Swans usually mate for life, though "divorce" does sometimes occur, particularly following nesting failure, and if a mate dies, the remaining swan will take up with another.
Owen Sheers (born in 1974) is a Welsh writer and poet. Welsh history and identity is an important theme in his writing. As well as poetry, he also writes fiction, non-fiction and drama.

Sheers is writer-in-residence at the Welsh Rugby Union, having been a rugby player himself. You may have seen one of his regular appearances as a presenter on TV. This poem is from his collection called Skirrid Hill.

What are the benefits of studying a poem by a writer who is still alive?

What are the cons?
Structure

- How many sentences are there in this poem?
- How does the use of clauses and sub-clauses impact on the way we read and understand the poem?
- What is the effect of the structure on the reader?

Challenge
Why does the last stanza differ in structure to the rest of the poem?
Imagery, Symbolism & Metaphor

How has the poet used imagery, symbolism and metaphoric language to portray the theme of love?

Annotate your poem.

- The swans physical appearance.
- The movement of the swans.
- The use of pathetic fallacy and personification.

CHALLENGE
Explore the effect of these devices on the reader. Is there more than one effect they could have?
What is the poem about?

A couple walk around a lake after two days of bad weather. They don’t talk to each other and they walk apart from each other – their relationship is troubled.

They stop at the sight of some swans and watch them as they tip under water – they eventually right themselves and swim away. The swans’ display seems to change the mood between the couple.

The couple carry on walking and end up holding hands – they seem to have reconciled.
Personification of the weather – the heavy rain may reflect the problems in their relationship.

Enjambment emphasises the pause in the weather, and perhaps in their arguing.

The clouds had given their all – two days of rain and then a break in which we walked.
Personification of the earth’s desperation links to how their relationship is struggling for life.

The waterlogged earth

gulping for breath at our feet

as we skirted the lake, silent and apart,

Multiple meanings – keeping to the edge of the lake, but also keeping their distance from each other and perhaps avoiding the issue that troubles them.

Caesura creates a pause which emphasises their silence and separation.
Suggests what the swans are doing is meaningful for the couple.

until the swans came and stopped us

with a show of tipping in unison.

As if rolling weights down their bodies to their heads

Image suggests that the couple are weighed down by the problems in their relationship.
The word “halved” suggests separation, but also that the swans were a whole to begin with – this reflects the couple’s relationship.

Icebergs have more below the surface of the water than they do above it – the metaphor may suggest that the couple keep things hidden from each other and aren’t communicating, or it could imply that their relationship has a strong foundation.

*they halved* themselves in the dark water,

*Icebergs* of white feather, paused before returning again *like boats* righting in rough weather.

Simile shows it’s been a rough time for their relationship, but things are becoming more stable. The rough weather mirrors the rain in stanza 1.
This is the first time we hear one of them speak to the other—this voice seems to confirm that they’ve turned a corner in their relationship.

This verb represents how the disruption in their relationship is settling down.

“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,

Porcelain is beautiful and strong—this metaphor reflects the hope that their love will have these qualities.
Sibilant sounds throughout this stanza create an impression of softness – this reflects the softening of tension between them.

*Suggestions dancing – they’re moving together and in unison like the swans did.*

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slow stepping in the lake’s shingle and sand,
I noticed our hands, that had, somehow, 
swum the distance between us
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Swan imagery to describe them holding hands – this reflects how they’re following the example of the swans.

Their hands have crossed the physical distance between them, but also the metaphorical distance – they have come closer together emotionally.
Full stop emphasises the sense that the trouble in their relationship has been raised.

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

They’re no longer two separate things, but part of one whole.

Swan imagery to describe them holding hands – this reflects how they’re following the example of the swans.
Poetry Dictionary

Skirted – walked around or avoided
Righting – returning to a normal or upright position
Feelings and Attitudes

It’s clear that something has happened between the narrator and his partner – the earth is “gulping for breath” and they walk “silent and apart”.

There’s a feeling of peace towards the end of the poem. The couple have had their problems, but they return to each other and are settled in the end.
Come up with your own ideas to the questions below:

1. Why do you think the poem is set in Winter?

2. Why do you think the poet chose to use swans as the metaphor for this poem?

3. What evidence is there that the couple have overcome their problems by the end of the poem?

**Key Themes**

Distance, fulfilment, nature...

Compare the physical and emotional distance here with the distance between the narrator and her lover in ‘Sonnet 29’. ‘Singh Song!’ explores fulfilling relationships, and nature is key to ‘Letters From Yorkshire’.