



# WINTER SWANS

## KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



**Context** – *Winter Swans* was written by Owen Sheers and published in *Skirrid Hill* in 2005.

**Owen Sheers** – Owen Sheers (born 20<sup>th</sup> September 1974) is a Welsh poet, playwright and author. He was born in Suva, Fiji, but was brought up in Abergavenny, Wales. His work is notable for its energy and sensuality, and on the way that people connect with land and their country. His poetry also takes an interest in connections between people, and the borders that people create between themselves. He is currently a professor of creativity at Swansea University.



**Swans** – Swans are large water-dwelling birds, of which there are around 6 or 7 species in existence. Swans usually mate for life, although 'divorce' can occur (especially after the failure to reproduce) and if one of the mates dies. Although swans can be aggressive, they are often associated with romance due to their beauty and elegance, their enduring relationships with one another, and their status as a respective species. They are referred to as symbols of love.



**Skirrid Hill** – Skirrid – from the Welsh *Ysgyrid*, means divorce or separation, which is crucial to understanding the nature of the relationships in the poem. Throughout this collection, there is the overwhelming atmosphere of disintegration and breakdown. Sheers suggests that relationships do not develop between isolated, connected moments, and suggests that relationships are an intense power struggle.



**Winter** – Physically winter is the coldest month of the year in temperate and polar zones, which is caused by the hemisphere in question pointing away from the sun. It is a season in which many plants and animals die, and there is little vegetation actively growing. The days are often shorter in winter. As a result, in literature winter is often used in texts associated with darkness and despair, offering a gloomy tone.



### Language/Structural Devices

**Pathetic Fallacy/ Personification** – Sheers brings different features of nature to life in different sections of the poem, helping to show the connection between nature and people. A prime example is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza, when the 'waterlogged earth' is personified as 'gulping for breath.' This idea of the earth being congested is mirrored in the lovers' relationship. Pathetic fallacy is used in the opening section of the poem, in which the dull weather is described in depth, and its 'intentions' are implied, in order to set a gloomy mood representative of the melancholy relationship.

**Similes/ Metaphors** – Sheers uses a number of figurative language devices in order to stimulate imagery and enhance meanings. For example, the swans themselves can be seen as representative of lasting love and devotion – they demonstrate how the humans should be acting, for example by 'rolling weights down their bodies' (removing burden). The metaphor of icebergs are also used, to show represent what is hidden, whilst the 'dark waters' can be seen to symbolise both the doom and gloom of their relationship, and also the dangers of what is hidden beneath the surface.

**Quote:** "The clouds had given their all – two days of rain and then a break"

**Quote:** "they halved themselves in the dark water, icebergs of white feather, paused before returning again"

**Sibilance** – Sibilance is used in different sections of the poem, creating vivid sound imagery. For example, in line 16, sibilance is used in 'slow-stepping in the lake's shingle and sand.' This helps to recreate the soft sound of the flow of the water, as it becomes more still. The sound of their footsteps on the 'shingle and sand' is also echoed through the sibilance.

**Alliteration** – Sheers also utilises alliteration throughout the poem, both to mimic sounds, and to represent subject matter in creative ways. For example, in lines 4 and 5 there is the repetition of the awkward 'g' sound, which slows the pace of the poem, mirroring the clogged earth that is being described, and in turn the withheld emotions of the lovers.

**Quote:** "slow-stepping in the lake's shingle and sand, I noticed our hands, that had, somehow,"

**Quote:** "the waterlogged earth gulping for breath at our feet"

**Form** – The poem is written in 6 irregular tercets, containing 3 lines per stanza, with an additional couplet to complete the poem. The lack of rhyme, in addition to the variance in line lengths, is representative of the disharmony and disjointedness of their relationship. Enjambment is used throughout, at times between stanzas, which is reflective of the manner in which the relationship persists through the difficulties.

**Narrative Structure** – The opening details what has come before the poem – signalling that the lovers have been through a difficult time in their relationship. Stanza 2 shows how this is reflected in nature. In stanza 3, (and through 4 and 5) there is a shift in mood as the swans are spotted ('in unison') providing an example to the humans. In stanzas 6 and 7, the lovers temporarily appear to have healed their rift.

**Quote:** "but as we moved on through the afternoon light, slow-stepping in the lake's shingle and sand,"

**Quote:** "until the swans came and stopped us with a show of tipping in unison."

**Themes** – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Unhappiness in Relationships** – At the outset of the poem, the relationship between the speaker and their lover is at a desolate point – mirrored by the bleak weather. The two 'skirt' the lake, 'silent and apart', with skirt suggesting that they are avoiding issues. The appearance of the swans appears to help them put aside their conflict.



**Nature** – Sheers draws deep comparisons between the natural world and the relationships of humans. The weather mirrors the mood of the lovers, the earth mimics the congestion in their hearts, and the swans offer a reminder of the connection that they have. Comparisons are made with nature at every stage of the poem.



### Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	The clouds had given their all –	Sheers sets the tone by describing the weather – the dark, downcast weather reflects the mood. The language is colloquial (clouds have 'given their all') suggesting that this talk is taking place between two people who know each other well. The weather may also be a metaphor for an argument, with the rain representative of tears. Pathetic fallacy is used; nature reflects emotions.
	2	two days of rain and then a break	
	3	in which we walked,	
2	4	the waterlogged earth	This stanza gives the impression that there are congested, 'clogged up' emotions ('waterlogged', 'gulping for breath.') As the earth fights to be cleansed, the lovers too struggle to converse openly. This inability to adequately get words out is reflected in the alliterative 'g' sounds in 'waterlogged' and 'gulping.' 'Skirting' the lake implies that they are skirting their issues.
	5	gulping for breath at our feet	
	6	as we skirted the lake, silent and apart,	
3	7	until the swans came and stopped us	The arrival of the swans signals a shift in mood and tone. The swans 'in unison' seem more together than humans, breaking the tension between the lovers. The repetition of the 's' sound (sibilance) enables the reader to hear them gliding along the water. The swans 'rolling weights' gives the impression that they are removing burden, as the humans should do.
	8	with a show of tipping in unison.	
	9	As if rolling weights down their bodies to their heads	
4	10	they halved themselves in the dark water,	The idea of the swans 'halving themselves' in the 'dark water' shows that there is a lot beneath the surface – the humans are masking their true feelings. The 'dark water' conveys negative emotions whilst the icebergs present the hidden dangers felt towards discussing them (metaphors). Further metaphors are used in the idea of the white feather (surrender/cowardice) and the boats righting (they can fix this).
	11	icebergs of white feather, paused before returning again	
	12	like boats righting in rough weather.	
5	13	'They mate for life' you said as they left,	The use inclusion of her comment to open the stanza shows that either she aspires to be like the swans, or she has doubts that they will achieve the same longevity. The idea of the 'porcelain' is suggestive of the delicacy, value and beauty of the situation – all is still now, emotions have calmed. The afternoon lights gives an idea of mellowness – the tension in their relationship seems to easing.
	14	porcelain over the stilling water. I didn't reply	
	15	but as we moved on through the afternoon light,	
6	16	slow-stepping in the lake's shingle and sand,	The idea of the two 'slow-stepping' shows that the situation is still precarious, as soft sibilance is used to resemble the calm flow of the water and the sound of them treading slowly over the 'sand' and 'shingle.' The two hold hands, with the metaphor of them 'swimming' creating a neat association with the preceding swans.
	17	I noticed our hands, that had, somehow,	
	18	swum the distance between us	
7	19	and folded, one over the other,	The humans are beginning to mirror the natural world, with the hands 'folded, one over the other', being compared to birds, showing they too have made a connection for life – the simile to close the poem offers a sense of precarious calm – the 'flight' (difficulty) is over, for now.
	20	like a pair of wings settling after flight	

### Poems for Comparison

When We Two Parted	Neutral Tones	Influences on the Poet
<i>When We Two Parted</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Unhappiness in Relationships</u>	<i>Neutral Tones</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Nature</u>	"When I start writing a poem I find that they can start in a variety of ways - although there are a few constants. Probably the most common one being poems starting with a specific visual image. ...Another way that poems can sometimes start is with a story, with a narrative I've been told, or even with someone I've met, but again what is always important in that case is there's a sense that this story has a resonance that goes much further than the simple narrative itself." <a href="http://www.poetryarchive.com">www.poetryarchive.com</a>

