

Traditional Irish Sources for “The Song of Wandering Aengus”

Part 1. Allusions to Celtic Mythology

In discussing the composition of “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” William Butler Yeats noted, “It was suggested to me by a Greek folksong; but the folk belief of Greece is very like that of Ireland, and I certainly thought, when I wrote it, of Ireland, and of the spirits that are in Ireland.” One of Yeats’s long standing passions was to revive traditional Irish culture, and one way he acted upon it was by integrating Celtic mythology and Irish folk lore into his written work.

Yeats included several archetypal images in “The Song of Wandering Aengus” that have special significance in the Irish folk tradition: the fisherman, the silver trout, the hazel bough, and the apple.

- The fisherman archetype surfaces in various forms in this part of the world, especially in stories related to “selkies” with their scenes of fantastic shape shifting between seal and human form.
- The silver trout reflects the symbolic association fish carry in the Irish tradition with connotations related to health and fertility as well as knowledge, inspiration, and prophecy.
- The hazel is a sacred tree connected with immortal wisdom in Irish tree-lore. Stories in the Celtic tradition often place hazel trees at the border between worlds where magical things happen. Hazel is considered a container of ancient knowledge and, when ingested, hazel nuts were thought to heighten awareness and induce visions that led to epiphanies.
- The apple is also a sacred tree in the Irish tradition representing youth and possessing powers of healing as well as rebirth. Like the hazel, the apple is often used as a talisman when undergoing a magical transformation or journey to the Otherworld.

“The Song of Wandering Aengus” yields additional mythological allusions. When talking about this poem, Yeats referenced sources drawn from ancient Celtic mythology, stating: “The Tribes of the goddess Danu can take all shapes, and those that are in the waters often take the shape of fish.” The *Book of Leinster*, a medieval Irish manuscript compiled in 1160 CE and now kept at Trinity College, Dublin, documents the legendary history of the ancient tribes to which Yeats refers. The Tuatha Dé Danann or “the people of the Goddess Danu” were a mythical race who ruled Ireland over four thousand years ago and were believed to be gifted with supernatural powers. A god-like figure named, Aengus Óg was a member of this race

The Irish traditional fairy lore that infuses Yeats’s lyrical poetry is directly linked to fate of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Legend has it that after being defeated by other tribes the Tuatha Dé Danann were allowed to stay in Ireland, but only on the condition that they remain underground. They became the faery folk of Ireland known as the *aes sídhe* or “people of the faery mounds” because they were consigned to reside under the burial mounds that dot the Irish countryside. To this day there are some who believe the *aes sídhe* wield considerable power over the lives and fortunes of humankind who come into contact with them when these mounds are disturbed.

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In the cycle of stories about Tuatha Dé Danann, the figure of Aengus Óg appears as a god of youth and beauty and in some versions he oversees the domains of love and poetic inspiration. The name of the speaker in Yeats’s poem derives from this god and the speaker may arguably take on some aspects of his character. While “The Song of Wandering Aengus” is not a straight rendition of the myth, the story in the poem bears a resemblance to a mythic dream-vision and the profound impact that dream-vision had on Aengus Óg.

The Myth: The Dream of Aengus Óg

Aengus has fallen in love with a young girl he has known only in his dreams. He is unable to eat as a result of his love-sickness and subsequently begins to waste away. His love interest turns out to be an actual person named Caer Ibormath, the daughter of Ethal. After a long search, Aengus eventually locates her swimming on a lake, where she has been transformed into a swan.

Caer is living under the influence of a spell and she alternates between animal and human form, a common motif in Irish folklore, similar to shapeshifting selkies, Caer transforms from swan to human form on Samhain, the most important Celtic festival day, which falls on the first of November. It is a sacred, liminal time when the veil between the human world and the spirit otherworld is thinnest and can be penetrated. (Students may learn more about the ancient Celtic festival, Samhain, which underlies the [origins of our modern day Halloween](#).)

It seems Caer is one of 150 such shape-shifters attached to the lake by a silver chain. Her father will allow Aengus to wed Caer, but only on one condition: Aengus must pick her out from all the other girls in swan form. According to one version, Aengus is successful because he realizes the other swans all have silver collars, but Caer’s collar is made of gold. After Aengus identifies her, he transforms himself into a swan; the story ends with the two of them flying off together.

Further Reading:

For a source of the eighth-century poem, “The Dream of Aengus Og,” see Francis Shaw’s textual reconstruction and commentary: *Aislinge Óenguso* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1934), available [online](#) from the [Celtic Digital Initiative](#) at University College Cork, Ireland.

A good starting point to learn more about these topics would be a general introduction to Celtic mythology such as Alwyn Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989) or Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2000). An older classic text, which provided a foundation for this field of study, is Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1970). It offers a wealth of images and is widely available in reference libraries ([search the whereabouts of this text](#) through OCLC WorldCat).

Part 2. “Aisling” Influences on “The Song of Wandering Aengus”

“The Song of Wandering Aengus” emerged out of a type of Irish literature known as the “[aisling](#)”—the Irish word for “dream-vision”.

What is an Aisling?

An aisling is a type of Irish language poem (not a structural form). It is often allegorical and frequently recounts a visit by an otherworldly female figure who appears to a poet in a dream-vision. In many

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aislings, this female figure served as a metaphor for the poet’s homeland, Ireland, or for the Irish people. She is a type of *spéirbhean* (“sky-woman”). This female apparition sometimes appears as a young, beautiful maiden and at other times as an old, decrepit crone.

The female apparitions in Irish aislings have been likened to supernatural characters found in the popular medieval poetic genre, [reverdies](#). A reverdie is medieval song-type that usually speaks of the coming of spring. In some instances, the poet, in pastoral surroundings, is approached by a beautiful, otherworldly woman who personifies the bounty of spring and love. It is thought that aislings were largely derived from this model.

Irish scholar Gerard Murphy has identified three distinct types of Irish aislings:

- The love aisling or fairy aisling in which the mystical female figure beguiles the sleeping poet with her beauty;
- The prophecy aisling in which the poet receives a prophetic vision (often of success in battle), which may or may not be delivered by the female figure;
- The allegorical aisling in which the female figure represents the country of Ireland and comforts the disillusioned poet.

Brief History of the Aisling

The earliest major aisling poet was [Aodhagán Ó Rathaille](#) (1670–1726). He is often called the father of the aisling. His most famous aisling is “*Gile na gile*” (“[The Glamoured](#)” is a translation of this poem by 20th-century poet Seamus Heaney which literally means “Brightness of Brightness”).

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the aisling genre had a golden age as a popular form of Irish political poetry. Irish political aislings of this era presented a female spirit decrying the down-fallen status of Ireland under Protestant rule. The female character expressed optimism about a future return of fortune for the motherland. This form was often linked with the promised return of a Stuart ruler to the throne of Britain by the female figure prophesying the success of the Jacobite cause. Later aislings took a satirical turn, as in the late 18th-century poem by Brian Merriman, *Cúirt an Mheáin Oíche* (“The Midnight Court”).

In a groundbreaking study, *The Hidden Ireland* (Dublin, 1924), Daniel Corkery discussed how poetry functioned as a means of survival for the dispossessed Irish people in the 18th century. Corkery asserted that the “*aislingí*” (aisling poems) became the popular songs of the period. The Irish had a long, austere tradition of transmitting poetic knowledge through formal bardic schools of learning. After these bardic schools were dissolved in the mid-16th through the 17th century, poetry in Ireland began to be disseminated through informal “courts of poetry.” These literary gatherings were spontaneously convened in community places around the countryside. Poets would recite compositions and sing their songs in these “courts” which became the vehicle for the *aislingí* to enter the song tradition and impact the popular mind of the Irish.

Yeats’s Use of the Aisling

In the “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” Yeats intentionally adopted the aisling and produced a “song” harkening back to the lyrical aspect of the form. He tapped into the genre of love aisling or faery aisling by including a radiant otherworldly maiden who briefly appears, calls the speaker’s name, then vanishes and remains out of reach. There is a widespread belief in literary circles that this poem was somewhat

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autobiographical. Yeats experienced a long-term unrequited love for Maud Gonne, an Irish revolutionary whom he met in 1889, shortly before the poem was written. Gonne was a woman equally famous for her passionate nationalist politics and her remarkable beauty. She remained a profound influence on Yeats’s writing throughout his career. (See the entry on [W.B. Yeats](#) in the EDSITEment-reviewed [Poetry Foundation](#).)

The aisling form found a later incarnation in the poetry of modern day Irish poets such as Austin Clarke, Paul Muldoon, and Seamus Heaney, who were influenced by the poetry of Yeats.

Further Reading:

For a detailed discussion of the place of the aisling in the 18th-century courts of poetry see Pádraig Ó Cearúill, [Eoghán Rua Ó Suilleabháin: A True Exponent of the Bardic Legacy, *The Proceedings of the Barra Ó Donnabháin Symposium*](#) (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

For additional information on the aisling genre see s.v. “aisling” in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2009) and *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, [online edition](#) (Oxford University Press, 2004).