

Focusing on wild
swans at coole,
discuss the theme of
time and change in
yeats es...



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The theme of time and change bringing with it loss and regret is a constant one in Yeats' work, particularly in his later poems. 'The innocent and the beautiful / Have no enemy but time', he says in 'In memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markievicz'. Yet despite the onset of old age, and the failings of his strength and vitality, Yeats kept his passions to the end. 'Why should not old men be mad?' he asks in a poem of that name. At the end of his life, bitterly reviewing the works of his imagination, he describes them as 'circus animals' ('The Circus Animals Desertion').

His 'ladder' is gone, he says (his poetic imagination) and he must lie down 'Where all the ladders start / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart'. In 'Sailing to Byzantium' he describes his heart as 'sick with desire and fastened to a dying animal'. In his old age he is like 'A tattered coat upon a stick'. Though old age has its compensations too; in 'Sailing to Byzantium' he finds comfort in the intellect, and aesthetic beauty.

He wishes (after death) to be gathered 'Into the artifice of Eternity'. After his bitter description of old age, he adds 'Unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress'. His poetry is his consolation. But his attitude towards his aging self is mostly one of angry disappointment; often focused on his unrequited love for Maud Gonne. One of the earliest poems in which he expresses these themes of regret and loss is 'The Wild Swans at Coole'.

In this poem Yeats meditates on the changes that have occurred in the nineteen years since he first saw, and counted, the swans at Coole Park; the home of his friend and patroness Lady Gregory, who provided it as a retreat

for Irish writers and artists. The swans have a particular significance for him as he often uses them as symbols of wild passion, as in 'Leda and the Swan'. There are a great many of them at Coole Park; fifty nine he says, yet they paddle in pairs, 'lover by lover', which begs the question; who is the odd swan out?

The poem is made up of five stanzas of six lines each, mostly in the traditional ballad metre of alternating four and three stress lines; though the fifth line of each has five stresses, making it a pentameter. This unexpected pentameter line as well as the enjambment of lines has the effect of creating a 'build up' to each stanza's end. The final two lines of each stanza rhyme, giving a strong finish. Appropriately for its pensive tone, the lines have a falling rhythm; mostly trochaic with frequent dactyls.

As is often the case with Yeats, he is very free in the distribution of his unstressed syllables. The opening line is regular though; four trochees preceded by a hypermetrical 'The'. The second is similarly regular, and so sets the rhythm of the poem. The third is highly irregular, containing two dactyls and a reversed foot (an iamb). This irregularity is then constant throughout, and gives a conversational murmuring quality to the verse. The poem opens with images of peace and tranquillity and is given its solemn serenity by these beautiful images of nature.

It is late in the day (twilight) and late in the year (October). The trees 'in their autumn beauty' are none the less soon going to shed their leaves and become bare. It is late in the day for Yeats too; he is now over fifty; his summer is also over and he knows he is approaching the winter of his years.

The water ' mirroring the still sky' also mirrors his soul, which, as always in this lovely spot, is calm and at peace. The use of the spondee ' still sky' creates a stillness in itself, slowing the pace of the poem.

Yeats has been walking the ' dry woodland paths' until suddenly, it seems, in the final lines of the first stanza, he comes upon the amazing sight of these swans, on the ' brimming water'; images of life and vitality and love, contrasting perhaps with his own ' dryness'. In the second stanza, Yeats remembers how, that first time, before he had quite finished counting them, he saw the swans ' All suddenly mount/ And scatter wheeling in great broken rings'; an image of great strength and majesty.

He describes the sound of their beating wings as ' clamorous'; perhaps a transferred epithet combining the noise of their cries with that of their beating wings. All this noise and movement is a great contrast to the tranquillity of the first stanza; and seems symbolic of his own lost youth, and earlier romantic passions. Yeats uses another spondee ' I first' to slow the rhythm of the stanza which connotes that he is stalling and looking into the past. In the next stanza, he says that the sight has made his heart sore. ' All's changed' he says, since his younger, more agile days, when he ' trod with a lighter tread'.

He is now in a mood of regret for his lost youth, and passions, symbolised by the mounting swans. But the swans he sees now, nineteen years later, are (unlike him), ' unwearied', ' Their hearts have not grown old'. In pairs, ' lover by lover', they paddle and fly together. The streams in which they paddle are described as ' companionable'; another transferred epithet, for the swans

themselves are each other's companions, and form a society of their own. Again, this is in contrast to the lonely Yeats (the fifty-ninth swan?). Passion and conquest 'attend' upon them; that is, serve them.

The swans are in control of their passions, not the other way around. They are still free spirits who 'wander where they will', as, this suggests, Yeats did in his youth. In the penultimate stanza, the use of the word pair 'passion or conquest' relating to the swans, helps to show the reader that the fire and drive that the swans have, has been lost with time and the change in Yeats. Whereas the swans' hearts 'have not grown old', Yeats's has. The 'companionable streams', now grown cold due to winter, and which the swans still paddle in, contrasts the changeable seasons to the constant swans.

The "All's changed" of stanza three reminds us of the refrain from "Easter 1916": "All changed; changed utterly"; though the change described in this poem is more sudden and brutal. It has been building up unnoticed for years, until it suddenly explodes in revolution, shattering the 'casual comedy' in which they had all taken part previously, and giving birth to the 'terrible beauty' of the war for Irish independence. Time has brought about a slower change in 'The Wild Swans at Coole', and the swans here are at rest, 'Mysterious, beautiful'. Finally they will of course fly away and delight other men's eyes elsewhere.

Yeats will awake some day and find them gone; just as someday he will awake to find his passions spent, and his poetic inspiration disappeared. He anticipates his loss and regret when this occurs, in the same way as he

already laments the loss of his youth. So if Yeats typically sees time as the enemy, bringing change that means loss of youth, beauty and vitality; or (as in 'Easter 1916') bringing violent change and horror; he found comfort in art and beauty and his own creative accomplishment. This was his consolation for the decaying of his physical energies.

No longer caught in the 'sensual music' of youth in 'Sailing to Byzantium', he seeks instead 'Monuments of un-ageing intellect'. Art defeats time, because it endures. Throughout 'The Wild Swans at Coole' therefore, are many references to the theme of time and change in Yeats. There is a sense of winding down, as the 'twilight' (3rd light of the day) and the 'autumn beauty' of the scenery, (3rd season of the year) mirror the closing stages of Yeats' life. Looking back on his younger self, his memory of the swans fills him with envy for their unchanging nature.