

Questions for Further Discussion (teacher version)

Before delving deeper into the W.B. Yeats poem, “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” you will need to read and discuss the information included in [Traditional Irish Sources for “The Song of Wandering Aengus.”](#) After reading this contextual background, the following questions can be raised for discussion and/or used as a basis for writing activities.

The answers provided in this teacher version are suggestions and a starting point for discussion. There are a variety of other possible responses to these questions for further discussion. Each question is preceded by the Common Core State Standard it is aligned to.

Instructions: Read and refer to the information included in [Traditional Irish Sources](#) to work through the following questions.

Questions 1–3. Align with CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.9: Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.

1. Comparison of “The Song of Wandering Aengus” and “The Dream of Aengus Óg”

There’s evidence that Yeats drew heavily on his knowledge of Celtic mythology for his poetry. How are the elements in Yeats’s poem, “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” similar to and different from the Celtic myth of “The Dream of Aengus Óg”?

Suggested Answers:

Similarities

- The same name (Aengus) is used for both of the protagonists.
- These are both examples of “a love or faery aisling” which feature a dream vision of a beautiful girl who appears and invades the main character’s thoughts.
- Both contain characters who change their forms.

Differences

- Yeats story has a fish who turns into a girl. Aengus Óg story has a girl who turns into a swan.
- Yeats does not mention that his speaker Aengus is a god, whereas Aengus Óg is clearly a god in the Celtic myth.
- Yeats’s outcome is left undetermined—it is not known if his speaker Aengus will ever realize his dream and consummate his love whereas Aengus Óg clearly wins the girl.

2. Comparison of “The Dream of Aengus Óg” and stories from Greek and Roman Mythology

Yeats claimed that “The Song of Wandering Aengus” was based (at least in part) on a Greek folk song and he noted many similarities between Greek and Irish mythology. Have students think about how the mythological tale, “The Dream of Aengus Óg,” especially the shapeshifting of the couple Aengus and Caer is reminiscent of many stories from Greek or Roman mythology.

“The Song of Wandering Aengus” by W. B. Yeats: A Common Core Exemplar

[Note: There are numerous examples of Greek myths in which gods change into animal forms, such as Danaë into a shower of gold; Europa into a bull; Leda into a swan, etc. Many of these stories are depicted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* such as Daphne’s transformation into a laurel tree. Learn more in EDSITEment curriculum unit: [Ovid’s Metamorphoses: A Common Core Exemplar \(3 lessons\)](#)

Suggested answer:

Aengus’s ultimate transformation into a swan is *somewhat* reminiscent of the Latin story of Vertumnus who was the Roman god of seasons, and vegetation. Vertumnus possessed the ability to shapeshift at will. So after falling in love with Pomona, he assumes several shapes including that of an old woman to gain access to her garden, and her affection. There are also major differences between these two myths. Most notably, Vertumnus woos Pomona by using disguise and deception, whereas Aengus uses his intelligence to win Caer. Aengus turns himself into a swan to become like his beloved swan-maiden and form a union with her. [Bk XIV: 623–697 Vertumnus woos Pomona.](#)

3. Comparison of “The Song of Wandering Aengus” and stories from other traditions

Have students think about the poem “The Song of Wandering Aengus” to listen for any echoes or any remnants of stories and legends from other cultures?

Suggested answer:

In one of the tales in the *Arabian Nights*, “[The Story of the Vizier Who Was Punished](#),” there is a similar vision: four silver fish are given as a gift, but when they are cooked, the walls crumble and a beautiful woman appears dressed in flowered satin, draped in jewels, and holding a wand of myrtle in her hand. Similar to the maiden in Yeats’s poem, this mysterious woman promptly disappears back into the wall.

4. Solar and Lunar Imagery in “The Song of Wandering Aengus”

Question 4. Aligns with CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

In an essay published in 1904, Yeats discusses the allegorical union represented by the marriage of the sun and the moon. He writes of their symbolism in this passage on solar and lunar imagery:

Old writers had an admirable symbolism that attributed certain energies to the influence of the sun, and certain others to the lunar influence. To lunar influence belong all thoughts and emotions that were created by the community, by the common people, by nobody knows who, and to the sun all that came from the high disciplined or individual kingly mind. I myself imagine a marriage of the sun and moon in the arts I take most pleasure in; and now bride and bridegroom but exchange, as it were, full cups of gold and silver, and now they are one in a mystical embrace.

How does this passage on solar and lunar imagery from Yeats’s 1904 essay apply to “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” especially the last two lines of the poem? “The silver apples of the moon, / The golden apples of the sun.”

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Suggested answers:

One interpretation of Yeats’s final lines in the “Song of Wandering Aengus” points to a future resolution for the quester, who will transcend time and space to find his way back to his loved one with the help of supernatural objects which may act as love charms—“silver apples of the moon and golden apples the sun.”

For Yeats there is an idealized sacred marriage operating here. The bride (represented by the lunar symbol of the silver moon, which expresses the emotional side of life) is joined with the bridegroom (represented by the solar symbol of the golden sun, which expresses the “kingly mind” or controlling intellectual side of life.). Yeats thought of this celestial union of sun and moon as a representation of an ideal coupling: the common knowledge and shared experiences of a community of people united with the uniquely meaningful personal experience found in the life of an individual.

5. Comparison of Two Aisling Poems: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney

Question 5. Aligns with CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.5: Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

Compare the imagery used by Yeats in his romantic 19th-century aisling, “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” with a late 20th-century aisling, “A Hazel Stick for Catherine Ann,” written by the celebrated Irish poet Seamus Heaney. *Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966–1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 214. [Note: Catherine Ann in the title of Heaney’s poem is the poet’s own daughter, who was 12 years old when this was written.]

What images do these two aislings have in common? Do they share any other commonalities? In what ways are they different? Which aisling resonates more with 21st-century students? Why?

Suggested answers:

Similarities

- Both contain imagery of the natural world—flora and fauna.
- Both have speakers who are male.
- In each poem a maiden is present.
- Both contain an image of a fish with symbolic connotations.
- Both contain the act of cutting of a wand with symbolic connotations.
- Both contain autobiographical elements. Each involves a reminiscence—containing flashbacks to a significant event (either real or imagined) in the life of the speaker.

Differences

- Yeats’s speaker is Aengus; Heaney’s speaker is a father (himself).
- Yeats’s poem incorporates a classic love aisling or faery aisling dream vision with an unattainable love interest. It is an imaginative vision—featuring a human speaker and a beautiful maiden apparition. Heaney’s poem recounts a memory of a real-life experience with a young girl—featuring two main figures, himself and his twelve year old daughter.
- Yeats’s hazel wand is used to catch a silver fish. His fish becomes a female apparition who disappears; Heaney’s fish disappears, but the stick used to catch it retains its symbolic salmon-silver color.

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- Yeats’s poem involves two figures—Aengus and the dream vision figure; Heaney’s poem primarily is a reflection for his daughter, but the scene he is recalling in the poem includes himself and his daughter as well as a group (possibly of his family members).