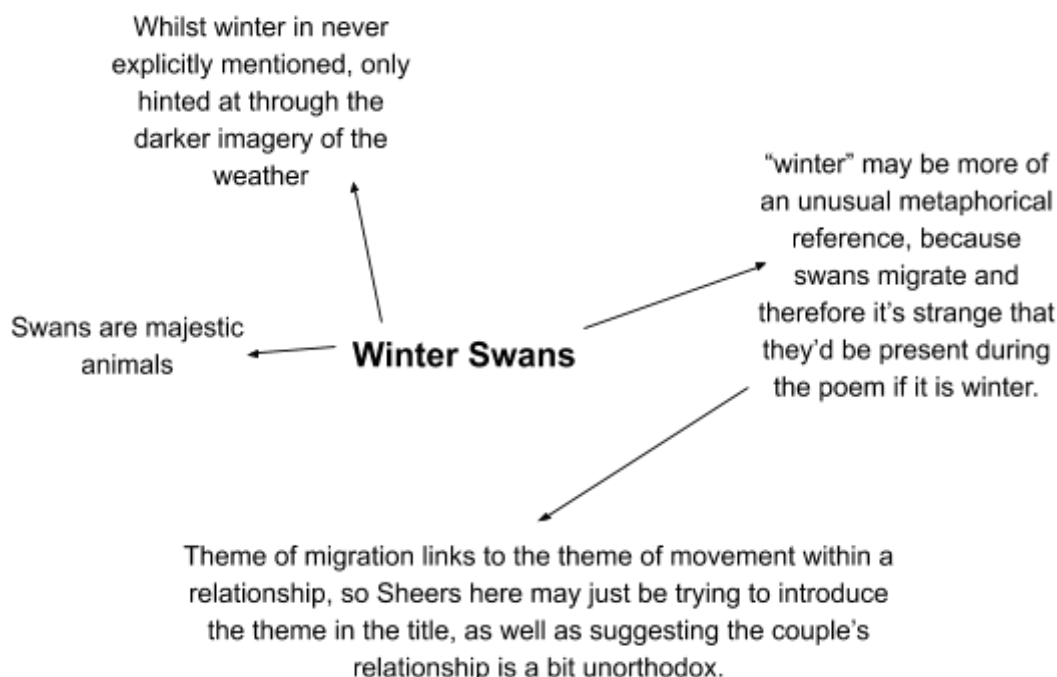
<https://www.pexels.com/photos/scenic-view-of-lake-in-forest-247800/>

The poem has a rather vague setting and is ambiguously separated from the context. In addition to this the **past tense narrative** of the poem can confuse the reader as it is not set in any clear frame of time.

The poem has a rather slow pace, using **caesura** in conjunction with **enjambment** perhaps to **reflect the struggles that the couple are having explaining their problems to each other**. However, the final couplet suggests that they have resolved their differences. Though the lack of rhyming in the final couple may imply everything is still not perfect in their relationship.

CAESURA | A pause between words, for example across lines, with the use of a comma or full stop.

The title "Winter Swans"



Winter Swans

Personification of the clouds to suggest there are external forces with ulterior motives which are negatively affecting the couple's relationship.

Alternatively, this familiar language really emphasises to the reader the awful weather.

Reflects the caged environment the couple has been living in during the "two days of rain", and perhaps the feeling of claustrophobia the relationship is presenting the couple.

A collective pronoun is used for the couple which suggests there is still hope they'll resolve their conflict, or suggest that they have a life-long connection despite adversity.

Pausing the movement of the couple on their walk.

The simile of "weights" could be symbolic of the issues and arguments which are haunting the couple.

Two contrasting colours, perhaps a reassuring message that two individuals can always return to each other after setting their differences apart.

The other 'speaker' speaks for the first time, which regains a sense of balance between them in the poem's narrative. Breaking the silence with one speaker's direct dialogue.

"Light" is often used in literature as a symbol of hope,

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**, silent and apart,

until the swans came and **stopped** us

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. I didn't reply

but as **we** moved on through the afternoon **light**,

Introduces the semantic field of pairings, "two", and this could also metaphorically suggest that both individuals in the couple have volatile and argumentative personalities.

Collective pronouns, which hints at the themes of enduring and unconditional love - they are intrinsically linked.

This could symbolise the issues the couple are having in their communication.

Creates a bleak image, and suggests the couple is emotionally lacking, and there are problems between them.

"Skirted the lake" could metaphorically suggest that the lake is representative of their issues and they're avoiding them.

Punctuation mark highlights the stop the couple takes from their walk after noticing the swans.

Returning to the pairings imagery; on a figurative level, this could imply the swans appear a unit, and are soulmates, but separate to become single entities again.

The simile of likening the swans to boats, which are symbols of stability, continues the theme of reuniting and reassurance to the end of the stanza.

Connotations of purity from "porcelain", could perhaps have biblical connotations of remaining with one partner for life, connected to the concept of 'soulmates'.

Returning to collective pronouns at the end of the poem.



which suggests to the reader the conflict in the relationship will be resolved by the conclusion of the poem.

References the imagery and the symbolism of the swans from earlier, suggesting that the couple have put aside their differences. Similar to the start of the poem when the rain is personified, this time, the actions of the couple are being compared to nature, which suggests that they've become part of the natural world to an extent. Perhaps they have followed the message of the swans and decided to make a life-long connection.

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

I noticed our hands, that had, somehow,

swum the distance between us

and folded, **one over the other**,

like a pair of wings **settling after flight**.

"Shingle and sand" are hard to walk on, and this may present the difficult nature of working through a conflict, and how both people have to put in a lot of effort to resolve the situation.

Semantic field of reuniting and pairings.

Returning to the imagery of stability and solidarity.



Perspective

There are two speakers, who are sometimes presented as a unit and sometimes presented as speaking and acting separately. The narrative is from a first-person perspective, however they are addressing someone who they're romantically (it's implied) involved with. It is ambiguous whether this is based on a true event in Sheers life, in which case it could be semi-autobiographical, or not.

The poem is from the perspective of someone addressing someone they're romantically attached to, after an argument, so they use a mix of conjunctive and excluding pronouns to highlight their distance.

The Opening

The poem opens on a focus on the weather, with the **personification** of the clouds - "**given their all**" - to suggest there are external forces with ulterior motives which are negatively affecting the couple's relationship. Alternatively, this familiar language really emphasises to the reader the awful weather. This creates a **foreboding atmosphere** for the rest of the poem, and hints to the reader that this may be a poem focusing on a detrimental relationship.



The clouds had **given their all** –
two days of rain and then a break
in which **we** walked,

On the other hand, the **pronoun** "**we**" presents the couple as unified which hints at the themes of enduring and unconditional love. By mentioning that there has been "**two days of rain**", Sheers is introducing the **semantic field of pairings**, and this could also metaphorically suggest that both individuals in the couple have volatile and argumentative personalities.

SEMANTIC FIELD | A writer uses words which are linked by a theme or topic throughout a text or passage.

Structure

Inconsistent Form

Sheers doesn't use a rhyming scheme or consistent syllable line count, which could be interpreted as a commentary on the unpredictable and flexible nature of relationships.



Stanza Structure

The poem is structured into four sentences stretched over twenty lines, which continues the **theme of symmetry and pairings** into the format of the poem. The **enjambment** used here reflects the fluidity of the conversation the couple are having and makes the pace of the poem feel more natural. Aside from the final pair of lines, the poem is structured into stanzas of three lines, which may be a **textual mirror of the obstruction placed between two individuals**, perhaps reflecting what is causing their argument.



Couplet

Sheers uses a final **couplet** to suggest a resolution to the separation or tension between the couple, and couplets are often used to display one single direct thought. However, the **couplet doesn't rhyme**, which could suggest there is still some tension in the couple's relationship.

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

This conclusion ties the poem together and presents the couple as reunited again but not fully.

Caesura

Sheers uses **caesura** to **reflect the break in the relationship and conversation**, and arguably to symbolise the cracks in the couple's relationships. The pauses the reader is forced to take by the caesura mirrors the struggles of the couple's relationship. These pauses could also reflect a **tone of contemplation** which is housed throughout the poem also.

Language

Semantic field of pairings

There is a semantic field of pairs - including **"two days"**, **"halved"**, **"pair of wings"**, **"one over the other"** - to represent the couple and their intimacy and desire to be together. The couple are compared to the swan, and eventually it helps them rekindle their relationship as it's noted that they **"mate for life"**.

Natural imagery

Sheers employs a great amount of **natural imagery** which could suggest that relationships, along with the conflicts which accompany them, should be embraced as a natural part of human life. Their conflict is resolved with a walk in nature and seeing the swans, which may be Sheers highlighting the critical importance of nature in our society.



Nature is personified, such as in the lines **“the clouds had given their all”** and **“waterlogged earth // gulping for breath”**. This makes it easier for Sheers to introduce exterior motives and forces which could be affecting the couple’s relationship. If it is a semi-autobiographical poem, this could be seen to be an attempt to remove the blame for the disruption in the relationship on himself, the speaker.

Swans

The swans are used as a **symbol of enduring a timeless love** as swans **“mate for life”**. Due to their white colour, swans are often used in literature as a **symbol of light and purity**. They are also a **feminine symbol** although in Greek mythology the swan was linked to the Sun God Apollo. In alchemy, the swan is seen to **symbolise melding of opposites** such as fire and water. With this understanding of a swan’s importance to the poem, it could be suggested that the two individuals have very opposing personalities, with is perhaps why the two characters in the poem are not getting on well in a relationship.

Juxtaposing language

Contrasting language such as **“dark water”** and **“white feather”** could be argued to be commenting on how simplified conflict can be by comparison to the complexities of human relationships and love. It could also be displaying the ups and downs experienced by people in a relationship.

Weather

The **“two days of rain”** creates an **ominous and foreboding tone** for the poem and the relationship. However, the weather improves as the poem progresses, and this may reflect the healing of the couple’s relationship as they put aside their differences.

Comparisons

Winter Swans	Love's Philosophy
“lake”	“river”
“clouds had given their all”	“the waves clasp one another”
Both poets personify nature to make it easier to compare to the human relationship.	
Both poets focus on a romantic / sexual relationship, using natural imagery to suggest that romantic relationships are crucial and important.	

Winter Swans & Letters From Yorkshire

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display the effects of disruption and separation in a relationship. • Natural imagery is utilized to create a vivid setting.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Letters From Yorkshire, the characters are physically separated, whereas in Winter Swans, the characters are only emotionally detached. • Letters From Yorkshire deals with a familial relationship (it is assumed), whereas Winter Swans concerns a romantic / and or / sexual relationship.



Winter Swans & When We Two Parted

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both poems explore the difficulties encountered within a relationship• Both attribute some of the difficulties encountered in the relationship towards a lack of communication - WS describes the couples as “silent and apart” and WWTP described the speaker as “in silence and tears”.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In WWTP, the couple is already separated and do not reunite, however in WS they begin separated however reunite at the end of the poem.• Both poems have stanzas of a set length, eight for WWTP and three (mostly) for WS.

