

2018 Unseen Poetry

(a) What do you think the poet is saying about time in the above poem?

Support your answer with reference to the poem.

In this poem, I believe Moya Cannon is illustrating the eternal nature of art and memories throughout time.

We are told of the two ivory swans flying across “Siberian tundra/twenty thousand years ago” and how today they fly in much the same way, only now in a ‘display case’. Carved by a hunter-gatherer, their likeness has passed down throughout time. They have been worn, traded and gifted, and now remain on display for all to see.

Though their creator is long dead, his art and, by extension, the memory of him lives on. These swans have been ‘dropped down time’s echoing chute’ to our present day. Though, like the artist, the swans are also long dead, so too does their memory and likeness survive through his art.

In this way, the poet is showing us the power of art to survive through time and how, though time may pass, through art and memories those who once lived can be remembered and kept alive in our collective imagination. The phrase ‘time’s echoing chute’ is particularly pertinent here. In this poem, time is not simply linear, but rather something that moves us all. Art and memories, such as the swans, ‘echo’ upwards for those coming after them in the ‘chute’. Therefore, Cannon’s point about the power of art to preserve memories and imagination across the endless expanse of time is clearly demonstrated.

(b) Identify two images from the poem that make an impact on you and give reasons for your choice.

The first image in this poem which made an impact on me was the opening description of the swans 20,000 years ago. Cannon describes them ‘heralding thaw on an inland sea- their wings, their necks, stretched, vulnerable, magnificent’. This is an incredibly vivid image, painting an almost mythic picture

of the birds in their full, inspiring prime. This image was enough to inspire the hunter-gatherer to carve their likeness, and struck me as an awe-inspiring demonstration of the beauty of nature. However, one word in particular in this image stood out to me, 'vulnerable'. These birds are 'magnificent' and flying free, but at the same time with their wings and necks stretched they are vulnerable. This aspect of the image is in strong contrast with its surroundings and as such impacted me as a reminder of the fragility of life and beautiful moments. It showed me that, no matter how extraordinary, life and the beauty of nature are fragile and often temporary.

Another image which struck me was the final image of the birds 'dropped down time's echoing chute/to emerge, strong-winged/whooping/to fly across our time'. In this description, the birds are not vulnerable but strengthened by their memorialisation in the hunter-gatherer's art. These lines bring with them a sense of thrill and excitement with the birds' 'whooping'. This image particularly impacted me through its metaphor of time as an 'echoing chute' which the birds have been dropped down. This calls to mind the lack of control we as humans have over time and its progression. Furthermore, it caused me to reflect upon what legacy we leave down this 'chute', and what echoes behind us.

As a whole, this poem makes use of effective imagery to both convey vivid description and cause us to reflect upon its deeper meaning.