The Song of Wandering Aengus

POEM TEXT

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
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.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

SUMMARY

The speaker remembers going out to a wood full of hazel trees because he felt some burning passion. The speaker cut and peeled a hazel branch, tied a thread to it as a fishing line, and then baited the thread with a hook and berry. As white moths fluttered around him and stars, flickering like moths, faded in the morning sky, the speaker fished in a stream and caught a small silver trout.

Once the speaker had placed the fish on the floor at home, he went to make a fire. Suddenly, the fish moved on the floor and called his name. It had turned into a shining girl wearing apple blossoms in her hair. She called the speaker's name, ran away, and disappeared into the dawn.

Although the speaker has grown old while searching unsuccessfully, wandering through lowlands and highlands, he still believes he will find the girl. He imagines kissing her, holding her hands, and walking through long, sunlight-sprinkled grass with her. He imagines them eternally plucking each night's moon like a silver apple and each day's sun like a golden apple (that is, being together forever and having a delicious time).

THEMES

INFATUATION, BEAUTY, AND OBSESSION

"The Song of Wandering Aengus" is a poem about the magic and dangers of infatuation. Its speaker, Aengus, catches an enchanted fish that turns into a beautiful young woman who calls Aengus's name and then runs away. The smitten Aengus tries, and fails, for years to find her. Despite the fact that Aengus's infatuated search seems, in some ways, to waste his life, he confidently dreams of a passionate reunion even into old age. The poem thus depicts the search for love and beauty with equal parts warning and celebration, showing how it can become both a fruitless obsession and a dream that keeps people going.

Aengus goes out fishing at night to seek relief from some unnamed inner turmoil: "a fire [that] was in my head." But the girl's arrival brings the opposite of relief: the glimpse of beauty and the mere *potential* for love (as opposed to love itself) pushes Aengus to direct all his energies into an obsessive search. The poem thus speaks the intense allure of love and beauty.

On one level, Aengus's search seems to fritter his life away, illustrating how passion can be not only irrational but also destructive. He devotes his life to pursuing this girl/fish, even though she's only "called [him] by [his] name," not given any sign of affection. In fact, since the girl magically appears, then "fade[s]" just as quickly, she may well be an illusion! Even so, he grows "old with wandering" after her, losing his life—and his life's direction—without gaining anything in return.

At the same time, however, his seemingly futile quest keeps feeding his imagination, suggesting a paradox at the heart of passion: it can somehow be both unfulfilling *and* sustaining. Aengus remains confident that he'll find his beloved—that he'll get his hands on love and beauty—even if his confidence stems purely from his obsession. He starts out fishing and ends up vowing to pick the "apples" of the sun and moon, so he never actually gets the food (or love) he seeks. And yet, his quest alone seems to nourish him; his final vision of a romantic reunion suggests that he's carried the energy and passion of his

youth into old age.

It's worth noting that Yeats isn't necessarily talking *only* about romantic love in this poem. Aengus is a god of youth and love in Irish mythology, and Celtic myth associates hazel (the wood of his fishing pole) with inspiration and divination. Thus, the poem's hero seems less an average guy with mundane motives than a mythical figure on a symbolic journey.

Since Aengus's quest draws from the symbolic realm of myth and fable, it allows for many interpretations. It could represent *any* kind of boundless, one-sided passion—such as an artist's passion for art, or, more specifically, the poet's deep longing to find beauty through the written word. In any case, the poem finds both beauty and sadness in the lifelong pursuit of romantic dreams—even those that turn out to be mirages.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;

The poem begins with a combination of straightforward style and mysterious content. It's a dramatic monologue, meaning that the speaker is a fictional character. The title identifies this character as "Aengus" (an ancient Irish god of youth, love, summer, and poetic inspiration).

In these opening lines, Aengus recalls going out into a "hazel wood" (in other words, a forest full of hazel trees) and making a simple fishing pole out of a branch, thread, and a berry. He speaks in a plain, direct manner, as if his actions were perfectly natural—but right away, his motives are perplexing. His only explanation for going out fishing raises more questions than it answers: "Because a fire was in my head."

This "fire" seems to symbolize some overwhelming passion or desire, and it might suggest that Aengus is a person driven by irrational impulses. (The poem's original title, "A Mad Song," may be a clue here.) Fire is often associated with romantic passion in particular, and fishing is associated with searches for romance (as when people say that someone's "a catch" or that "there are plenty of fish in the sea"). Even that "hazel wand" might be a phallic symbol! All these symbolic hints pay off in subsequent lines, as Aengus "catches" the girl of his dreams—only to watch her run away.

These first four lines establish the poem's iambic tetrameter pattern (meaning each line has four iambic feet in a row: da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM). In fact, they follow this meter without any significant variations:

I went | out to | the ha- | zel wood,
Because | a fire | was in | my head,
And cut | and peeled | a ha- | zel wand,
And hooked | a ber- | ry to | a thread;

(It's possible to read "out" in line 1 as a stressed syllable, but this slight variation doesn't affect the rhythm much.) Many of the metrically stressed syllables are further emphasized by alliteration, as in the words "went"/"wood"/"wand" and "hazel"/"head"/"hazel"/"hooked."

The meter will remain extremely regular throughout the poem; the lines fall into an even, sing-song rhythm (remember, this is a "Song"), uninterrupted by caesuras. The steady beat mimics the steady forward motion of Aengus, who, as the reader soon learns, has been "wandering" the earth in search of his lost love. The relentless drive of the meter helps evoke his persistence and obsession.

LINES 5-8

And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

Continuing his tale, Aengus says that he went fishing in a stream when it was near dawn and the stars were fading in the sky as "white moths" fluttered away. The comparison between moths and stars here gives the scene a vivid, magical quality, as if suggesting some mysterious connection between the earth and the heavens. The "flickering" of the stars also recalls the "fire" in Aengus's head from line 2. At this enchanting time of night, Aengus catches a "little silver trout," its scales perhaps reflecting the silver of the moonlight.

By the end of this first stanza, three images have been mentioned twice: "hazel," "berry," and "moth[s]." This repetition of images and phrases is one of the major features of the poem. It adds to the hypnotic quality already established by the steady meter and rhyme scheme, while also hinting at Aengus's preoccupation with *pairing*. He is, after all, a lonely man in search of love.

The sounds of these lines bring their imagery to life:

- Line 5 is driven by strong alliteration—"when"/"white"/"wing"—that helps evoke the fluttery wingbeats of the moths.
- The quick assonance and liquidy /l/ sounds of "little silver" evoke the slippery movements of these fish.
- There's also some subtle sibilance in the lines about catching the trout: "stars"/"stream"/"silver." These eerie, hissing sounds will become more noticeable

when the trout starts "rustl[ing]" in the second stanza.

The phrase "moth-like stars" is the poem's only simile—and will remain its only explicitly figurative language until the closing metaphor about the "apples" of the moon and sun. Rather than figurative comparisons, most of the poem is driven by symbolism. It's presented as a straightforward series of events: a young man catches a fish; the fish turns into an elusive young woman; the man chases the woman all his life. But by the end, the reader senses that these events *represent* something: for example, the pursuit of unrequited love.

LINES 9-12

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:

Aengus's story takes a magical turn: the fish he caught turned into a human being! When he set it on the "floor" (perhaps in a simple dwelling that lacked furniture) and went to "blow the fire a-flame" (start a cooking fire by fanning the embers in his hearth), it suddenly moved and "called [him] by [his] name."

Notice how "something" (line 11) becomes "someone" (line 12) as the fish undergoes its change. Similarly, the fish's voiceless "rustl[ing]" turns into a voice that "call[s]." These subtle touches reflect a startling transformation.

It's significant both that the girl appears when Aengus is about to fan the fire and that she *interrupts* this action. By linking the girl with fire, the poem symbolically associates her with desire or passion. She's even "glimmering" (shining, flickering) like firelight.

But in the same way that the fire never has a chance to warm the room, Aengus's passion never has a chance to flourish. By the end of the stanza, the girl is gone—leaving Aengus literally and figuratively in the cold.

As in the first stanza, the verse maintains a very steady rhythm, heightened by the sounds of the words themselves. Note the alliteration and melodious consonance throughout, especially of liquid /l/ sounds, muffled /f/ sounds, and humming /m/ sounds:

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:

Sibilant /s/ sounds ("something"/"rustled"/"someone"), meanwhile, including in the onomatopoeia word "rustled," evoke the soft thrashing motion of the fish on the floor.

LINES 13-16

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.

Lines 13-16 contain the dramatic climax of the poem. The fish Aengus has caught turns into a "glimmering girl," who "call[s]" out his "name" and then runs off into the dawn. As she runs, she "fade[s]," possibly disappearing from his life forever.

In one of the poem's many repetitions, the phrase "called me by my name" appears in both line 12 and line 15. It's unclear whether the girl calls Aengus's name twice, or whether he's describing the same event twice over. Either way, he interprets the call as a signal to follow her; he spends the rest of his life chasing her in vain.

The alliterative phrase "glimmering girl" (line 13) draws heightened attention to the girl's dramatic appearance. Meanwhile, assonance and internal rhyme ripple from lines 11-12 into lines 13-14: "something"/"rustled"/"someone"/"become"/"blossom." These muted, echoing /uh/ sounds seem almost like a sonic equivalent of the girl's eerie "glimmering." The way she then "fade[s]" into the "brightening" dawn recalls the "flickering out" of stars in line 6.

All in all, the sounds and images of the passage suggest that this girl is magical, elusive, dreamlike—perhaps not quite fully present between her appearance and disappearance. In fact, she may be an illusion or hallucination.

The detail of the "apple blossom in her hair" serves a few potential purposes. First, it sets up the apple imagery in lines 23-24, thereby connecting this mysterious girl with the "moon" and "sun" (or nature in general). Second, it marks a possible allusion to the most famous apple in literature—the one that tempted Adam and Eve—thereby associating the girl with temptation and desire. Finally, in ancient Celtic custom, brides wore apple blossom in their hair, so these flowers may further indicate that the girl seems to offer the promise of love.

LINES 17-20

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;

The beginning of the third stanza marks a time jump, as Aengus's narration switches from past to present tense.

Whereas the events of previous stanzas happened when he was young and fiery, now he has grown "old with wandering" in search of the elusive girl. His unsuccessful quest has taken him all over the countryside, or all over the earth—"Through hollow lands and hilly lands"—yet he seems strangely optimistic. Even after all these years of failure, he still believes he will "find" the

girl and "kiss" her.

This strange twist forces the reader to wonder: is Aengus admirably persistent, or just deluded? Could he be both? Yeats originally called the poem "A Mad Song," so this man with the "fire in [his] head" may not be entirely in his right mind. By this time, the "girl" he remembers would be an old woman—assuming she's mortal, and assuming she's not just a figment of his imagination—so even if he found her, she might not match the image he has in his head. All in all, he seems to be chasing a hopeless fantasy.

But while Aengus may be a figure of massive delusion, he's also a figure of modest devotion. He keeps going in spite of all obstacles ("hollow lands and hilly lands") and dreams of the simplest romantic gestures: "kiss[ing] her lips and tak[ing] her hands." It's unclear whether Yeats wants the reader to pity Aengus, sympathize with him, admire his persistence, recoil from his obsession—or some combination of all these things.

As in previous lines, alliteration ("hollow"/"hilly") and parallel phrasing ("hollow lands and hilly lands; "kiss her lips and take her hands") add to the hypnotic quality of the poem. Aengus's narration remains straightforward and logical, his tale of "wandering" easy to follow, even as his state of mind sounds weirder and weirder.

LINES 21-24

And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

Lines 21-24 conclude the poem on a note of soaring fantasy. Not only does Aengus imagine that he'll find and kiss the girl he's been chasing all these years; he dreams that they'll walk through beautiful, sun-"dappled" fields together, "pluck[ing...] apples" out of the sky. He claims they'll keep doing this forever—"till time and times are done." In other words, he imagines the two of them spending eternity together in a sort of heaven.

These closing lines are full of musical effects, from the internal slant rhymes "among"/"long" and "walk"/"pluck" to the pleasant, tripping alliteration of "till time and times." The last words of the last three lines—"done," "moon," and "sun"—all make full or slant rhymes with each other, while echoing "gone" in line 19 as well. Once again, doubled words and phrases ("time"/"times"; "The ___ apples of the ___") subtly suggest the perfect *pairing* Aengus is hoping for.

There are many ways to read the fantasy of plucking the "silver" and "golden apples" of the moon and sun. Most obviously, it's a twist on the conventional idea of "seizing the day." Aengus imagines making the most of both the days *and* the nights, as if they're rare, delicious fruits he and his lover will feast on. Silver and gold connote preciousness and beauty—qualities that Aengus associates both with the "girl" and the imagined reunion.

The "silver apples of the moon" recall both the "silver trout" (line 8) and the "apple blossom" in the girl's hair (line 14), so Aengus seems to have spun this fantasy out of elements associated with the magical girl herself. In fact, both the "trout" and the celestial "apples" are food imagery, and enjoying food is often a metaphor for romantic or sexual enjoyment.

The poet may be suggesting, then, that just as Aengus never *enjoys* the silver fish he catches or *embraces* the girl it turns into, he'll never actually enjoy these lunar/solar apples, either. He'll be left *hungry* for love and fulfillment—or else, he'll be *sustained* only by the dream of these things.

Finally, the apples can be interpreted as allusions to other literature. In the biblical story of Eden, apples are associated with temptation, sex, paradise, and the expulsion from paradise. Accordingly, Aengus may be imagining a kind of sensual paradise. (Whether he'll ever get there is another question.)

Golden apples also feature in several Greek myths, where they tend to create distraction, discord, or danger. If Yeats is alluding to any of these, he may be suggesting that Aengus has foolishly wandered astray. At the same time, this final vision has an undeniable beauty and romance to it, so maybe Yeats wants to portray Aengus as a noble dreamer. In the end, the poem leaves a great deal to the reader's interpretation and imagination.

SYMBOLS

HAZEL

Hazel is an important, though slightly obscure, symbol in "The Song of Wandering Aengus." In the Celtic tradition (which Yeats knew well and drew on for this poem), hazel trees were sacred and associated with wisdom, divination of omens, and poetic inspiration.

By going out to the "hazel wood" and fishing with a "hazel wand," then, Aengus may be seeking something more than a fish supper. Symbolically, he may be preparing to receive some sort of inspiration or omen about the future. Whether he knows it or not, he's also craving love. The "sign" or "inspiration" he receives comes in the form of a magical, elusive girl, whose appearance (and disappearance) does in fact dictate the rest of his life.

What about wisdom? Arguably, the girl's disappearance teaches him a hard lesson, but by the end of the poem, it's not clear that he's really learned it! He's still pursuing her as avidly as before.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I went out to the hazel wood,"
- **Line 3:** "And cut and peeled a hazel wand,"

FIRE

Fire in the poem is symbolically linked with passion, impulse, and desire. Aengus's explanation for going out into the woods at night is that "a fire was in my head." This doesn't convey much on the literal level, so the reader's forced to read it symbolically: he felt some impulsive passion, perhaps related to romantic desire.

When he's back at home, the fish he catches turns into an enchanting girl just as he's about to "blow the fire a-flame." In this way, the poem further associates fire with passion and romance. The fact that her appearance *interrupts* his fire-making also evokes the theme of *thwarted* passion. Aengus may feel a fire "in [his] head," but he isn't warmed by an actual blaze, and he seems to leave his hearth forever in a fruitless search for love. Thus, fire imagery helps the poem illustrate the difference between desire in the imagination and desire consummated in reality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Because a fire was in my head,"
- **Line 10:** "I went to blow the fire a-flame,"

SILVER TROUT

There's symbolism in the fact that Aengus's beloved starts the poem as a fish. His fishing trip itself symbolizes a search for love (as it does in a popular expression like "plenty of fish in the sea"). Fish are also known for being slippery and elusive—and the girl this fish turns into proves especially elusive!

The trout's "silver" color gives it a precious, beautiful, enchanted quality, reflected in the magical "glimmering" of the girl it becomes. Silver also links the trout with the "silver apples of the moon" at the end of the poem. The color silver, then, links this fish/girl with the night, and perhaps even with dreams (the kind that "fade" in the "brightening air" of dawn).

Finally, both the "silver trout" and "silver apples" are images of *food*—which Aengus pursues but never obtains (leaving him literally hungry and figuratively love-hungry).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "And caught a little silver trout."
- **Lines 11-13:** "But something rustled on the floor, / And someone called me by my name: / It had become a glimmering girl"

APPLES

Apples carry a great deal of mythic and religious symbolism that's relevant to this poem. Broadly speaking, they represent nourishment and romantic fulfillment.

In line 14, the fish-turned-girl wears "apple blossom in her hair." Apple blossom is the flower of the apple tree, and in the Celtic tradition that Yeats often drew from, it's the flower that brides wear in their hair. This detail suggests, then, that the magical girl holds the promise of love. (Even if the promise proves false.)

Apples return at the end of the poem in an image of the moon and sun:

> And pluck till time and times are done,
> The silver apples of the moon,
> The golden apples of the sun.

On the simplest level, this image symbolizes "seizing the days" (and nights). Aengus is imagining his reunion with the girl as a kind of delicious eternal feast.

"Silver" also echoes "silver trout" in line 8. Both the silver trout and the silver apples are products of the night (the fish's scales may be silver because they reflect the moonlight); both have an enchanting, dreamlike quality; and both (like love itself) seem to elude Aengus no matter how much he craves and pursues them.

Meanwhile, "golden apples" feature in many ancient legends:

- In one Greek myth, a golden apple distracts the hunter Atalanta during a footrace;
- In another, it's a prize "for the fairest" (most beautiful) goddess, which causes discord among three competitors;
- In another, Hercules steals the Golden Apples of the Hesperides (goddess of the sunset) as one of the seemingly impossible challenges he's tasked with.
- Golden apples also feature in Irish myth. In one story, for example, they grow on a magical silver branch that plays soothing music and makes people forget their troubles.

Aengus's dream of plucking "golden apples"—which is really a dream of romantic fulfillment—thus suggests all sorts of symbolic possibilities. It distracts him from other pursuits; relates to beauty; represents a challenge or quest; makes him forget everything *but* the quest, and so on.

Finally, apples are associated with the biblical story of Eden: that is, with paradise and the expulsion from paradise. By eating the forbidden apple from the Tree of Knowledge (an act symbolically linked with sex, a.k.a. carnal knowledge), Adam and Eve defied God's will and got banned from the Garden of Eden. Poor Aengus imagines spending eternity with his beloved in a kind of romantic paradise, but it's not clear that he'll ever get

there.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "With apple blossom in her hair"
- **Lines 23-24:** "The silver apples of the moon, / The golden apples of the sun."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem packs a striking amount of repetition—especially parallel phrasing and repeated images—into just 24 lines. This effect adds to the hypnotic quality of the verse and the spellbinding quality of the tale it tells.

In the first stanza alone, three major images are mentioned twice:

> I went out to the **hazel** wood,
> [...]
> And cut and peeled a **hazel** wand,
> And hooked a **berry** to a thread;
> And when white **moths** were on the wing,
> And **moth**-like stars were flickering out,
> I dropped the **berry** in a stream

Combined with the steady rhythm of the verse and the anaphora of "And" at the beginning of lines 3-6, the repetition of "hazel," "berry," and "moth[s]" makes this "Song" sound almost like an incantation or spell. Even the apparently singular word "fire" in the second line will soon return in the second line of the next stanza.

The second stanza contains several similar repetitions: "floor" in lines 9 and 11 (also an identical rhyme), "called me by my name" in lines 12 and 15, and "something"/"someone" in lines 11 and 12. (Here, the shift from some*thing* to some*one* indicates the fish's transformation into a human.)

Along with more anaphora of the word "And" in lines 20-22, the third stanza contains two mentions of "lands," the parallel phrases "kiss her lips" and "take her hands," the near-identical "time" and "times," and the parallel phrasing "The ___ apples of the ___" in the final lines. ("Apples" also echoes the "apple blossom" in line 14, while "silver" in line 23 echoes "silver" in line 8.)

The speaker seems almost compulsively drawn to *pairings* of words and phrases—fittingly enough, since he hopes to find and pair off with the girl of his dreams. Ironically, though, in this poem full of pairs, Aengus remains alone!

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hazel"
- **Line 2:** "fire"
- **Line 3:** "And," "hazel"
- **Line 4:** "And," "berry"
- **Line 5:** "And," "moths"
- **Line 6:** "And," "moth"
- **Line 7:** "berry"
- **Line 8:** "silver"
- **Line 9:** "floor"
- **Line 10:** "fire"
- **Line 11:** "something," "floor"
- **Line 12:** "someone," "called me by my name"
- **Line 14:** "apple"
- **Line 15:** "called me by my name"
- **Line 18:** "lands," "lands"
- **Line 20:** "And," "kiss her lips," "take her hands"
- **Line 21:** "And"
- **Line 22:** "And," "time," "times"
- **Line 23:** "The," "silver," "apples of the"
- **Line 24:** "The," "apples of the"

PARALLELISM

In addition to its general repetition, the poem also uses lots of parallelism.

Most obviously, there's plenty of anaphora throughout (which is a specific kind of parallelism): note the anaphora of "And" in lines 3-4 and then again in lines 20-21, and the anaphora of "The" in lines 23-24.

But the poem's parallelism goes beyond the first words of these lines:

- Lines 3 and 4 follow the same structure of "And [verb]," while lines 5-6 both go: "And ___ were ___."
- Lines 11 and 12 follow a near-identical structure as well: "But something [verb], / And someone [verb]."
- Line 18 contains the parallel phrases "hollow lands" and "hilly lands" (which are also antithetical: hollowness and hilliness are basically opposites, thus emphasizing just how much ground the speaker covered in his travels).
- Line 20 uses the structure "And ___ her ___" twice over.
- Lines 21 and 22 both follow the structure "And [verb]."
- And, finally, lines 23 and 24 both follow the structure "The ___ apples of the ___."

This heavy parallelism adds to the hypnotic sound of the verse, which maintains a very steady meter, regular rhyme scheme, and so on. There's a sense of endless motion, thanks to all that repetition.

This parallelism also contributes to the impression that Aengus

is laying out an orderly, logical story—"I did this, then this, then this; now I'm going to do this, then this, then this"—even though the tale he's telling is fantastical, and his plans for the future sound impossible. In other words, parallelism helps create an ironic tension between the hyper-logical structure of Aengus's statements and their bizarre, possibly deluded content. (On that note, the poem's original title was "A Mad Song"!)

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "And cut and peeled a hazel wand, / And hooked a berry to a thread;"
- **Lines 5-6:** "And when white moths were on the wing, / And moth-like stars were flickering out,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "But something rustled on the floor, / And someone called me by my name:"
- **Line 18:** "hollow lands," "hilly lands"
- **Line 20:** "And kiss her lips and take her hands"
- **Lines 21-24:** "And walk among long dappled grass, / And pluck till time and times are done, / The silver apples of the moon, / The golden apples of the sun."

ANAPHORA

The poem makes extensive use of a specific kind of parallelism called anaphora. For example, the first stanza contains four successive lines beginning with "And," while the final stanza contains three. In the first stanza, this effect creates the sense that Aengus is telling his tale in a direct, logical, sequential fashion: *I did this, and this, and this*. In the final stanza, it's Aengus's fantasies that he's explaining in order: *I will do this, and this, and this*. This "and" repetition is also an example of polysyndeton, and creates the sense of list piling up.

In many ways, this orderly, straightforward style ironically contrasts with the content of his tale. The events he's recounting are magical and mysterious, and even his own motivations are somewhat puzzling. (Why did he go fishing that night? The only explanation we get is that "a fire was in my head.")

Meanwhile, there's the strong implication that his fantasies are nothing more than a pipe dream. He's now an old man, and the girl he's been chasing all these years may have been an illusion to begin with. He'll probably never get his perfect reunion with her, much less live in bliss with her "till time and times are done." Anaphora heightens these ironies by laying out the fantastical and impossible in such a seemingly logical manner.

One last anaphora (with a variation) appears in the final two lines, which both begin with "The [...] apples." Once again, the combination of anaphora and steady meter makes the fantastical seem logical. Aengus and his beloved will pick *these* apples at night, and *these* apples during the day. It sounds like a tidy, well-organized plan—except that "pluck[ing]" the moon and sun out of the sky is impossible!

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 20:** "And"
- **Line 21:** "And"
- **Line 22:** "And"
- **Line 23:** "The"
- **Line 24:** "The"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration and consonance enhance the lush musicality of this "Song" while also helping bring the speaker's imagery to life.

The first stanza introduces alliteration immediately, with "went"/"wood"/"wand" in lines 1-3, "hazel"/"head"/"hazel"/"hooked" in lines 1-4, "when"/"white"/"wing" in line 5, and "stars"/"stream"/"silver" in lines 6-8. Notice that all these alliterative syllables are also stressed syllables:

And when | white moths | were on | the wing,

One thing alliteration does for the poem, then, is intensify its rhythm. In general, this is a highly rhythmic "Song" whose steady beat seems to echo Aengus's relentless "wandering."

The effect continues with /w/ alliteration in lines 9-10 ("When"/"went") and /f/ and /fl/ alliteration in lines 9-11 ("floor"/"fire"/"a-flame"/"floor"). Again, all these sounds make the poem feel musical and hypnotic, drawing readers into Aengus's strange story. The strong sibilance in 11-12 ("something"/"someone"/"rustled") adds to the mysterious atmosphere, mimicking the whispery "rustl[ing]" of the fish on the floor.

Later, in line 13, alliteration calls attention to the "glimmering girl" who has suddenly appeared, those hard /g/ sounds almost like a glimmer in the line itself. The pleasantly tripping /t/ sounds of line 22, meanwhile, ("till"/"time"/"times") suit a line in which Aengus imagines a joyful reunion with the girl.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "went," "hazel," "wood"
- **Line 2:** "head"
- **Line 3:** "hazel," "wand"
- **Line 4:** "hooked"
- **Line 5:** "when," "white," "moths," "were," "wing"
- **Line 6:** "moth," "stars"
- **Line 7:** "stream"
- **Line 8:** "silver"

- **Line 9:** “floor”
- **Line 10:** “fire,” “flame”
- **Line 11:** “something,” “floor”
- **Line 12:** “someone,” “me,” “my”
- **Line 13:** “glimmering girl”
- **Line 14:** “her hair”
- **Line 15:** “me,” “my”
- **Line 17:** “with wandering”
- **Line 18:** “hollow,” “hilly”
- **Line 22:** “till time,” “times”

ASSONANCE

Assonance works a lot like alliteration, adding to the poem's musicality at a number of key moments. In line 8, for example, short /ih/ sounds (and lilting /l/ consonance) evoke the quickness and slipperiness of the "little silver trout" that the speaker catches. The same sound pops up again in "kiss her lips" in line 20, once more adding a bouncy, slippery rhythm to the poem.

Later, short /uh/ sounds repeat throughout lines 11-14 in a striking series of echoes and internal rhymes: "something"/"rustled"/"someone"/"become"/"blossom." This insistent assonance draws attention to the dramatic moment when this magical girl suddenly appears. The echoing sounds almost seem to align with the girl's eerie "glimmering."

In a final striking example, lines 21-22 bring another rippling of /uh/ words: "among," "pluck," and "done" (which then rhymes with the poem's final word, "sun"). Once again, these echoing vowels are surrounded by intense alliteration, consonance, and general repetition. All of these effects heighten the musicality of the "Song" and help create a rich, memorable ending.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “berry,” “thread”
- **Line 8:** “little silver”
- **Line 11:** “something rustled”
- **Line 12:** “someone,” “by my”
- **Line 13:** “become”
- **Line 14:** “blossom”
- **Line 15:** “by my”
- **Line 16:** “brightening”
- **Line 17:** “wandering”
- **Line 18:** “hollow”
- **Line 19:** “I,” “find”
- **Line 20:** “kiss,” “lips”
- **Line 22:** “pluck,” “done”
- **Line 24:** “sun”

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem uses juxtaposition (and the related, more specific device known as antithesis) at a few key moments.

First, lines 11 and 12 subtly contrast the "something" that "rustled on the floor" (that is, the fish) with the "someone" that "called [Aengus] by [his] name" (that is, the girl). The contrast illustrates the fish's magical transformation, as "someone" is typically used only to refer to human beings.

More obviously, line 18 contrasts the "hollow lands and hilly lands"—the valleys and uplands—that Aengus has been wandering. This antithesis—a quick comparison of opposites set in parallel phrases—is a shorthand way of indicating that Aengus has roamed all over the place, through every type of terrain, on his seemingly endless search.

Finally, lines 23-24 close the poem by describing

> The silver apples of the moon,
> The golden apples of the sun.

This is a fanciful way of describing nighttime and daytime. Aengus claims that he and his beloved will "pluck" the moon and sun, suggesting that the two of them will seize, or make the most of, both the night and the day. Although night and day are opposites, silver and gold are both precious metals, so this juxtaposition aligns the two things closely rather than setting them in contrast. The two kinds of "apples" seem to stem from one beautiful source; Aengus's romantic vision collapses day and night together into a single, blissful eternity.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** “But something rustled on the floor, / And someone called me by my name:”
- **Line 18:** “hollow lands and hilly lands”
- **Lines 23-24:** “The silver apples of the moon, / The golden apples of the sun.”

ALLUSION

Like a number of other works by Yeats, "The Song of Wandering Aengus" alludes to Irish and Celtic mythology.

Traditionally, Aengus is an Irish god of love, youth, and poetic inspiration. In this poem, he starts out as a figure of youthful love, but his love for the mysterious, magical girl causes him to grow "old with wandering" in search of her.

The tale that Yeats narrates doesn't appear in previous myths (at least not in this exact form), but it draws on pre-existing sources. Yeats himself once explained:

> The poem was suggested to me by a Greek folk song; but the folk belief of Greece is very like that of Ireland, and I certainly thought, when I wrote it, of Ireland and the spirits that are in Ireland.

Some critics have also suggested that the folk song Yeats had in mind was "The Fruit of the Apple Tree," which contains some similar details.

There's another possible allusion here as well. The final reference to "golden apples" echoes a number of stories from Greek and Irish myth, including one in which Hercules must fetch golden apples as one of his seemingly impossible labors. (Aengus, too, is on a seemingly impossible quest.)

It also calls to mind the biblical story of Adam and Eve, who get permanently kicked out of Paradise for eating a forbidden fruit. (Aengus himself seems to be seeking a kind of unattainable paradise.)

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 24:** "The golden apples of the sun."

IMAGERY

"The Song of Wandering Aengus" tells a vivid story full of striking visual imagery.

Throughout the poem, sharp visual details conjure up an enchanting—and enchanted—rustic landscape: the "hazel wood"; the simple fishing pole made of "hazel wand," "thread," and "berry"; the "white moths" flying around Aengus; the "stream" in which he catches a "little silver trout"; the "floor" on which he lays the fish (perhaps in a simple dwelling without furniture); the "hollow lands and hilly lands" through which he wanders; and the "long dappled grass" through which he imagines walking with his lost love.

The poem even helps the reader see the sun, moon, and stars afresh: it envisions the cycling sun and moon as "golden apples" and "silver apples," and the fading stars as "moth-like," "flickering" presences. All of these images help lend the poem its vibrant, mythical, magical atmosphere.

The poem offers some auditory (sound-based) and tactile (touch-based) imagery, too. The onomatopoeia "rustled" (line 11) helps the reader hear the movement of the fish on the floor as it transforms into a young woman. The young woman also "call[s]" Aengus "by [his] name" once or twice (lines 12, 15) before disappearing. Through these images, the voiceless thrashing of the fish transforms into the sudden voice of a human being.

Later, the phrase "kiss her lips and take her hands" (line 20) offers a hint of the touch Aengus craves—since he and the girl never even embraced before she ran away! Notably, this is the *only* mention of touch in a poem otherwise dominated by sights and sounds—and by the dream of love rather than love itself.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16
- Line 18
- Lines 20-24

VOCABULARY

Hazel (Line 1, Line 3) - A small tree or shrub in the birch family, or the wood from same. Can also refer to a light brown color characteristic of this wood.

On the wing (Line 5) - Flying around.

A-flame (Line 10) - A-flameUsually means "on fire," but here means "into full blaze" or "from a spark into a blaze."

Rustled (Line 11) - Made soft, fluttery sounds.

Glimmering (Line 13) - Shimmering or faintly gleaming.

Apple blossom (Line 14) - The pinkish-white flower of the apple tree.

Dappled (Line 21) - Speckled or spotted; here suggesting "spotted with sunlight."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Song of Wandering Aengus" is a ballad in three octaves (a.k.a. eight-line stanzas). Each of these octaves can be subdivided into two quatrains (four-line stanzas) rhymed ABCB.

Through the ballad form, the poem delivers on the "Song" promised in its title. Historically, poetic ballads were composed to be sung with musical accompaniment. While Yeats's poem was written primarily for the page, it has, in fact, been set to music and adapted as a folk song. Its verse is exceptionally smooth and regular, containing very few metrical variations, no imperfect rhymes, and no caesuras. This regularity makes the poem easy to memorize, recite, and sing. It also evokes the steadiness, or obsessiveness, of Aengus's search; it's as if the verse is driving him—and the reader—relentlessly along.

METER

The poem is written in very smooth iambic tetrameter. In this meter, each line contains four iambs (metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable), resulting in eight syllables total. As an example, here's the meter in lines 1-2:

I went | out to | the ha- | zel wood,
Because | a fire | was in | my head,

(For metrical purposes, "fire" conventionally counts as one syllable, not two.)

Almost all metrical poems contain some variations in the meter, but this poem contains remarkably few. The first noticeable variation doesn't come until line 5, which features two stressed syllables ("white moths") in the second foot:

And when | white moths | were on | the wing,

But this variation doesn't disrupt the poem's flow all that much, and in general, the rhythm remains extremely steady throughout.

This steadiness is a fitting choice for the poem's subject: an obsessive wanderer who keeps searching for his beloved no matter what. The meter almost gains a march-like quality, propelling Aengus (and the reader) forward at a constant pace.

It might also suggest a particular reading of line 19, where natural speech rhythm might ordinarily stress "I," "find," and "out" ("I will find out"), but where the meter invites a strong emphasis on "will" ("I will find out"). That emphasis would certainly match Aengus's willful determination!

RHYME SCHEME

The poem consists of three octaves (eight-line stanzas), each of which can be divided into two quatrains in which the second and fourth lines rhyme. The basic rhyme scheme for each stanza, then, is:

ABCBDEFE

The only slight variation in this scheme comes in the opening lines of the second stanza, where there's an identical rhyme ("floor"/"floor") between the first and third lines along with the expected full rhyme between the second and fourth.

All the rhymes in the poem are full rhymes (including the one identical rhyme). That is, there are no slant or imperfect rhymes. The regularity of the rhyming matches the smoothness of the verse in general, which contains few metrical variations and no caesuras. The resulting steady sound reflects the steadiness of Aengus's lifelong quest. At times it's almost *too* steady—as if the spellbound Aengus is trapped within the poem's form just as he's driven to wander the earth.

SPEAKER

The poem is a dramatic monologue in the voice of Aengus, an ancient Irish god of love, youth, and poetic inspiration. Yeats was an Irish poet who often creatively adapted Irish and Celtic mythology in his work. Here, he drew loosely on existing stories to turn Aengus into a figure of vivid imagination and obsessive passion—themes that often recurred in his other work as well.

On the surface, the poem doesn't provide much detail about Aengus. He goes to the woods at night to fish, inspired by a burning passion ("a fire [...] in my head") that he doesn't explain. He catches a fish that magically turns into a beautiful girl, then spends the rest of his life searching for that girl. Given how suddenly the girl appears and disappears, she may well be an illusion or hallucination. Even so, Aengus is the kind of dreamer who's determined to chase love and beauty—or the illusion of those things—long past the point of reason. (The poem's original title was "A Mad Song," a hint that Aengus isn't entirely rational.)

By the end, Aengus's quest doesn't really make any sense; he's an old man now, so even if he found the "girl" (or the woman who was once a girl), how could he enjoy the days and nights with her forever? He seems to have committed himself to pure fantasy. Thus, his "Song" is often read as a tale of unrequited love, or romantic obsession, or as an allegory for other kinds of one-sided passion (such as a poet's passion for language).

Again, these themes were close to Yeats's heart. In real life, he experienced an infamous, decades-long, unrequited love for his friend Maud Gonne, who rejected his marriage proposals more than once. Some of his poems also speak of poetry as a kind of long, frustrating quest. In other words, Aengus may not literally be Yeats, but in many ways, he reflects Yeats's personality.

SETTING

The poem has a rustic, timeless setting. It seems to take place more in a mythical landscape than a real one (especially because its hero, Aengus, is a god in Irish myth).

The specific features Aengus mentions include a "hazel wood" (forest full of hazel trees), a "stream" with "trout" in it, and some sort of shelter or dwelling, probably a very simple one. Aengus may not even have furniture—he places the fish he's caught on the "floor" rather than a counter or table—but he does seem to have a hearth in which to build a "fire." The mentions of "a berry" and "apple blossom" add to the rustic atmosphere.

By the third stanza, Aengus seems to have left his hearth for good, trading home for "wandering." He roams through the countryside, over valleys and peaks ("hollow lands and hilly lands"), in search of his lost love. The landscape he describes at the very end may be one of sheer fantasy: he imagines walking through "long dappled grass" with the girl of his dreams, somehow plucking the "apples" of the "moon" and "sun." The mythic, blissful quality of this setting might suggest that it's Aengus's vision of paradise.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Yeats published this poem as a fairly young man: he was 32 when it first appeared in the journal *The Sketch* (1897) and 34 when it appeared in his collection *The Wind Among the Reeds*

(1899). But it contains subjects and elements that defined his whole career, including Irish tradition, thwarted or doomed passion, and mystical inspiration.

The "Song" is not only a ballad but also a dramatic monologue: that is, its speaker is a fictional persona rather than Yeats himself. Specifically, the speaker is Aengus, a god of youth, love, and poetic inspiration in Irish mythology. (The name is sometimes spelled "Óengus.")

Yeats claimed to have based the poem on both "a Greek folk song" and Irish folklore, and scholars have noted its parallels both with the Greek folk song "The Fruit of the Apple Tree" and the mythological tale "The Dream of Óengus" (which involves a beautiful girl who visits Óengus/Aengus in a dream, then vanishes). In general, many folk songs in the ballad tradition involve tragic love, ill-fated quests, and the like.

Aengus's story contains parallels with Yeats's own epic *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889), which similarly features a legendary, "wandering" Irish hero associated with poetry and a dramatic transition from youth to age. As an old man fated, or cursed, to wander the earth, Yeats's Aengus also has some similarities with the Ancient Mariner in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798). Unlike the Mariner, however, Aengus seems to remain cheerful and optimistic; if he's cursed, he doesn't know it!

The poem's central theme—persistent, unrequited love—was a central theme of Yeats's poetry as a whole. His decades-long passion for his friend Maud Gonne is one of the most notorious cases of unrequited love in literary history. Yeats unsuccessfully proposed marriage to Gonne four times—and, in old age, proposed unsuccessfully to her daughter. He also wrote many famous poems that channeled his obsession and frustration, including "When You Are Old," "No Second Troy," and "Adam's Curse." On one level, then, "The Song of Wandering Aengus" dramatizes this same frustration. By the time he wrote it, Gonne had already turned down his first proposal (and yet, like Aengus, he hadn't given up).

The poem can also be read as a symbolic tale about other kinds of one-sided passion or lifelong striving. Since Aengus was a god of poetic inspiration, some critics have interpreted the "Song" as reflecting Yeats's feelings about poetry, which he portrays elsewhere (e.g., in "Adam's Curse") as an exhausting struggle.

Finally, the poem's mystical/magical elements reflect Yeats's longtime interest in mysticism, visions, and the occult. He even wrote an entire book on the subject: *A Vision* (1925).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

W. B. Yeats is generally considered the most influential Irish poet in modern history. He was the central figure of the Irish Literary Revival, a.k.a. the Celtic Twilight, a movement that brought renewed attention to Ireland's literature, culture, and Gaelic heritage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

During this period, Yeats based many notable works on Irish and Celtic myth and legend, including his epic poem *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889), his play *The Countess Kathleen* (1892), and lyric poems such as "The Song of Wandering Aengus." Other key figures of the Revival included the playwright and theater manager Lady Gregory and the playwright and poet John Millington Synge.

The Revival developed during a tumultuous period in Ireland. It was associated with the Irish nationalist movement that sought Ireland's independence from the United Kingdom. Through a combination of literature and activism, the writers of this movement hoped to raise Irish national consciousness—that is, encourage Ireland to see itself as a cohesive, potentially self-governing people with a rich cultural tradition.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a short bio of Yeats, along with other Yeats poems, at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/w-b-yeats)
- The Poem Read Aloud — Hear a reading of the poem by actor Michael Gambon. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cN_VPtGfsw0)
- "Aengus" in Song — Listen to a 1971 adaptation of the poem by folk singer Donovan. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQUT6mS0eY8)
- Yeats, Nobel Laureate — Browse an exhibit on Yeats, winner of the 1923 Nobel Prize in Literature, at Nobel.org. (https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1923/yeats/biographical/)
- The Many Sides of Yeats — Read the Poetry Foundation's introduction to the various phases of Yeats's career. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70241/william-butler-yeats-101)
- Yeats Reads His Work — Listen to a rare recording of W. B. Yeats reading his poetry aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2FT4_UUa4I)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- Among School Children
- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- A Prayer for my Daughter
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree

- The Second Coming
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- When You Are Old

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