The Song of Wandering Aengus (Yeats, 1897)

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Dominant Effect: In “The Song of Wandering Aengus”, Yeats uses nature imagery and its Celtic symbolism to create a wistful tone, drawing parallels between his pursuit of love and an Irish national identity.
- **Celtic (Kel-tik)**

  A branch of the Indo-European family of languages, including especially Irish, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, and Breton, which survive now in Ireland, the Scottish Highlands, Wales, and Brittany.*

- **Celtic (Sel-tik)**

  A Boston Basketball team originating in 1946. Its current president is Rich Gotham.**

* [http://www.dictionary.com/browse/celtic](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/celtic)

** [https://en.notwikipedia.org/notwiki/Boston_Celtics](https://en.notwikipedia.org/notwiki/Boston_Celtics)
Background Info - Yeats and Ireland at the Time

- Still in ‘early life’ - pre-simplification

- Rhymer’s Club - very focused on sophistication, craftsmanship

- Occultism - very interested in mysticism, apparent in this poem

- Nationalism - key in Yeats’s poetry, idea that an Irish identity is his responsibility to create and many references to Irish/Celtic culture
Allusions - Aengus

- Irish God of love, youth, poetic inspiration

- Dreamed about a perfect woman - instantly in love

- Caer (Keer) - goddess of sleep, dream, and prophecy

- Found her in Dragon’s Mouth lake, but found 149 other women too

- Turned into swans on Nov. 1st every year, Aengus could only have her if he found her as a swan

- Successful → he turned into a swan. Sang song that put people to sleep for 3 days
Structure

- 3 octaves (3 stanzas with 8-lines each)
- Rhyme Scheme: _A_A_B_B ( _ are slant rhyme)
- Iambic Tentrameter
- Several shifts:
  - Line 11 - speaker’s personal idea and passion
    → drive to spread the message
  - Line 17 - shift from the past to the present
    - Still the same optimism for his passion
Symbols - Celtic Culture

- Hazel
- Apple Blossoms
- Trout
- Moths
- Gold and Silver Apples
- Sun and Moon
Analysis - Hazel

“I went out to the hazel wood,
...And cut and peeled a hazel wand” (1-3)

-Hazel - symbol of wisdom and inspiration

- Celtic legend of a sacred pool surrounded by nine hazel trees and the hazelnuts gave the consumer infinite knowledge of the universe

- The speaker uses hazel to craft his “fishing pole”

- He is has the knowledge to pursue an Irish identity and he is using it to try and find inspiration and passion
Trout

“\( I \) dropped the berry in a stream  
And caught a little silver trout” (7-8)

- Trout - symbolize forward thinking and strong conviction
  - Deviates from the legend of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, where a salmon gave him infinite wisdom
  - Uses trout instead of a salmon
- Fish were a popular symbol within Celtic culture
  - Draws parallel to the speaker’s desire to actively look for an Irish identity
Moths

“And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out” (5-6)

- Moths - chase light
- Yet the “moth-like stars flickering out” represent the twilight of dawn it explains that nighttime is the best environment for fishing.
- Since moths are nocturnal and are most active in darkness, they signify a loss in direction and purpose.
Analysis - The Girl and Apple Blossoms

“It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air” (13-16)

-Girl came from trout - trout are a symbol of conviction

-Apple blossoms = sensuality, heady love, passion

-Connection of metaphors - chasing inspiration like chasing love

-Biblical Tree of Knowledge - ate an apple from the tree to gain knowledge

-Girl (Caer) represents the prophecy for the future, the ideal form
Analysis - Gold and Silver Apples

“The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun” (23-24)

Silver and moon: refers to emotion and illumination in darkness.

Gold and sun: symbol of power and life

Golden Apples: An ingredient necessary to enter the “Celtic Otherworld”: A realm where powerful spirits and deities inhabit. May also allude to the apple of knowledge in Christianity.

Silver apples can refer to silver apple branches. In Irish mythology, it was needed in order to pass into the “Celtic Otherworld”, which was a location inhabited by Celtic deities.
Analysis - Wandering

“Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;” (17-20)

Wandering in last stanza - empty, ‘hollow’ or meaninglessly crowded with ‘hilly’

- Lack of substance, anything gained in wandering
- Growing old for nothing besides chasing the girl
- Gaining nothing, but still resolute in his purpose, however damaging or useless it might be
- Yeats’s disillusionment with age/worth of old people - not old at this point, but still part of his character
Analysis - Fire

“I went to blow the fire a-flame” (10)

-Fire in his head - passion for an Irish identity

- Want to do something about his passion but right now just in his head

-In Celtic culture, Fire represents life, enlightenment, and inspiration

-Represent Yeats’s desire to breath life into Ireland’s literary identity as he is the enlightened one

-Made girl come to life from the trout, a reflection of this desire
Analysis - Repetition

- Repetition of words “Hazel”, “berry”, “floor”, “called me by my name”, “lands”, and “time”
- Repetition follows pattern in the first two stanzas then changes in the third as the mood of the poem shifts:
  - Lines 1 and 3 of the stanzas repeat then lines 4 and 7 of the stanzas repeat
  - Breaks in third stanza when the repetition occurs within the lines on lines 2 and 5, then repeats the same word on 7 and 8
- Signifies where the speaker wants the reader to focus -- eventually emphasize the passion and desire to connect to the fading memory of Irish tradition and trying to reignite that flame of Celtic spirit
- Also add a song/lyrical type element to the poem
Discussion Question #1

How does Yeates differ from the story of Aengus, and what do these differences do for his story and message?
Discussion Question #2

How does nature imagery impact Yeats’s poem and message he conveys in this poem?
Discussion Question #3

How does the structure, diction, repetition, and other literary devices impact the poem and message that Yeates conveys through it?
Exit Slip

1) What is the correct pronunciation of Caer and Celtic, assuming we’re talking about the culture?

2) What is the most important line in the poem? Why? What devices does it use? How does it impact the overall tone or message of the poem?

3) What is the most important cultural allusion in this poem? How is it important? What effect does it have?