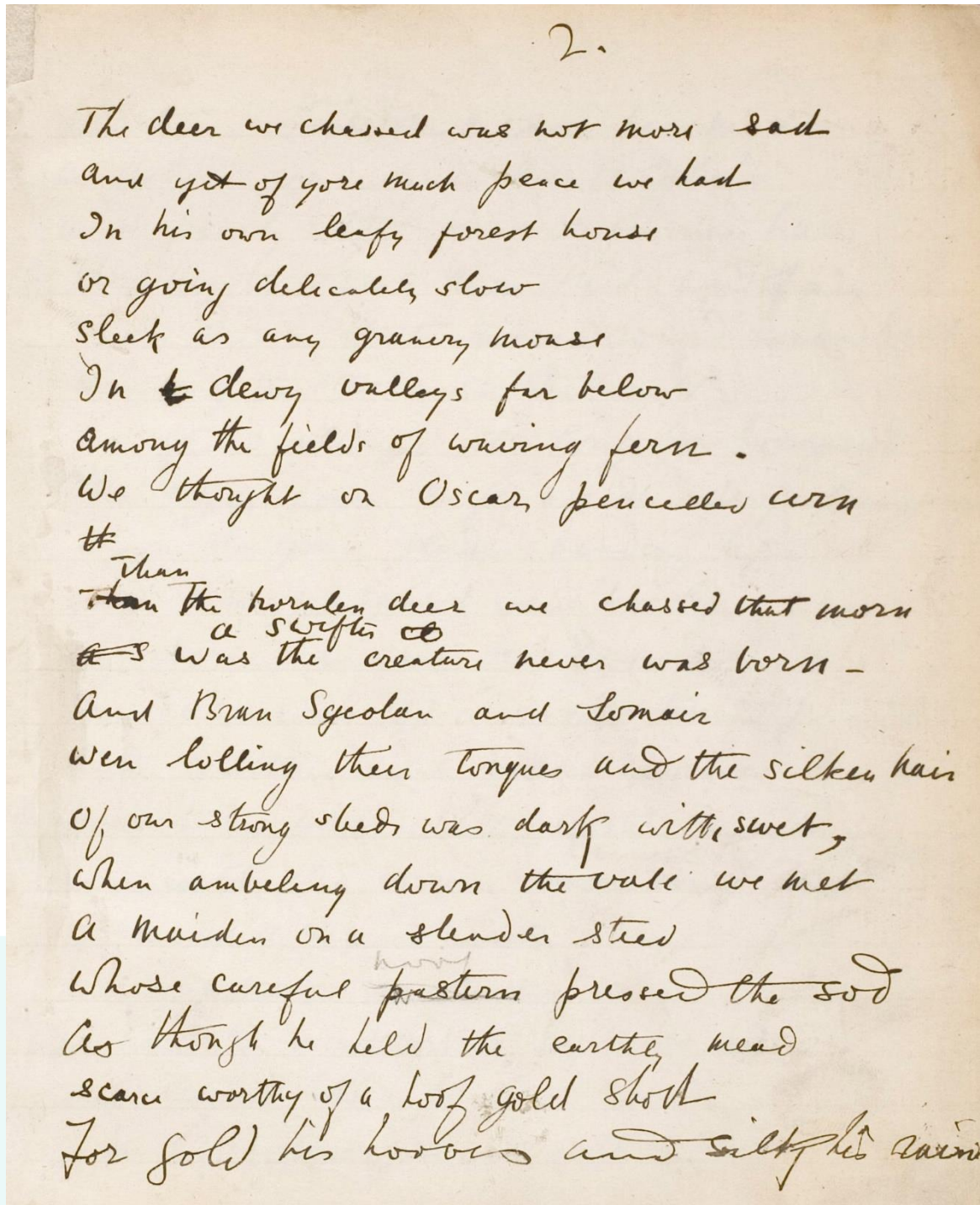


Irish Folklore and Fairy Tales in the work of William Butler Yeats



Contents

Teacher's Notes.....	1
Links to the curriculum	2
Introduction to William Butler Yeats	3
Irish Literary Revival.....	4
Types of Sources.....	5
Source One: The Stolen Child.....	7
Source Two: Photograph of a Holy Well, Co. Sligo	8
Source Three: The Song of Wandering Aengus	9
Source Four: First Collection of Poems.....	10
Source Five: The Celtic Twilight.....	11
Task 1	12
Task 2	13
Task 3.....	14
Appendix 1	15
Appendix 2.....	17

Teacher's Notes

This lesson introduces students to primary and secondary sources from the Yeats collection at the National Library of Ireland. It is suitable for Junior Certificate students from 1st to 3rd year or for a transition year class.

It encourages pupils to learn about the influence of Irish folklore in the poetry of William Butler Yeats. Using primary sources such as original manuscripts, the students are asked to examine how Yeats used inspiration from fairytales and folklore in the content of his work.

Useful Links

NLI catalogue: <https://catalogue.nli.ie>

Discover more items from the Yeats family collections.

Dúchas: <https://www.duchas.ie/en>

The Irish Folklore Collection Project

Yeats Nobel Centenary Videos: [The Lake Isle of Innisfree, read by Luke Dolan – Yeats Nobel Centenary \(youtube.com\)](#)

Links to the curriculum

This lesson can form part of studies for Junior Certificate English. It is relevant to the statement of learning (SOL) 3 and 16.

It can also be used in conjunction with the Junior Certificate History curriculum and relates to SOL 3 and 6.

Junior Certificate English:

OL 10 collaborate with others in order to explore and discuss understandings of spoken texts by recording, analysing, interpreting and comparing their opinions

R 7 *select key moments from their texts and give thoughtful value judgements on the main character, a key scene, a favourite image from a film, a poem, a drama, a chapter, a media or web based event

W 5 engage with and learn from models of oral and written language use to enrich their own written work

Junior Certificate History:

1.3 appreciate their cultural inheritance through recognising historically significant places and buildings and discussing why historical personalities, events and issues are commemorated

1.8 investigate a repository of historical evidence such as a museum, library, heritage centre, digital or other archive or exhibition

2.10 examine how one sporting, cultural or social movement impacted on Irish life

Introduction to William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats was born on the 13th of June 1865. He is one of Ireland's most well-known poets and was the first Irish writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.

Yeats is synonymous with his poetic works; however, he also was an important collector of Irish folktales and published four collections of Irish fairy and folktales.

His interest in Irish folklore was influenced by his childhood growing up in Sligo. Due to his father John Butler Yeats' career as an artist, the family lived between Dublin, London and Sligo throughout Yeats' childhood and adolescence.

He would visit his neighbours' houses in Sligo where they would tell him local legends that he wrote down in his notebook. His interest in the tradition of Irish storytelling came from his friendships with Douglas Hyde and the Fenian John O'Leary while he was a student at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. Yeats was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival. He was interested in creating a type of literature that was distinctly Irish. Irish folklore and fairy tales influenced much of Yeats' work, especially his early works such as *The Stolen Child* and *The Song of Wandering Aengus*. It also continued in his later work in poems such as *Easter 1916*.

Yeats later became a senator in the new Irish Free State and was part of the coinage committee who were responsible for designing the currency for the new state. Yeats died on the 28th of January 1939 in Roquebrune, France. Let's look at the evidence to discover more about Yeats and Irish folklore.



Irish Literary Revival

The Irish Literary Revival was a movement from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. It was closely aligned with Irish nationalism and inspired by the Irish Cultural Revival and the Gaelic League. The Gaelic League was formed in 1893 by Douglas Hyde to revive the Irish culture and language. Key figures of the Irish Literary Revival included William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, Liam O'Flaherty, Douglas Hyde, and George Moore.

Yeats was one of the foremost writers of the Irish Literary Revival movement. He co-founded the Abbey Theatre in 1904 alongside Lady Augusta Gregory. This was Ireland's first national theatre.

Towards the end of the 19th century, many of the significant Gaelic literary texts had been translated into English and become widely available. Collections of folklore had begun to be recorded from the early 19th century in Europe due to an interest in antiquities and popular culture brought on by nationalist movements such as the French revolution.

Yeats became interested in Irish folklore and legends as a distinct source of inspiration for his poetry. He drew from three main types of Irish material. First was the written literature for example, the Ulster Cycle which features stories such as the Brown Bull of Cooley (An Táin Bó Cúailnge). These stories were recorded by medieval monks and are preserved in manuscripts that date from the 11th and 12th centuries AD.

Secondly, Yeats used characters from stories from the Fenian Cycle which followed the famous warrior Fionn Mac Cumhaill who was the leader of a band of warriors called the Fianna who engaged in brave and romantic adventures which dates to the Middle Ages. He was particularly influenced by the story of Oisín in Tír na nÓg. This follows the story of Fionn's son Oisín who marries the fairy queen Niamh and his journey to the land of eternal youth.

The third type of materials Yeats was inspired by was folklore and the oral story-telling tradition. He wrote down stories he heard from storytellers in a notebook. He also read collections of fairy tales by writers at the time such as Douglas Hyde and wrote his own collection of folktales.

In addition to drawing inspiration from the content of folklore, Yeats also was influenced by the form, rhythm, and metre of traditional music. He wrote his poems using formats such as a ballad or an aisling. An aisling is a type of Irish song in which a female character personifies the country of Ireland. This is evident in poems by Yeats such as *The Song of Wandering Aengus*.

Types of Sources

Primary Source:

A primary source is a source that was created at the time of the event. This might be a manuscript, original book publication, drawing, first-hand account, or photograph.

Secondary Source:

A secondary source is one that comes from an interpretation of the original source. This could be a newspaper article, journal article or a biography.

Look at Source 1

1. This is a manuscript copy of the poem *The Stolen Child* written by Yeats in 1886.
 - (a) Do you think the fairies in this poem are good or bad? Use evidence from the source to back up your answer.
 - (b) What story do you think Yeats was inspired by when he wrote the poem?
 - (c) What poetic techniques does Yeats use in this poem?

Look at Source 2

2. This is a photograph of Tobernalt Holy Well in County Sligo. Holy wells are natural spring water wells that can be found across the island of Ireland. They were believed to have healing properties in both pagan and early Christian traditions. They are connected to many legends and Yeats' poetry often emphasises the healing properties of water.
 - (a) What items can you see in this photograph?
 - (b) What sort of a place is this? How do you think you would feel being there?
 - (c) When do you think this photograph was taken?

Look at Source 3

3. This is an illustration from a poem by Yeats called *The Song of Wandering Aengus*.
 - (a) Describe what you see in the illustration, then read the full poem in Appendix 2.
 - (b) What do you think is the theme of this poem?
 - (c) Is there a particular legend that this poem is based on?

Now let's examine Source 4

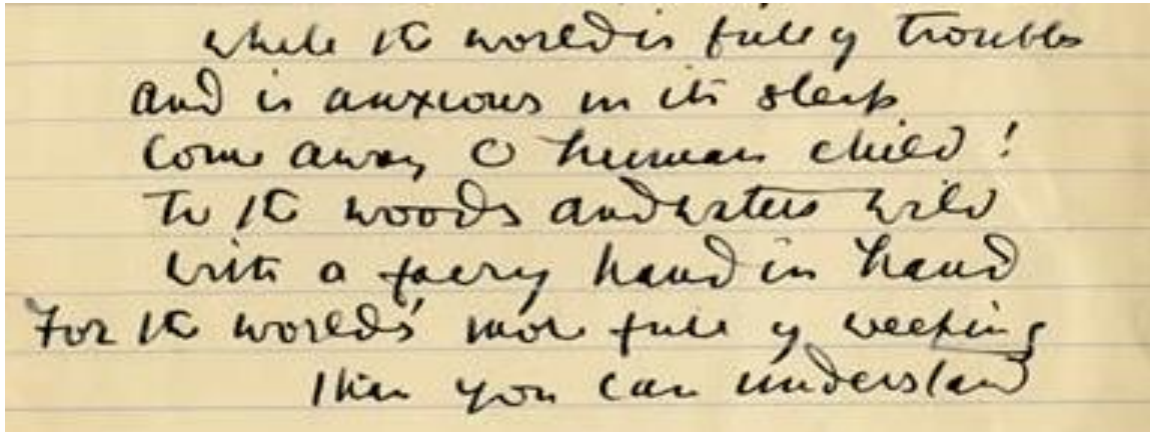
4. These are two original pages from *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Stories* which was the first collection of poetry published by Yeats.
 - (a) Who was the character Oisín in Irish mythology?
 - (b) What insights does the page from Yeats' notebook give to his writing process?

Let's finish by looking at Source 5

5. This is the book cover of *The Celtic Twilight*, a collection of folk and fairy tales published by Yeats in 1893.
 - (a) What does the design of the cover reveal to the reader about the content of this book? Hint: the gold lettering
 - (b) Why were people beginning to collect Irish stories at the time this book was published?

Source One: The Stolen Child

Extract from the poem by William Butler Yeats



Catalogue reference: MS 30,478 1-3

Transcript

“Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim gray sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And anxious in its sleep.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.”

Source Two: Photograph of a Holy Well, Co. Sligo



Catalogue reference: L_CAB_o6848

Image of a holy well in Co. Sligo.

Source Three: The Song of Wandering Aengus



*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.*

W. B. Yeats.

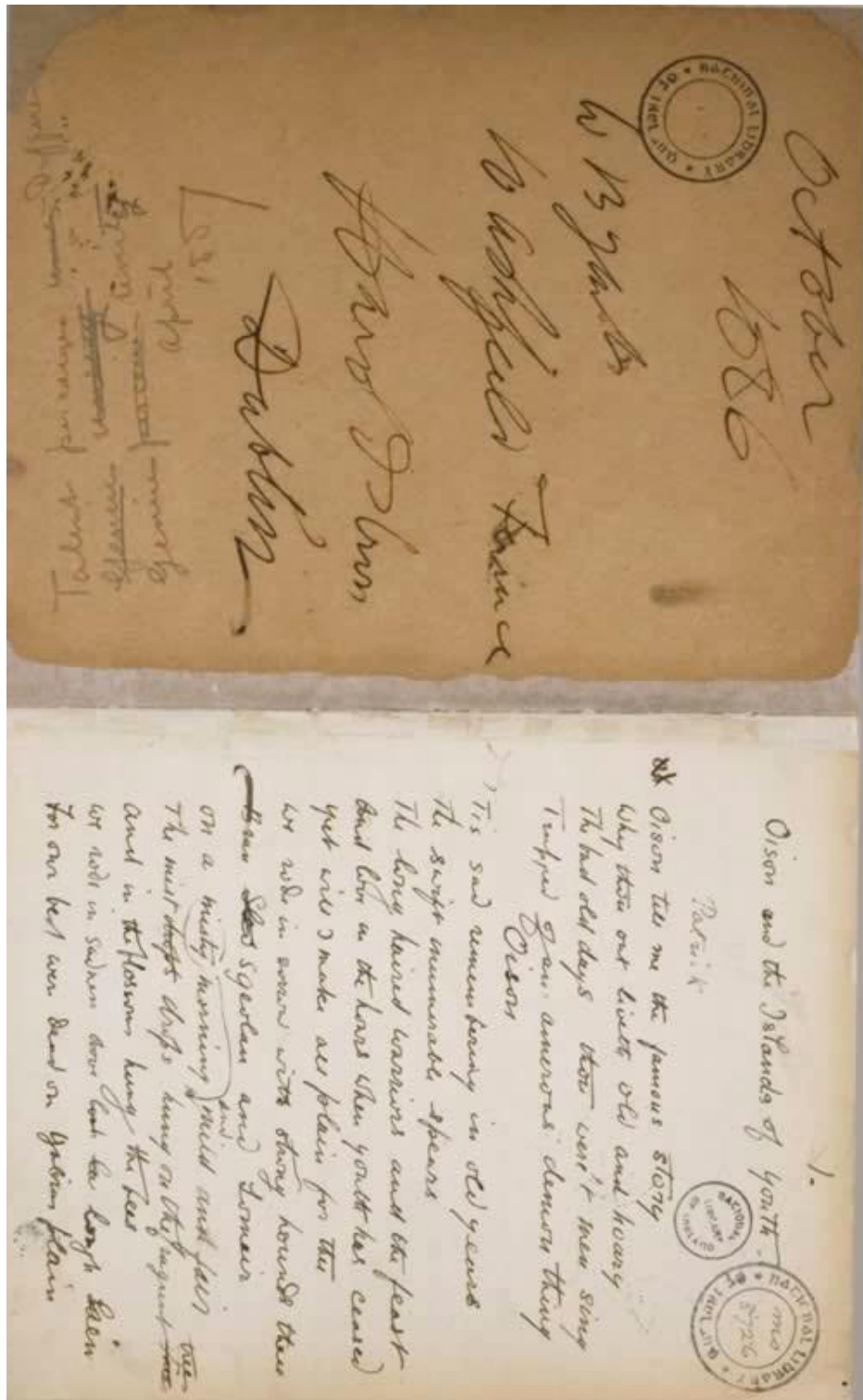
Catalogue reference: PD 2160 TX 24

Transcript

“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.”

From *The Song of Wandering Aengus* by William Butler Yeats

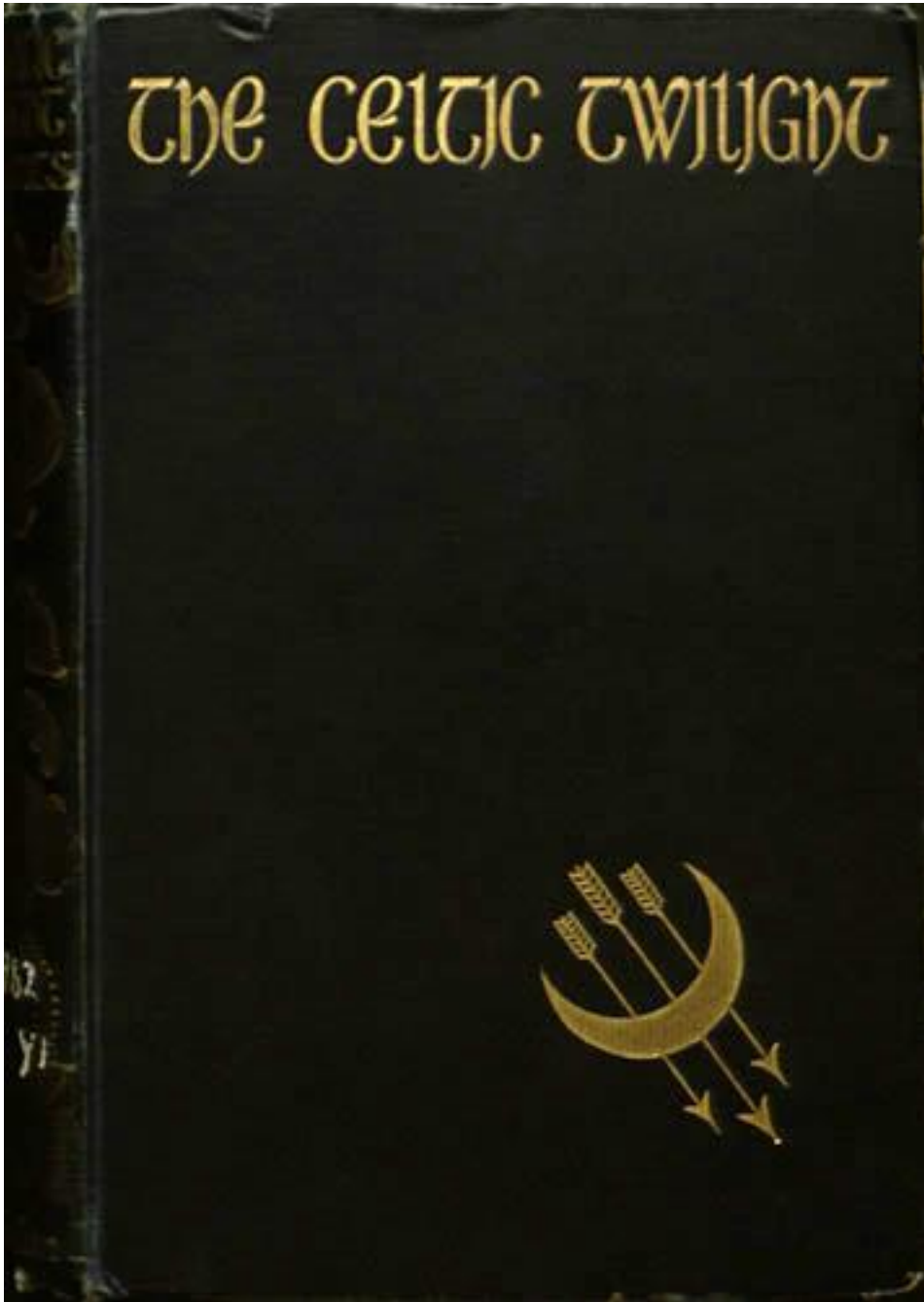
Source Four: First Collection of Poems



Catalogue reference: MS 3726

The Wanderings of Oisín and other poems, first collection of poems by William Butler Yeats published in 1889.

Source Five: The Celtic Twilight



Catalogue reference: YL 3056

The Celtic Twilight (1893)

Collections of stories by William Butler Yeats

Book published in London in 1902 by A.H. Bullen.

Task 1

Yeats collected folk tales from his neighbours in Sligo. Ask a member of your family or a neighbour to tell you about a legend from your local area. Write down the story below.



Task 2

Practice reading one of Yeats' poems aloud and make a recording of this. You can find some inspiration from our Yeats centenary celebration videos which are available on YouTube or Poetry Aloud competition. Did you notice any further details about the poem after reading it out loud? Use this space below to record your notes.

Task 3

Based on Source Five, design a book cover for your own collection of fairy and folktales.



Appendix 1

The Stolen Child

Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
The drowsy water rats;
There we've hid our faery vats,
Full of berrys
And of reddest stolen cherries.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim gray sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And anxious in its sleep.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Where the wandering water gushes
From the hills above Glen-Car,
In pools among the rushes

That scarce could bathe a star,
We seek for slumbering trout
And whispering in their ears
Give them unquiet dreams;
Leaning softly out
From ferns that drop their tears
Over the young streams.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Away with us he's going,
The solemn-eyed:
He'll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal chest.
For he comes, the human child,
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than he can understand.

Appendix 2

The Song of Wandering Aengus

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.