

ENGLISH ADVANCED: MODULE B

Critical Study of Texts: Poet: W. B. Yeats (Texts: “When you are Old”, “The Wild Swans at Coole”, “Easter 1916”)

The enduring value of a text lies in its ability to convey memorable ideas. Evaluate the way in which Yeats has used poetic techniques to make his ideas memorable in at two of the poems set for Study. 20 marks.

Poetry is a textual form often appreciated for depicting significant ideas. It is precisely a poet's ability to [LINK TO QUESTION] convey memorable ideas that give poems an impression of universality. As such, Yeats' Poems “When You Are Old”, “The Wild Swans at Coole” and “Easter 1916”, in employing poetic devices to convey unforgettable ideas of romantic desire, mortality and loss during the Irish Rebellion, encouraged responders to acknowledge and [LINK TO QUESTION] understand the nature of their enduring value.

The profundity of love and romantic failure is a memorable idea artfully expressed in “When You Are Old”. Yeats writes of his bitter, unrequited love for Maud Gonne- a British woman who embraced Irish nationalism but refused his advances. He uses a **highly structured, envelope** of “ABBA” **rhyming scheme**, allowing him to remain objective, measured and rational in his censure towards his subject. Using **second person narration**, “You” and “Your”, when referring to Gonne, adds an **accusatory tone** to the words and reinforces this impression of criticism. For Yeats, although his affection was never reciprocated, he cannot help but feel a desire to evoke renewal and remembrance in her **“Murmur, a little sadly, the mountains overhead”**. Furthermore, Yeats employs **religious discourse** when declares **“But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you”** to justify the honest, and virtuous nature of his love for her. He then reinforces **to personify** love as it **“fled/and paste upon the mountains overhead”**. Love is shown to be an active force that **“fled”** his own failure to pursue and fulfil romantic desire. Lastly; there is a sense of ethereal solution when Yeats **employs symbolism**, as love **“hides his face amid a crowd of stars”**. This can be mirrored by **George Bornstein** who said, Yeats poetry **“seizes upon the high romantic theme of mind encountering the world through imagination”** envisioning the belief that Yeats' earlier poetry specifically drew upon the **notions of romanticism**. Stars are **symbolic of eternity**; therefore in essence they were once believed to be an unchanging force, ultimately suggesting the undying and unforgettable quality of love.

Another casting notion, clearly illustrated in “The Wild Swans at Coole”, is that of mortality with the passing of time. Through the **romantic lyric form** supported by a **tri-partite structure**, Yeats conveys feelings of despair as he observes the **“swans at Coole”** and reflects on his own frigidity, ageing and mortality as a human being. The obvious poetic technique Yeats employs is his **symbolic use** of the swans. Yeats sets up a comparison between himself and the swans, of whom are **“unwearied still...their hearts have not grown old”**. The swans in this case, represent the lack of energy, passion, vitality and youth he saw in himself, at the age of fifty-one, when he visits Coole for the **“nineteenth autumn”**. He **metaphorically identifies** the swans as creatures **“upon the brimming water”** with dual citizenship to both water and air, elements he believed were amorphous, and unstable. In **contrast** he saw himself as mere mortal of the **“earth”** subjected to mortality, old age and death in the dry **“woodland paths”** that the swans in their immutability seemed to avoid. Their youth is further exemplified by the **auditory imagery and rhyme** of **“Scatter wheeling in great broken rings/ upon their clamorous wings”** **juxtaposed** to Yeats heart which **“is sore”**.

W. H Auden alludes to the passing of time **“in the wild swans at Coole”** as **“[the swans] symbolise an image of achieved union in contrast to the hero's continuing unsuccessful quest”, complementing Yeats physical dejection of his youth**. The **use of enjambment** furthermore conveys a passing of time and its consequent effect of old age on the poet where Yeats' careful choice of diction also supports the contrast setup while the swans have the option of **“passion or conquest”**. This

prerogatives of youthfulness, he can only reflect on a past where he "Trod[s]...with a lighter tread". Moreover, Yeats utilises **visual imagery** as he describes, "The trees are in their autumn beauty" as a season marking the transition of life towards death and decay, whereby illustrating such a setting evokes a melancholy mood of nostalgia, with the passing of time. This is reinforced by the **odd number motif** "nine and fifty swans" implying that one swan is devoid of a partner. Yeats in this curious numbering of the swans maybe alluding that he is a lone swan who cannot "lover by lover...paddle in the cold". As such, he does not share the perpetual passion the swans seem to display in their pairs and thus finds it difficult to establish unity with the timeless natural world surrounding him. (770)

Finally, the concept of loss rooted upon sacrifice is a memorable idea Yeats believes is worth remembering in his elegiac poem "Easter 1916". Written in April 1916 as a response to the Easter rising of Ireland, Yeats remembers the republicans who were involved and acknowledges them as "martyrs" and "national heroes". Initially Yeats **elucidates** nameless people with "vivid faces". The word vivid depicts a positive connotation, possibly signifying the degree of sacrifice and enthusiasm shared by the nationalists toward their purpose of rebellion, and national freedom. The **use of Caesura**, in "All changed, changed utterly" is evocative as the emotional break in the voice draws attention to the **anaphora** of the word "changed". This **repetition** positions responders to the tragic view of the situation, as well as the beauty of heroism as **paradoxically** seen in "terrible beauty". This provides an empathic finality of thought and furthermore undertaken by the rebels executed and the violent chaos and loss of lives that resulted. Moreover, Yeats also employs a **metaphor** in the "stone", signifying the concentration of heroism, purpose and sacrifice. This "stone" "in the midst of all" is **juxtaposed** against "the living stream" and although the stone is **symbolic** and inanimate, the living stream conveys the constant change in life. The stone is shown to "trouble the living stream" and hinder the flow of water effectively **symbolising** the political struggle in gaining national freedom. Yeats also uses an **extended metaphor**, comparing the execution of the rebels to a "child...sleep at last has come" Yeats confirms loss as a memorable idea upon contemplating death as sleep, an idea deriving from Shakespearean literature in the Elizabethan milieu. Then, like a mother who "names her child" he finally using **cumulative listing** the names of the rebels executed: Connolly, MacBride, Pearse and MacDonagh. As these martyr's have all resigned in their part in the alliterative metaphor of a "causual comedy", their memory will live in the present "whenever green is worn".

Essentially, Yeats employs literary devices to convey transcendent ideas in "When You Are Old", "The Wild Swans at Coole" and "Easter 1916". Through the textual form of poetry; Yeats demonstrates the enduring values of love, loss and mortality- ideas which are not only memorable in their nature, but also universal in their application.