

Questions for Discussion (teacher version)

The following questions can be adapted for use in a classroom or literature circle discussion of W. B. Yeats’s poem [“The Song of Wandering Aengus.”](#) In whatever venue, make sure the students provide evidence from the poem in their answers.

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. The questions are preceded by the Common Core State Standard they are aligned to.

Questions 1–2 align with CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.3: Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

1. The Title

Consider the **title** of the poem. What does it tell you about the subject, tone, and genre? What does it promise? Does it live up to that promise? Would your experience of the poem be different if Yeats’s original title, “A Mad Song,” had been retained?

Suggested Answer:

In labeling it “song”, the lyrical aspect of this dream-vision poem is being emphasized. The title of the poem as it was finally published with the adjective “wandering” brings up connotations of someone roving around in a search for something. By including the reference to “Aengus” in the title, Yeats identifies the subject and connects the quest with the Celtic god-figure Aengus. (See the section on “Allusions to Celtic Mythology” in [Traditional Irish Sources for “The Song of Wandering Aengus”](#)). If the first title had been retained, it would have implied the search was rather crazy and/or in vain. By leaving the word “mad” out of the title, the reader has to decide for him/herself if Aengus’s life-long search is warranted.

2. The Story

This poem tells a story. Work through the following series of questions to uncover the actions as well as the characters described in the poem.

- What is the quest that the speaker has set himself? What spurs this search?
- How is this a quest? How does the reader know it is not just a search to gather wood? What are the clues to the supernatural here?
- What does the speaker do? Describe his actions. What effects does that behavior cause?
- What was the speaker going to do with the fish that he caught?
- What happens when the speaker goes to stoke the fire?
- How does the magical transformation of trout to girl come about?
- What does she look like?
- What does she do?

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- How do you know this girl is important to the old man? Why do you think that is?
- What will he do now that he has aged? Where will he go?
- What is his fantasy? What obstacles are in his way? What objects does he turn to for help in his quest? When will his quest be finished?

Suggested Answers:

The quest is to find the maiden who has vanished and if found, to consummate the speaker’s unrequited love. His search for her is spurred by her mysterious disappearance and the poet’s fascination with this unattainable heart’s desire.

It is a search to find something that is beyond reach and perhaps not of this world. (See the section on “Allusions to Celtic Mythology” in [Traditional Irish Sources for “The Song of Wandering Aengus”](#)). Entering a hazel wood has an otherworldly connotation in the Irish tradition as the hazel tree in Irish tree lore offers immortal wisdom. The speaker cuts a hazel wand and makes a fishing pole of it with a berry as bait. Then he catches a silver trout that he lays on the floor while going to blow on the fire with the intention to cook it. Instead, the fish turns into a dreamlike maiden with springtime blossoms of the apple tree in her hair. She calls him by name and runs away—as if to taunt him into chasing her?

This female figure is important because she becomes the object of the speaker’s life quest, which is to find and possess her. In the final stanza, the speaker is now old. He has wandered many years, overcome many obstacles, and has conquered much emptiness in seeking her. He would like to find her and walk together in a light and shadow filled field. Maybe in an effort to recapture his own faded youth? Or maybe he is aspiring to become immortal and by taking in the magical fruit of the sun and moon—he will be able to master time? Whatever his reasons, his quest will only be complete when he finds his maiden and enters into a mystical (immortal) state of union with her.

3. Comparing Quests

Question 3 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.

The speaker in the poem (Aengus) has embarked upon a quest that is not of the natural world. Have students consider other stories which deal with hero figures who take on supernatural quests (i.e. characters in the *Chronicles of Narnia* or *Harry Potter* series).

Identify three ways Aengus’s quest is different from and three ways it is similar to the quest of the character you selected.

Answers will vary.

Questions 4–6 align 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.)

4. Identifying Forms

Identify the different *forms of nature* in the poem: energy, animal life, and plant life. Discuss how the poet uses them symbolically and how his inclusion of them impacts the reader.

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Suggested Answers:

Energy forms

flickering stars: coming of dawn

water in a stream: element to catch fish

fire in fireplace: element to cook fish

dappled grass: light and shade on path

sun and moon imagery: idealized sacred marriage

Animal forms

silver trout: magical fish associated with inspiration, and prophecy

white-moths: helpless attractions as in “moths to the flame”

Plant forms

hazel wood: place of magical transformation where one might find immortal wisdom

hazel wand: magical rod used to transform

berry: used as bait to catch magical fish

apple blossoms: promise of rebirth in springtime

silver apples of sun, golden apples of moon: supernatural objects which may act as love charms

5. Literary Devices

Give examples of the following devices in the poem.

Suggested Answers:

Assonance: The repetition of the long “o” vowel sounds within the first few lines of final stanza.

Repetition: The repetition of these words throughout poem: hazel, moths, fire, apple, name, time/times.

Alliteration: The repetition of “h” at beginning of words in final stanza: hilly, hollow, her, hands.

Consonance: The repetition of “k” sound in final stanza: kiss, take, walk, luck.

Meter: The poem is written in iambic tetrameter. (Each line has four (tetra-) poetic feet to it, which are iambs—two-syllable feet composed of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable.)

The lines are set into three stanzas, each of which contains two quatrains (four-line sections). The first and third lines of each quatrain do not rhyme, the second and fourth do: xAxAxBxB
xCxCxDxDxExExFxF.

How do these devices act together to move the poem along?

How do they influence the reader/listener’s experience?

Answers will vary.

6. Tone in “The Song of Wandering Aengus”

How does this poem simultaneously reflect both a hopeful and melancholy tone? Discuss this unusual pairing and how Yeats makes it work.

Suggested Answer:

Hope and despair walk hand in hand in this poem. It is possible that Yeats does not quite believe this quest can ever be realized, yet he hopes against hope. He almost can't help himself.

Question 7 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.

7. Comparing Two W. B. Yeats Poems: “The Song of Wandering Aengus” and “Aedh Wishes for The Cloths of Heaven”

Dreams are a recurrent theme throughout Yeats's poetry. Consider another poem about dreams also published in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, “[Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven](#).”

“Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven”

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dream under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams

Compare the imagery and message of the two poems. What are the similarities? Differences?

Suggested Answers:

Similarities:

Both of the poems reference dreams.
Both feature a speaker with a melancholy tone.
Both contain images of celestial light that have mystical connotations.

Differences:

There are two different kinds of dreams. Aengus experience is a dream-vision of a once glimpsed, now absent, maiden who remains beyond his reach. Aedh's experience is more of a state of mind in the form of a wistful daydream. Aedh references dreams by implying they are his most valuable possession as well as the most vulnerable part of himself. Aedh is offering his dreams as a gift to his love interest who appears to be part of his life.

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Aengus speaks to himself or a general audience whereas Aedh directs his speech to a particular person who is his love interest.

Aengus’s experience involves catching a magical fish who transforms into a dream maiden that he continually seeks to possess. Aedh’s experience involves calling up beautiful images and making an offering of dreams to his beloved with a caution to be careful as they are so delicate.