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## **A Critical Edition of Madison Cawein: Examining the Effects of Modernism on Regional Poetry**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

A Critical Edition of Madison Cawein:

Examining the Effects of Modernism on Regional Poetry

by:

Kristin Teston

A Thesis

Submitted to the Honors College  
Of the University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of English



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## Introduction

When I first began this project, I had hopes of discovering that long forgotten poet, Madison Cawein, was one of America's early Modernist writers. However, as time progressed and as I became intimate with Cawein's work I realized that he was, in fact, not a Modernist. Rather, Cawein's writing reveals interesting insight on how poets steeped in traditional form were affected by the shift to the Modernist ways thinking and writing. Although, as this project will later reveal, Cawein was much opposed to the free verse style of Modernist writing his concerns about the ever changing modern world closely relate to his contemporary Modernist writers.

Given the lack of scholarship about Madison Cawein, for this project I chose to compile a short critical edition on the poet. Cawein was a prolific writer, publishing 36 volumes of poetry. The three poems which I have chosen are "The Wasteland," "The Old Remain" and "Coward." These poems were published in *Minions of the Moon*, Cawein's collection of poems for children, which was published in 1913 and was the last book published before his death.<sup>1</sup> The edition that follows contains biographical insights, indentifies Cawein's writing style, and provides introductions and annotations for three of his poems. The poems that I have chosen represent the latter period of Cawein's writing career.

Cawein died in December 1914 and these were among the last poems he wrote. They express Cawein's shift from an untroubled naturalist to a troubled proto-Modernist. These poems coincide with the first years of World War I, which were also the early years of Modernism. Analyzing Cawein's poetry and correspondence reveals how deeply

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cup of Comus* is technically Cawein's last work; it was published posthumously in 1915.

concerned Cawein was with his place within the changing canon of literature. Although Cawein was not a true or a “high” Modernist, per se, his work was greatly influenced by Modernism; it resists the notion of free verse but it does adopt Modernism’s subject matter. Cawein’s own subjects in his later works of poetry parallel that of Modernist writers insofar as Cawein recognizes a “cultural crisis” and writes to raise awareness.

## Chapter 1: Who is Madison Cawein?

Madison Julius Cawein was born in Louisville, Kentucky on March 23, 1865.<sup>2</sup> Cawein's childhood and adolescence exposed him to nature's therapeutic qualities and to spiritualism, which ultimately shaped the type of poetry he was to produce. Although Cawein is undeniably a nature poet, he is also more than that. When Cawein was nine years old, his father, William Cawein, accepted a job as the manager of Rock Springs Hotel, a resort near Brownsboro, Kentucky only about 20 miles from Louisville. The family only stayed at the resort less than two years; however, these two years would prove pivotal in the shaping of Cawein as a poet.

William Cawein had a great interest in the study of medicinal plants and while at Rock Springs, he was able to explore this interest. When the family returned to Louisville in 1875 William Cawein devoted his time to studying anatomy, pharmacy, and botany. His particular interest was in the medicinal qualities of roots and herbs, which he gathered for use in his homemade remedies. Although he never graduated any school or medical college, the state of Kentucky allowed Dr. Cawein to practice medicine without a license. He began making and selling his medicines, and advertised them as "Dr. Wm. Cawein's Vegetable Family Medicines" (Rothert 73). Unlike other men in the homemade remedy business, Dr. Cawein never claimed his medicines to be a sort of "one dose, fix-all." Instead, each remedy was to be used for a very specific ailment. Cawein attended school, but he regularly assisted his father in the making of his herbal medicines.

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<sup>2</sup> For this section, I am greatly indebted to Otto Arthur Rothert for his work, *The Story of a Poet: Madison Cawein; His Intimate Life as Revealed by His Letters and Other Hitherto Unpublished Material, Including Reminiscences by His Closet Associates; also Articles from Newspapers and Magazines, and a List of His Poems*. Rothert published Cawein's biography in 1921 after compiling all the information that its title indicates. Any information regarding Cawein's life comes from this book unless otherwise noted.

Dr. Cawein handpicked all the herbs he used for his remedies, and his son frequently accompanied him on these gathering trips. Cawein most likely developed his knowledge of Kentucky's flora and fauna from these excursions. A friend and neighbor of the poet, Emily F. Bass, alludes to the impact these "rambles" had on the "embryo poet" saying that it was here that the Cawein "began to learn the names of trees and flowers and birds and insects he saw in the woods and fields and was able to use afterward so beautifully as "symbols and similes" (Rothert 75).

Cawein expressed admiration for his father after his death with the poem "One Who Loved Nature" (Rothert 75). This poem was first published in *New Poems* in 1909 in London. In 1911, Cawein selected the poem again for publication in *Poems*, a collection that was to represent the scope of his works over the last 25 years. The poem is comprised of eight numbered stanzas and there is no difference between the two separate publications. The poem is about his father and begins:

He was not learned in any art;  
But Nature led him by the hand;  
And spoke her language to his heart  
So he could hear and understand:  
He loved her simply as a child;  
And in his love forgot the heat  
Of conflict, and sat reconciled  
In patience of defeat.

One characteristic worthy of note in Cawein's poetry is that Nature is not merely the outdoors, but a life force, a person, a goddess of sorts. For Cawein, Nature is the best teacher and he attempts to capture that didactic quality in this poetry. In these lines, Cawein suggests that Nature has a power over man, such a power that it allowed his father to forget "the heat of conflict." Yet the closing lines of the poem reveal something deeper about Cawein's views of Nature:

Yet Nature in the end denied  
The thing he had not asked for—fame!  
Unknown, in poverty he died,  
And men forget his name.

Cawein recognizes that man's relationship to Nature does not always provide lasting fame or fortune. Although this poem is about his father, these lines also reflect the anxiety felt by the aging poet beginning to fear his own lack of immortality because of an overwhelming devotion to Nature poetry.

Although Cawein was clearly influenced by his father and nature, his mother also played a large part in shaping the writing style of her son. Annie C. Cawein was a frail woman with a sickly disposition. It was because of her health that the family moved from Rock Springs back to Louisville. Mrs. Cawein, despite her poor health "realized that she possessed the power of mediumship" and she frequently "lent her services in that capacity to some of her friends who were interested in spiritualism" (Rothert 73).

According to Helen Sword, "spiritualism is the belief that the dead communicate with the living, as through a medium" (1). The spiritualist movement became very popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially with "oppressed or disenfranchised social groups such as African Americans, English plebeians, and women" (Sword 3). Although many mediums were exposed as falsifying séances and fabricating messages from the other side "the movement's allure extended to both men and women, to the socially privileged as well as to those struggling for cultural influence" (3).

Beginning in April 1879, Mrs. Cawein assisted Edward Shippen in the compilation of his book, *Women and Her Relations to Humanity* (Rothert 73). Shippen would transcribe the messages from spirits which Mrs. Cawein received while she was in a trance. The book was anonymously published 12 years later, with a dedication to Mrs.

Annie C. Cawein and with her picture and facsimile of her signature. Many of the messages are comments concerning this life and the next. The young Cawein was present at many of the Shippen séances. Cawein was 14 when the Shippen séances took place and the exposure to an unconventional, quasi-religion at such an early age had a great impact in shaping his poetic style.

Many of Cawein's poems display ghosts and spirits as their subjects. These poems suggest that there is something both dark and comforting about the conjuring of these spirits. Cawein, being influenced greatly by a spiritualist mother and a naturalist father, was able to combine the two ideologies to compose poems that represent the spiritual and the natural worlds as one sphere rather than two. One example of a spirit poem is "The Old House," which was published in 1898 as his thirteenth book, *Shapes and Shadows*. Cawein, as he did with many poems, selected the work again for publication in *The Poems of Madison Cawein: Volume IV: Poems of Mystery and of Myth and Romance*," which he dedicated "To My Mother."

Quaint and forgotten, by an unused road,  
An old house stands: around its doors the dense  
Blue iron-weeds grow high;  
The chipmunks make a highway of its fence;  
And on its sunken flagstones slug and toad  
Silent as lichens lie.

...

But come with me when sunset's magic old  
Transforms the ruin of that ancient house;  
When windows, one by one,--  
Like age's eyes, that youth's love-dreams arouse,--  
Grow lairs of fire; and glad mouths of gold  
Its wide doors, in the sun.

Or let us wait until each rain-stained room  
Is carpeted with moonlight, patterned oft  
With the deep boughs o'erhead;  
And through the house the wind goes rustling soft,

As might the ghost--a whisper of perfume--  
Of some sweet girl long dead.

In this poem, Cawein invites the reader to come into a desolate old house that has gone unused for many years. Cawein's descriptions of the house's dilapidated condition are all based on natural elements: blue-iron weeds that grow high, chipmunks using the fence as a highway, and the slug and toad lie silent on the flagstones. The flagstone, or flat pieces of sandstone, are commonly broken up and used to make walkways. However, it can also be used as flat grave marker, and therefore could represent the old house itself and the spirit of the "sweet girl long dead." Yet, despite the seemingly disrepair of the house, and the peculiar feeling the poem gives to scene, Cawein finds tranquility as night approaches, "let us wait until each rain-stained room is carpeted with moonlight.../And through the house goes rustling soft/ As might the ghost--a whisper of perfume-- Of some sweet girl long dead." Cawein is able to take two very dismal images, an abandoned house and a dead girl, and combine them to produce a sense of peaceful harmony with nature.

Before his death in 1914 Cawein had gained both national and international recognition. He received the praises of William Dean Howells in America and Edmund Gosse in London. Yet the question still remains as to why Cawein is unknown today. The answer to the question is fairly simple and incredibly complex. Cawein published 36 volumes of poetry and the literary quality of the poems is questionable. In short, much of Cawein's work seems to be overrun with elements of nature and fantasy. Because of his extreme devotion to his calling as a nature poet, Cawein's potent work is buried deep in the forests and hills of Kentucky's landscapes. Cawein, although praised by some, was not readily accepted by his generation. In 1902 William Archer wrote of Cawein in *Poets*

*of the Younger Generation* and devoted the first ten pages of the book to Cawein. By this point, Cawein had published 19 volumes of poetry and according to Archer one's "mind becomes so fatigued in wading through the marsh jungle or Mr. Cawein's unpruned, unchastened fancy, that it presently loses all power of discrimination and cannot tell the flower from the weed" (Archer 83). Only four years after the poet's death, Louis Untermeyer says that Cawein "pictures all outdoors with painstaking detail: and yet it is somehow unreal, prettified, remote...the reader is quickly wearied by the almost interminable procession of gnomes, elves, dryads, spirits, fays, and fauns" (Ward 96).

Cawein's poetry is also heavily laden with the influences of other poets. His first volume, *Blooms of the Berry* (published in 1887, shortly after his graduation from the Male High School in Louisville) already reflects his twin concerns: nature and spiritualism. Cawein's teacher, Robert H. Cathers, writes in a letter to Rothert that "it would not be a difficult task to trace in his writings some influence derived from his study of Hale's *Longer English Poems* which was used as a textbook" (Rothert 79). *Longer English Poems* is a compilation of works by Tennyson, Keats, Shelley and other English poets. During his time at school, Cawein discovered his poetic influences, figures that would haunt his poetic style for the rest of his life. Cawein would choose to follow the styles set forth by these poets and would adhere to the poetic rules of meter, rhyme, and nature as subject. Cawein received favorable reviews in regards to taking these influences and composing his own poetry. Walter N. Burns writes in the *Courier-Journal*: "In subject, in treatment, in language, Tennyson's influence can be traced, but only for good. There is no slavish imitation, no mere echoing of any subject, but familiarity of Tennyson and Swinburne is easily seen" (Rothert 85).

In an interview conducted by lawyer and friend, William W. Thum, Cawein claims that he was “fascinated by Keats and Shelley, and Goldsmith and Spencer” and that he “commenced to writing poems in imitations of others” (Rothert 122). He also states that “Coleridge took hold of me also—like a terrible spirit” (Rothert 122). These were the poets of Cawein’s youth. Later, he said Tennyson, Browning, and Wordsworth were the poets that inspired him when he responded to a “Questionnaire” in 1914, only a few months before his death.<sup>3</sup> Given Cawein’s acknowledgement of his influences and the style of his poetry, there is no doubt that he was “emulating what [he] understood to be poetry” (Perkins 87).

After the Civil War, many American poets felt that America needed “culture” and therefore, turned to the great English poets for inspiration. At the turn of the century, “many Americans had a remarkably literal faith in culture” and this “contributed to an imprisoning stock conception of what poetry should be (beautiful, elevating, refined, traditional, and ideal) and, still more importantly, what it should not be (vulgar, homespun, idiosyncratic, realistic, deflating)” (Perkins 95). Poetry was to preserve the enchantment of American society, it was to “maintain the ‘spiritual’ side of life” (Perkins 95).

One could stop here with Cawein’s work, allowing these ideals to be the tagline for Cawein’s poetic style and purpose. However, I believe his closing responses to the “Influences” section of the Questionnaire, his correspondences, and the thematic shifts in his later works reveal that Cawein was becoming disenchanted with direction of American culture. Cawein was very much a Romantic; in Romantic poetry, “nature is almost omnipresent” and “it is almost always favorably regarded: it is refreshing

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<sup>3</sup> The “Questionnaire” can be found in full in Rothert’s work on pages 120-125.

aesthetically appealing, sympathetic, wise, or a source of wisdom, occasionally even divine” (Perkins 4). It seems as though Cawein’s later poetry shifts to a direction similar to Yeats’ idea of the Celtic Twilight:

“The poetry of the Celtic Twilight, then in its attempt to be local in setting and radical in mood, and revive the imaginative heritage of the people, was a late product of Romanticism in its interplay with nationalism. Yeats especially hoped that the old mythology...would foster a sentiment of national unity...Thus, in a few generations habits of sensibility would be reeducated; the mind and the language would be cleansed of abstraction; and a large, diverse and imaginative audience would come into being...” (Perkins 26)

Cawein seems to have taken the idea of interplay between traditional metric style and the “radical mood” of the changing century and to have fused the two together in order to provide a critique on the changing forms. However, Cawein was also searching for a way to preserve the styles of meter and rhyme for future generations.

Cawein was recognizing the inevitable shift in popular poetic style. He realized that the conventional methods to which he had adhered could become obsolete. Cawein realized that his poetic style was to be the last line in this particular chapter of American poetry. Rather than accepting the new style, which is now known as Modernism, Cawein refused to give in and remained steadfast in trying to preserve not only the landscapes he loved, but also the poetic style to which he had dedicated his life.

## **Chapter Two: Anxieties in Cawein's Writing: Money, Method & Modernism**

In Thum's Questionnaire, Cawein provides a list of his influences from the time of his youth to his maturity. He claims to find "rest and quiet" in Wordsworth. Cawein's last sentence to this section raises an interesting notion. He states that the poetic influences of his youth now cause "agitation and unease of the soul, and longings that can never be satisfied" (Rothert 123). In the later years of Cawein's life, the poet began to feel the stress of his chosen path. Poetry was a career choice that did not bring in a great deal of money, and the style of poetry which he had dedicated his life to writing was essentially going out of style. The "agitation and unease" to which he alludes could be the recognition and grim acceptance that his kind of traditional poetry would never bring the money or the widespread fame for which he hoped. As a youth, Cawein aspired to find his place among the great Romantic poets but in the early 1910s, Cawein was struggling to find a way to preserve the poetry he loved in spite of the new rising style which was "more like prose than poetry" (Rothert 316). Cawein found himself in a difficult position; he either had to take arms against the new style of poetry or embrace the new techniques.

He associated his struggle with changing literary techniques with his financial struggle. Cawein worked for his brother from 1887-1892 in a poolroom. He worked as a cashier, taking the money for gamblers' bets and their debts. However, after eight years in this industry, Cawein decided that this was no place for a poet and quit his job in order to pursue a full time writing career, saying that he "was 'behind the bars' as it were, the brass bars of the cashier's desk" (Rothert 122).

By this time, Modernism and free verse poetry replaced his kind of poetry. Cawein's letters from 1913 and 1914 reveal his opposition to the unconventional style. In the two years before his death, Cawein became very anxious about money and seems to have tied this to a book market that was no longer interested in his kind of poetry. In fact, however, Cawein had invested thousands in the stock market and lost almost everything he had by doing so. He writes to a friend:

I am in great trouble. Reverses, financial, have come upon me that make it necessary for me to seek employment—something otherwise than poetry to do. No one but Mr. Noyes can make a living from the writing of poetry. I have tried to, but the cost of living is too high. I must find something else to do. Newspaper work I am not fitted for; I know nothing at all about it. I can write poetry—God, what a commentary on inability that is! Could there be anything worse in the eyes of the world! If I had devoted myself to medicine or to the law for the thirty years I have devoted myself to poetry, I would not be writing you thus, but be comfortably fixed in the goods of the world. (Rothert 312)

In a letter to long time friend, R.E. Lee Gibson, Cawein writes of how he and his son Preston “made a raise last week” by selling autographed volumes of James Whitcomb Riley to a rare book collector for \$150 (Rothert 322). Among these books was a special autographed book to young Preston. Despite the sentimental value of the book, its financial value was greater; Cawein was forced to sell a significant portion of his library.

I believe that Cawein's desperate financial situation and the onset of World War I gave rise to his hatred for the “prose” style of writing which is what he called “free verse.” Cawein states that, “It's a bad lot, this trying to live in the age of wars and

commercialism” (Rothert 328). Cawein became increasingly despondent during these years. Despite working for years in a poolroom, watching the gambling world, he was still able to find comfort and beauty in nature and the world. However, the pressure of earning a living and supporting his family became progressively more difficult during this time. I believe that Cawein’s expression of his opposition to writers such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot stems from his need to sell his poetry. Cawein’s style was exactly what these writers were pushing against; therefore, if they were to be succeed Cawein would have no place in the literary sphere and, more importantly, his poems would have no monetary value. He was envious of the financial support that other countries gave to their poets:

“Poetry is not encouraged enough in this country. Now in England it is quite different. I see that the government there has recently pensioned W. B. Yeats, and a poor poet named Davies who was a tramp at one time and still very poor. This puts the two poets in a position to devote their lives to poetry and dispense with anxiety for the future which simply eats out all the poetical quality in a man. I am anxious every day as to what is to become of me and mine in the near future.”

(Rothert 301)

Cawein believed that his poetry, written in meter, often rhyming, would *sell*; therefore, he choose to continue composing poetry in this form in hopes that magazines would select his poems and that he could influence the literary world to return to these traditional styles. However, this very need to write poems in the old way caused Cawein to become a victim of the very commercial and materialistic world he despised. This ultimately prevented Cawein from fully participating in the literary movement that we

now known as Modernism. Cawein needed to sell his poetry; therefore, he had to discourage the publication of poetry that differed from his style. This is why he encouraged *Poetry* editor Harriet Monroe, to publish less of Pound, saying that he was

“Walt Whitman gone mad, without the grace and sound common sense of Whitman to redeem the platitude and lack of poetic form and inspiration. A boy could write such stuff by the yard without any mental effort whatever. May God help us, who love real poetry, if this is the kind of verse we are to be doomed to read in the next decade.” (Rothert 316)

Cawein firmly believed “that form and rhythm and music are absolutely necessary to the making of good poetry” (Rothert 322). Therefore, his opposition was not to the ideas that Modernist writers aimed to address, but rather to the style in which they chose to do it, free verse. Cawein still believed in meter and rhyme and did not associate the lack of meter with the detested commercialism or materialism. In short, he falsely viewed free verse and “The New Poetry” as “formless” as did many others (Hartman 29).

For Cawein, the absence of meter, rhyme, and other organizing qualities of poetic composition would only add to the damaging effects that urbanization had on poetry. He writes: “Ours is a materialistic nation that reckons as achievements its wonderful progress in material things, inventions, manufactories, railroads, ocean liners, tunnels, tubes, and bridges. These are the things on which we base our pre-eminence. The spiritual, the intellectual, must accept second place” (Rothert 352). This idea is in essence, the same problem that Modernist writers sought to address in their works.

Although it is difficult to define Modernism, it is commonly agreed that it is an ideological critique of “modernity and of the complex social developments associated

with industrialization, urbanization, and democratization” and that “living through such a period of momentous social, political, and cultural upheaval can be seen as a key motivating factor in the modernist insistence on an equivalently momentous upheaval in aesthetic practice” (Poplawski ix).

Even before World War I was underway, Cawein recognized that increasing urbanization would alienate the individual and ultimately cause one to forget the beauty of nature and meter entirely. He realized that the poet was the last defense against this tragedy; thus, he began to write poems that explicitly expressed his concerns about this issue. Yet he felt that a total break from meter and from his beloved subjects, nature and spirit, would result in the undoing of poetry; this is why Cawein addressed the idea of urbanization by using metrical poetry. By definition, “meter is an organizing principle which turns the general tendency toward regularity in rhythm into a strictly-patterned regularity, that can be counted and named” (Attridge 7). Cawein was dedicated to writing poetry that followed these patterned regularities. Therefore, Cawein saw an opportunity to organize the changing world by using metrical form to create regularity amidst the chaos. Nonetheless, Cawein did not turn a blind eye to the problems that were fast approaching the next generation. The last group of poems found in Cawein’s collection, *Minions of the Moon*, expresses the same concerns that were later represented in a radically non-conventional form by Modernist writer, T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*.

### Chapter Three: Minions of the Moon

One thousand copies of *Minions* were published in 1913 by Stewart & Kidd Company. Cawein said that this book was written “in my best vein, I think—all poetry, if I am not mistaken” (Rothert 315). This book is an interesting compilation, mostly because the work is primarily labeled as a children’s book. The dedication reads: “To all Children, big and little, who have ever believed or still believe in faeries, I dedicate this little book, that attempts to set forth in words all that such a belief may mean to the soul of man” (*Minions* 5).

This was not Cawein’s first book for children. In 1909, he published *The Giant and the Star, Little Annals in Rhyme*, which was dedicated to his son Preston Cawein. Yet the tones of these two books differ greatly. *The Giant and the Star* contains whimsical children’s poems that also have a didactic quality: they urge children to exhibit proper manners. He warns of eating too much candy and of being a bully. Yet he also suggests that children should not be too good, but should play and get dirty. These poems, in true Cawein style, contain many references to nature, most of which are simple and informative, presumably so that his child readers could learn about the plants and animals.

The tone and trajectory of *Minions* is the very opposite of *The Giant and the Star*. The book, written for both children *and* adults, contains poems such as, *Wasteland*, *The Old Remain*, and *The New God*. These stand in stark contrast to his previous children’s poems, such as *Toyland*, *The Land of Candy*, and *HappyGoLucky*. Given Cawein’s concern about the present materialism of what he called the “doomed” generation, I

believe the publication of a children's book was his attempt to ensure that his preferred style of poetry would be remembered by the next generation. As we know, Cawein was exposed to poetic form, nature, and fantasy as a young child. Therefore, his attempt to expose a new, younger generation to the same ideas through poetry is not surprising, especially if Cawein thought that this form of poetry was in jeopardy of being overshadowed by a new style.

## **Wasteland**

When attempting to connect the work of Cawein to the early Modernist movement, the one poem that provides an undeniable link is *Wasteland*. The poem was first published in the January 1913 issue of *Poetry* and later in *Minions of the Moon*. Although *Minions* is stylistically one of his best works, *Wasteland* has become known today as Cawein's "one-hit wonder" because of its publication in the January 1913 issue of *Poetry*. Critics have made the connection between Cawein's poem and T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. Although Eliot never acknowledges familiarity with Cawein's poem or lists it as a source for his own, he would have seen the poem in *Poetry*. Pound, who would later become good friends with Eliot, had an editorial comment in that same issue, "Status Rerum", which was a review of Imagist poetry. The article highly praised Yeats.

Cawein's *Wasteland* presents a desolate image of the same outdoors that Cawein had presented in his earlier works. However, unlike those poems, this is not the outdoors of enchanted fields with faeries and nymphs, but instead seems to be the center of all decay. It is quite interesting the Cawein writes a poem that does not present nature as having a powerful poetic or healing quality. Instead, he gives us a field upon which

nature has wreaked havoc. Having a reputation as a nature poet, I believe this poem is Cawein's attempt at integrating himself among the modernists and showing his concerns about the changing modern world of industry and literature. Because Cawein was not an urban poet, he was forced to work within his familiar region. Cawein had dedicated his career to writing about nature; however, in his later years, he began to understand how human nature could be found in nature. *Wasteland* expresses his growing anxieties about America and his place in the changing literary sphere.

In this poem, nature has added to the destruction of the field. Biographically, we can also say that Nature is what led to Cawein's destruction. I believe Cawein realizes that his devotion to nature poetry, which in his eyes became a dying art that needs to be saved, will cause him to fall out of the favor with the new modernists. Considering that Eliot is held in the highest esteem and Cawein is all but forgotten, these anxieties were not without reason. Cawein presents his readers with an image of a field void of all life, except for the brief appearance of an old man and his blind dog. Cawein uses the desolate imagery to suggest that the field of poetry will become a sort of wasteland if metrical form, rhyme, and beauty are overshadowed by free verse.

The speaker describes the trees as the "tortured bones of a perished race" (23). This suggests that the trees are grim and that poets such as Cawein are to become a perished race. The gnarled trees as symbols of their poetry will become but skeletons. Cawein is concerned that people will no longer appreciate his poems. These lines indicate that if the speaker, namely Cawein, once felt a certain sentiment for this field, a symbol of poetry, he no longer does. Repose can be defined as a "temporary rest or cessation from physical or mental exertion" (OED). If the idea is that the poet stopped in

the place to rest, the poet's mind is not rested, but rather disturbed by the natural wasteland that he sees before him.

The only life that Cawein introduces in the *Wasteland* is that of a man and his old hound. The speaker claims to have actually *seen* the man, "I saw him plain" (35). Cawein uses natural imagery to describe the man: he is a lichen form and looks like a dead weed. These naturalistic descriptions suggest that the man is a symbol of metrical poetry. The man is a natural figure, just as metrical form is a natural element to poetry. However, the idea of natural form does not belong in this wasteland, which is not the beautiful field from Cawein's earlier works. Therefore, the man is a symbol for natural poetry and even becomes, I believe, a symbol for Cawein himself as a poet.

The man disappears almost as quickly as he appears, which begs the question, did the speaker actually see the man or was he just a ghost that haunted the mind's repose? The man's brief and out of place appearance represents Cawein's faltering belief in his own adherence to conventional aesthetics. There is no doubt that Cawein believes that the poetry void of meter and rhyme will become nothing but a wasteland. However, in this poem, we see that Cawein also begins to doubt the reality of the unfailing beauty in nature. Because Cawein can now see the "waste" he can now also admit that he is struggling to find the interdependent relationship between the old and the new. The speaker closes by wondering if the figures were "a part of the grim death there" or if they "were form of the mind, an old despair/that there into semblance grew/out of the grief I knew" (36, 38-40). This indicates that the speaker is also struggling with the relationship between traditional poetry and the new style of free verse.

The fact that Cawein leaves an indeterminate answer suggests that the responsibility of deciding on the fate of the man and metrical poetry lies with the reader. This poem suggests that responsibility to uphold the old style now encompasses the reader, who must choose to allow this form to suffer a “grim death” or find some new “semblance” of it within the wasteland of modern poetry.

## “Wasteland”

Briar<sup>i</sup> and fennel<sup>ii</sup> and chincapin<sup>iii</sup>,  
And rue<sup>iv</sup> and ragweed<sup>v</sup> everywhere;  
The field seemed sick as a soul with sin,  
Or dead of an old despair,  
Born of an ancient care.

The cricket's cry<sup>vi</sup> and the locust's whirr<sup>vii</sup>,  
And the note<sup>viii</sup> of a bird's distress<sup>ix</sup>,  
With the rasping<sup>x</sup> sound of the grasshopper<sup>xi</sup>,  
Clung to the loneliness  
Like burrs to a trailing dress<sup>xii</sup>.

So sad the field, so waste the ground,  
So curst with an old despair,  
A woodchuck's burrow<sup>xiii</sup>, a blind mole's mound<sup>xiv</sup>,  
And a chipmunk's stony lair<sup>xv</sup>,  
Seemed more than it could bear<sup>xvi</sup>.

So lonely, too, so more than sad,  
So droning-lone<sup>xvii</sup> with bees<sup>xviii</sup>--  
I wondered what more could Nature add  
To the sum of its miseries<sup>xix</sup> . . .  
And then--I saw the trees.<sup>xx</sup>

Skeletons gaunt<sup>xxi</sup> that gnarled<sup>xxii</sup> the place,  
Twisted and torn they rose--  
The tortured bones of a perished race<sup>xxiii</sup>  
Of monsters no mortal knows,  
They startled the mind's repose<sup>xxiv</sup>.

And a man stood there<sup>xxv</sup>, as still as moss,  
A lichen form<sup>xxvi</sup> that stared;  
With an old blind hound that, at a loss,  
Forever around him fared<sup>xxvii</sup>  
With a snarling fang half bared<sup>xxviii</sup>.

I looked at the man; I saw him plain<sup>xxix</sup>.  
Like a dead weed<sup>xxx</sup>, gray and wan,  
Or a breath of dust<sup>xxxi</sup>. I looked again--  
And man and dog were gone<sup>xxxii</sup>,  
Like wisps of the graying dawn<sup>xxxiii</sup> . . . .

Were they a part of the grim death there--  
Ragweed, fennel, and rue?<sup>xxxiv</sup>  
Or forms of the mind, an old despair<sup>xxxv</sup>,  
That there into semblance grew  
Out of the grief I knew?<sup>xxxvi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Briar, also spelled brier, is a term generally applied to any plant that has a “woody and thorny or prickly stem. Cawein begins with the image to a briar in order to suggest that the poem itself will be “woody” and “prickly.” (OED).

<sup>ii</sup> According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* fennel is another plant, an aromatic herb. According to a Greek myth, knowledge came to man from Olympus in the form of a fiery coal contained in a fennel stalk. This myth lead me to suggest that Cawein is about to reveal some piece of knowledge to his readers.

<sup>iii</sup> Chinkapin, more commonly spelled chinquapin, is an evergreen tree closely related to the beech tree. It produces a single seeded burs, which when opened produces a nut. The juxtaposition of an evergreen tree with the thorny briars implies that even though the field is barren, that something lasting can be found the despairing landscape, in particular, the poetic landscape (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

<sup>iv</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes rue as a shrub that posses healing qualities often used in medicines. However, “rue” also means sorrow and distress or even regret. I believe that Cawein chose this particular shrub because of this double meaning.

Although in his early work, he seemed to pick plants at random, the ones chosen for this poem seem to be selected to further the meaning of poem.

<sup>v</sup> Ragweed is a weed that produces a great amount of pollen, which often results in a hay fever when shed. The notion that a great abundance can cause a sickness parallels Cawein’s situation. He has produced a great amount of work, yet it is not in the style that is rising in culture, and this causes an “agitation” to his soul, just as the pollen agitates the sinuses (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

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<sup>vi</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* reveals that only the male cricket can chirp, with the two most common songs being the calling or mating song and the fight song, which repels other males. Female crickets lay their eggs into plant stems, which is often times damaging to the plant. At first notice, the crickets would seem to be a sign of life in the desolate landscape, but the fact that males are aggressive, egg-laying destroys plants, and they are often times cannibalistic, this insect only adds to the bleakness of the scene. Eliot also references crickets in his *Waste Land*, “the cricket no relief” (23).

<sup>vii</sup> According to the OED, “whirr” continuous vibratory sound, such as that made by the rapid fluttering of a bird's or insect's wings. To achieve a “whirring” sound, there must be a swarm of locust rather than just one or two of the insects. *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that locusts can migrate long distances and travel in destructive swarms, which appear and disappear sporadically. In attempts to explain this, a phase theory has been developed. According to this theory, a plague species has two phases: solitary and gregarious. The solitary phase is the normal state of the insect whereas the gregarious phase is a “physiological response to violent fluctuations in the environment”. If the environment changes, the locusts are forced into smaller habitats which causes crowding and triggers the shift to the gregarious phase. A locust in the stage is restless and irritable. They typically fly straight up into the fast moving winds and then are carried by the wind; however, when the wind slows or stops, gravity takes hold and causes them to fall from the sky. The fact that Cawein alludes to a destructive swarm of locusts in his wasteland suggests that ignoring metrical tradition will not last, but instead, will prove a destructive force to society and when the winds of this movement cease to blow they will fall, overtaken by the gravity that is traditional literature.

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<sup>viii</sup> The bird's 'note' is not that of happy song, but rather a sound of distress and disruption.

<sup>ix</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* states birds are often disturbed by locust swarms that invade the same habitat. This suggests that genteel poets, such as Cawein, were distressed by the invasion of the free poets.

<sup>x</sup> The OED states that rasping is the "the action or an act of rubbing or scraping...a rough grating sound." Cawein chooses to describe the sounds with harsh adjectives, which furthers the notion that this is not a romantic or light-hearted nature poem.

<sup>xi</sup> Grasshoppers can become crop pests, and have to be controlled with insecticides and poison baits (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Cawein, although a naturalist uses these problem insects, that cause substantial harm to the natural environment, to symbolize what will happen if traditional poetic techniques are completely invaded by the new.

<sup>xii</sup> The OED defines burr as a type of seed or fruit that has sticky bristles. This is so that they can "cling" to whatever comes by in order to pollinate. Cawein suggests that these are ideas will cling and pollinate to the "dress," which implies that the wearer is like an unsuspecting victim. This could also be a reference to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry*, who supported "Modernist" poetry. Cawein had written to her saying, "the less of that Ezra Pound stuff you put in your pages the better it will be for the future of *Poetry*" (Rothert 316).

<sup>xiii</sup> The woodchuck is a solitary creature that builds extensive burrows underground. The animal is also a hibernator and during winter, other animals seek shelter in its burrow while it hibernates (*Encyclopedia Britannica*)

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<sup>xiv</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that the mole also spends the majority of its life underground. The mole has terrible vision, but has an acute sense of smell and touch. They only surface to find nesting materials and seek water during droughts.

<sup>xv</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* reveals that chipmunks also spend much of their time in the forest understory. They are found in rocky areas and also dens in burrows. The fact that Cawein alludes to three burrowing species suggests a sort of underground burial or death of poetry. This suggests that Cawein does not want his metrical poetry to die and be buried or to be forgotten.

<sup>xvi</sup> The field cannot bear to have these aspects because they would indicate signs of life and this particular field is sick, and therefore life cannot exist. Eliot also references rodents in his poem, as the rats disturb the bones in lines 187-195 in *The Fire Sermon* section.

<sup>xvii</sup> “Droning-lone” is an amalgamation, a word of Cawein’s own creation. A “drone” is a male honey-bee that does not work, but instead impregnates the queen-bee. Drone is also a “continued deep monotonous sound of humming or buzzing” (OED). The lone further indicates the “loneliness” referenced in the line before. However, the combination of these two words also recreates the deep monotonous sound if read aloud.

<sup>xviii</sup> These bees, assumed to be drones, are not working to create honey, but are working to create life. However, there seems to be no life in this field. Male bees are also short lived, which could represent Cawein’s coming to terms with the fact that his poetic career will be short lived if Modernist technique prevails. This idea works well with the second half of the poem, which provides the image of a man that has but a brief stay in the poem.

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<sup>xix</sup> These lines introduce the notion that Cawein's "miseries" stem from his fear that metrical poetic style will be overshadowed and forgotten in free verse becomes the new style.

<sup>xx</sup> These lines are similar to Eliot's "And the dead tree gives no shelter." (23).

<sup>xxi</sup> Gaunt is to yawn or gape. (OED)

<sup>xxii</sup> Gnarled indicates the trees are knotty or distorted or twisted.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Eliot also has lines that are similar to these, line 115 "where dead men lost their bones."

<sup>xxiv</sup> These lines further the idea that Cawein's sentimental feelings toward nature have lessened.

<sup>xxv</sup> This is the introduction of the Fisher King. *The Cambridge Companion to Arthurian Literature* states that the Fisher King is a symbol in Arthurian literature of the wounded or sick king that has been rendered impotent due to wound and his kingdom is in disarray. Knight come for all over in attempts to heal the king, but only the chosen ones are successful. Cawein has knowledge of Arthurian literature (see the "Accolon of Gaul") and therefore, would have known that a "wasteland" is often associated with the Fisher King.

<sup>xxvi</sup> The man has a lichen form. *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that lichen is a "plantlike organism that consist of a symbiotic association of algae and fungi. The fact that the figure is a "lichen form" suggests that there is a sort of symbiotic relationship between the nature poet and nature. If nature, and the appreciation of nature, is destroyed, so will be the poet. Given the onset of a World War and the increasing urbanization, Cawein's urgency to preserve nature and poetics is even more apparent in this comparison.

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<sup>xxvii</sup> Dogs are often viewed as a symbol of protection and loyalty. Also, many heroes and kings have had loyal dogs. However, this dog is blind and therefore needs the man as well. This furthers the idea that there is a symbiotic relationship emerging in the poem. I believe these lines represent Cawein's belief that poetry can maintain metrical style while also being culturally relevant. This poem in itself is Cawein's attempt to prove that this type of symbiotic relationship is possible.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Although the dog cannot see, much like Cawein is blind to the future, he still follows his master with "his snarling fang half bared". This suggests that Cawein has his fangs bared, as he prepares to fight against cultural despair.

<sup>xxix</sup> These lines seem to indicate that the poet is actually seeing the man, that he is real; however, before the end of the stanza, the man has disappeared. I believe that Cawein is attempting to create a more realistic figure of the "spirits" that we encountered in his earlier works.

<sup>xxx</sup> The Fisher King's wound causes impotence, which is what sets his lands in disarray. The "dead weed" could be a euphemism for his condition with the cause of the wound being the abandonment of the traditional poetic form.

<sup>xxxi</sup> The man disappears as quickly as he emerged and the wording parallels Eliot's line, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

<sup>xxxii</sup> The two figures have disappeared; however, we are not sure if they were 'actual' figures or only ghosts that haunted the mind's repose. This indeterminacy represents Cawein's faltering beliefs in his own adherence to conventional aesthetics. There is no doubt that Cawein believes that poetry needs rhyme and form; however, in this poem especially, we see that Cawein begins to doubt the beauty in nature. This fact that

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Cawein can now see the “waste” in the world indicates that he is struggling to find the interdependent relationship between the old and the new.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Cawein compares this disappearance to the dawn, rather than the sunset. This fact implies that he recognizes that we are on the verge of a new century and a new literary era. Despite his opposition, Cawein is realizing that the two must find a way to coexist or one will be taken over completely by the other.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> The speaker now wonders if the figures were just a part of the “grim death” that he witnessed in the field. Is the man a part of the agitation caused by the new styles, hence the return to ragweed, fennel, and rue.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Cawein returns to the opening lines and only at the poem’s close does the reader understand that the old despair belongs to the speaker. I believe the despair that Cawein experiences is because he knows that he cannot fight against the new poetry that is emerging.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> The speaker then suggests that the man was a figure of his mind, which he created out of grief. Cawein imagines the fisher king; however, Cawein does not see himself as the king. Rather, Cawein is the knight, the chosen one that can heal the Fisher King, and ultimately heal the land as well. Cawein’s attempts to express his concerns over the loss of poetic form by writing poetry that follows that form but still addresses the problems facing his society, is his attempt to *heal* the wounds.

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## **“The Old Remain”**

Although not quite as obvious as “Wasteland,” Cawein’s poem “The Old Remain” expresses the same need for a symbiotic relationship between the aged and the new, or, as the poem says, the old and the young. With the onset of the conflict in the East, many of the young men were enlisting to go overseas to fight. The war offered a means of escape and adventure for these young boys, especially those from rural areas. Enough time has elapsed between the Civil War and the current conflict that many had forgotten the devastation and were only looking to the promise of the future. However, when the young men returned, if they returned, they had a different mindset altogether. Their sense of morality had been altered and, as a result, their ability to continue to see the good and beautiful in nature had also been lost.

Cawein recognized the beginning of this effect in urbanization itself. With the opening line, Cawein draws on the notion that the “young” are gone. This is a reference to the next generation whom he feels are fated to lose poetic inspiration. If the young have been drawn away by the war, the city, and the modernist idea of free verse poetry, then only older poets like him bear the burden of keeping the traditional poetic form alive and with it beauty as well. The idea that youth were drawn to the “brawn” suggests that the idea that production value was somehow greater than artistic value.

Although Cawein’s title suggests that the poem would focus on the remaining old figures like him, the subject seems really to be the old ways’ absence or loss of the young. Although the idea might seem obvious, if the younger generation leaves, then the older generation will be left the implications concerning poetry and beauty are not

obvious. Cawein's work expresses a deep concern over this seemingly simple notion. If the younger generation finds inspiration through materialism (which included to his mind, free verse) rather than nature and beauty, then they will be drawn away from the old ideals (beauty as represented by meter, and rhyme). The youth have left nature for the "cities of unrest", which we already know Cawein detested. Cawein's implication throughout this poem is that if the youth venture out in search of something new, then the old will remain. However, the old will not remain, as in endure, but will remain as in to stay behind.

Cawein's poem is not titled "The Young Are Gone," but rather "The Old Remain." This suggests that the poem could be read as a metaphor for his style of traditional poetry, the rhyme and meter which has been left behind. The fact that the youth have ventured away from their poetic roots into free verse suggests that this style of poetry will ultimately be forgotten. Since the youth will not do it, Cawein suggests that the old should somehow find a way to merge their dreams for the future and their memories of the past in order to preserve the traditions of poetic form.

In this book generally, the poems attempt to merge the concept of the concern for modernity with the forms of the conventional: Cawein never would have forfeited the notion of traditional poetic construction altogether and this poem fully expresses why. In it, readers can see Cawein's fear that without someone to inherit the responsibility of continuing the poetic tradition of rhyme and meter they will be lost.

### “The Old Remain”

The old remain, the young are gone.<sup>xxxvii</sup>  
The farm dreams lonely on the hill<sup>xxxviii</sup> :  
From early eve to early dawn<sup>xxxix</sup>  
A cry<sup>xl</sup> goes with the whippoorwill<sup>xli</sup> —  
"The old remain, the young are gone."<sup>xlii</sup>

Where run the roads they wander on?<sup>xliii</sup>  
The young, whose hearts romped shouting here:  
Whose feet thrilled rapture<sup>xliv</sup> through this lawn,  
Where sadness walks now all the year.<sup>xlv</sup> —  
The old remain, the young are gone<sup>xlvi</sup> .

To what far glory are they drawn?<sup>xlvii</sup>  
And do they weary of the quest?<sup>xlviii</sup>  
And serve they now a king or pawn<sup>lix</sup>  
There in the cities of unrest?<sup>l</sup> —  
The old remain, the young are gone<sup>li</sup> .

They found the life here gray and wan<sup>lii</sup> ,  
Too kind, too poor, too full of peace<sup>liii</sup> :  
The great mad world of brain and brawn<sup>liv</sup>  
Called to their young hearts without cease<sup>lv</sup> .—  
The old remain, the young are gone.<sup>lvi</sup>

They left us to our Avalon<sup>lvii</sup> ,  
The ancient fields<sup>lviii</sup> , the house and trees,  
Where we at sunset and at dawn<sup>lix</sup>  
May sit with dreams and memories.<sup>lx</sup> —  
The old remain, the young are gone<sup>lxi</sup> .

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<sup>xxxvii</sup> This is also a reference the fact that many young men have enlisted and gone overseas to fight in the war.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> “The farm dreams” could be read at a noun and verb sentence structure, the farm itself is dreaming lonely on the hills. These lines could also be read as the ‘farm dreams,’ similar to the phrase, the “American dream.” If structured like the last, it suggests that the “farm dream” or the idea of rural self-sustainability has been left behind in favor of seeking something else, such as city life or adventures overseas. This furthers the notion that traditional ideas, such as “farm dreams” will be left “lonely on the hill.”

<sup>xxxix</sup> The poem is set during the night.

<sup>xl</sup> By using the word “cry” as opposed to call, Cawein indicates a sense of sadness or mourning for the absence of the youth.

<sup>xli</sup> According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* the whippoorwill is a nocturnal bird that is named for its vigorous call. The bird can repeat this call up to 400 times without stopping. Cawein will use the bird to repeat his call, “The old remain, the young are gone” six times throughout the poem. The repetition of this phrase suggests that this is the point Cawein is trying to emphasize to his readers.

<sup>xlii</sup> This is the first time the bird and the poet sounds the call. It is offset by quotations, which suggests the verbal sounding of the line.

<sup>xliii</sup> “They” in this line are the youth that have gone. Cawein questions where the roads they are on will lead. This can be unpacked in many ways. The uncertainty of their

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travels could also represent the fact that the youth are travel on roads that lead away from the rural and traditional, which furthers the idea that Cawein is troubled over this fact.

<sup>xliv</sup> According the OED, rapture can be defined as “the action or an act of carrying on.” Because Cawein is concerned about traditional poetics being forgotten, he emphasizes that the young who were here were the ones to carry it on. The fact that they are on lawn suggests that they were outside in nature, which brought about rapture in both meanings of the word: the “act of carrying on” and the “intense state of delight.”

<sup>xlv</sup> These lines suggest that without the presence of youth, the place is now sad and empty. Cawein realizes that without someone to inherit the responsibility of continuing his aesthetics, they will be lost. Furthermore, the youths’ hearts romped here in the land and also in the traditional form, yet they turn away from it.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Again, this phrase is emphasized to imply that the youth are moving away and the old are staying behind. However, this time it is not spoken the bird but by the poet, hence the lack of quotations.

<sup>xlvii</sup> This line suggest that Cawein is referencing the youth that have ventured to war. For many, in rural areas such as Kentucky, enlisting offered an opportunity for travel. It was a means to see the world; however, because it was not merely leisure travel, the youth that left would forever be gone or changed by the effects of the war. “Records of the United States War Department best show Kentucky's participation in World War I. A total of 84,172 persons from Kentucky served in the United States Army” (ky.gov).

<sup>xlviii</sup> The “quest” suggests that the youth left for war on the premise of finding adventure. However, the old and wise realize that going to war is not a the best way to seek adventure for it also provides the “knight” with exposure to death and destruction, which

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will ultimately destroy the positive outlook on life and shatter their ability to find comfort in tradition, especially if seeking valor through fighting is a part of the tradition.

<sup>xlix</sup> In the game of chess, the King is the object which needs to be protected and it is also the piece that others are seeking to capture. The pawn is the first line of defense against the attacking team and therefore, they are often the first to fall and are sacrificed early in the game. The implication in these lines is that the king (traditional poetic form) is being attacked and needs to be protected, but the youth, are willing to serve the pawns (the new). Failing to understand how the game works, will ultimately result in a loss for the player. The fact that the youth do not understand which piece to serve indicates that they will lose in the end, with the sacrifice being the ideals of tradition. Eliot also titles one of the sections in his poem, “A Game of Chess.”

<sup>l</sup> The youth have moved into the large cities, which are busy and chaotic. These lines are similar to Eliot’s *Unreal City*, with a reference to London in *The Waste Land*.

<sup>li</sup> Again, only the old are left in the countryside, and the youth are gone into the city.

<sup>lii</sup> *Wan* is to lack light or luster, to be gloomy and dark. Cawein realizes that the youth are not attracted to the place from which they came. They have become discontent with their life, and even with the poetry of the past.

<sup>liii</sup> Cawein still appreciates what the youth do not. He sees this place, presumably Kentucky or the country, as kind, poor, and peaceful.

<sup>liv</sup> Cawein suggests the world has gone mad. *Brawn* is the muscle, which suggests that the working has now become equal with brain or intellect. However, if one becomes involved with working, he will also become enamored with money and materialistic

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needs, rather than seek out commune with nature or with poetry. In short, the idea of commercialism and dehumanizing work will destroy the individual.

<sup>lv</sup> These ideas were pushed onto the youth, and they felt the need to answer the call. With this line, Cawein suggests that the youth are not to blame for wanting to seek this life. Instead, he suggests that the old have somehow failed to instill the fact that aesthetic value is more important than commercial value.

<sup>lvi</sup> Again, the phrase is repeated, yet this time, the tone is that the old remain and the young are gone because the old have lost them to the ideas of the modern idea of materialism.

<sup>lvii</sup> According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Avalon is the island to which King Arthur was sent in order for his wounds to heal after his final battle. This implies that Cawein feels himself in a battle against the modern pull away from the rural to the urban. It also suggests that he has somehow been wounded in the process. I believe this wound to represent the idea that the appreciation of traditional poetry has been wounded by the new conventions of writers like Pound and Yeats. However, nature or Avalon, provides a healing or redemptive component and if one will only go there, then the damage can be repaired.

<sup>lviii</sup> The ancient fields could allude to the *Wasteland*, which comes after the poem in the book.

<sup>lix</sup> The juxtaposition of sunset and dawn suggests that the sun will set and rise just like literary movements come in and out of style.

<sup>lx</sup> Poets like Cawein are left with dreams and memories. Although similar, dreams are oftentimes not real, they are a vision of something that one would hope to come to pass.

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Memories, however, are a recollection of something real that has already happened. This suggests that Cawein might have dreams that the new and old ways can be reconciled.

He realizes that the “new” will become the standard since it has already taken hold of the youth. Therefore, the old will be left with only memories of the past.

<sup>lxi</sup> The final line is the phrase repeated for the last time. However, by the final line, it seems to express Cawein’s sadness that the young are gone, leaving the old to wallow in what Eliot refers to as a “mixing memory and desire.” This mixing of “dreams and memories” suggests that Cawein realizes the hopelessness of both the old and the young if they do not learn from one another.

## The Coward

Cawein, throughout his life and his poetry, was a worshiper of nature and beauty. However, the focus of his later poems shifts and begin to focus less on nature and more on the new religion of the modern world: materialism and mechanism. Cawein recognized early on the effects that materialism would have on society. The idea that the human or natural element could be removed concerned Cawein greatly. His poetry, especially *Minions of the Moon*, introduces a new urgency to his feeling of alienation. Cawein was isolated from much of the modern world. We know he never traveled abroad, nor was he a fan of large cities. Cawein once said this after a trip Chicago: “I got out in front of my hotel on the following morning, heard all the roar of the wild beasts of the mart, held my head in my hands and took the next train home” (Rothert 104). Given that Cawein did not like the city, he was especially upset that youth was migrating from the country and into the city. For Cawein the “city” was the antithesis of all that he stood for: Nature, beauty, and the appreciation in true poetic form. Cawein saw the city as the epicenter of destruction. To him, it led only to the loss of individuality and of the individual’s sense of poetic beauty. He knew that those who remained there would lose their appreciation for nature, which would ultimately result in the complete disregard of the poetic tradition of rhyme and meter.

In the “Wasteland” Cawein provides a symbol or metaphor for his preferred style of metrical and rhyming poetry with the introduction of the “lichen” man. In the “The Coward,” Cawein personifies traditional form once more; however, this time, it takes on the shape of a young woman. Meanwhile, the “man” in this poem might well be taken

for the youth of “The Old Remain” who finally is returning home. If one reads the man in this poem as that youth, then the young man in this story has been altered, presumably by his journey into the world and away from his old love. Returned to the country the young man recognizes that he has been changed by the city and is afraid to face his love because he knows that this alteration is irreversible. The city has indeed destroyed the tradition of poetic beauty and even the youth’s soul.

Upon returning to visit his love, the young man notices that the “bird’s faint note, bee’s lone drone/Seemed to his heart monotone” (3-4). This implies that he no longer feels a spiritual connection with the sounds of nature. The idea that these sounds are “monotone” suggests that they are now all identical; they have no variation to the man’s ears. However, the man knows that before he left and went to the city this had been the place in which he had found his “love.” Returned, he chooses to sit awhile in an attempt to regain that spiritual connection; he “waked memories, forgot or dead/Of days when love this way had led (11-12). The man reflects on the face of love that led him to this spot. However, the tone of the poem suggests that he was not drawn back by this same sentimental feeling. Instead it seems as though he has returned out of a sense of duty or obligation. Love might have drawn him back as a figure but not as a feeling. Instead of the feeling of love calling to him, only duty calls: the road that leads back into to the woods “so long on lone/that he was fain to turn again (1-2).

He recalls the old house with a white fence and the “garden plot that gleamed and glowed/With color, and that overflowed with fragrance; where, both soon and late,/She mid the flowers used to wait” (15-18). These lines indicate that “she” waited for him in the garden plot. If the woman is read as a symbol for the metrical style of poetry, then

the lines imply that he and she have been separated for “months and years” and that he has been far away. Cawein uses the word “estranged” which suggests that the man feels separated and alienated from his love. The idea of alienation or estrangement will echo throughout the poem, and come full circle with its closing lines.

The man remembers their final parting which was “filled with tears” (29). It also seems that this memory revives in the poet a brief recollection of the relationship he had with nature:

He closed his eyes, and seemed to see  
That parting now: The moon above  
The old house and its locust tree;  
The moths that glimmered drowsily  
From flower to flower, the scent whereof  
Seemed portion of that oldtime love. (30-36).

These are the only lines of the poem that regard nature as having a sort of magical quality. However, the man chooses to leave this “oldtime love.” This suggests that it is both a thing of the past and somewhat out of fashion and supports the view that he came back only out of obligation and duty.

Cawein continues to play on the notion of “oldtime” or traditional love since the man claims he left “for her sake” (43). On the surface, it seems as if the man left his love to go to the city, possibly to find work. Yet he asks, “but what had come of all his toil” (44)? If one considers Cawein’s belief that he must preserve his style of poetry for the next generation, and if the woman is read as a symbol for his poetry, then these lines become even more interesting. With this reading, these lines suggest that perhaps

Cawein was the man, and that he has ventured away from the familiar landscape in hope to find a way to provide a better life for his style of poetry.

Read in that way, the lines imply that this attempt is unsuccessful because by going to “The City, like monster snake” he had only been dragged “down—down, half awake,/Crushing him in its grimy coil” (45-47). The man believes that his love, if he returns, “would read/ Failure, vice-written in his face” (50-51). If he is read as having tried to take his old love into the modernist city, than he is implying that his attempt to take nature and traditional poetry into the city has failed. The man in the poem in attempting to provide for his love, has grown so distant from her over this time, that he can no longer return to find the same relationship that he had left. The man decides that it is “better to break all oldtime ties” and when he hears the voice of his love, he runs “as if death-pursued,/He fled into the solitude” (61-62). These lines echo the previous notion of alienation. The speaker no longer feels connected to nature symbolized by the woman, yet he also recognizes the evils that the city can cause on the individual.

Cawein’s poem implies that if one leaves the traditional metrical style behind to seek the sort of free verse associated with the urban one will ultimately become alienated. The city only constricts an individual’s life. Upon returning to nature, one will feel guilty for their failure to preserve the traditional style. When they return to its origins in nature, they will see that it has forever been altered or been forgotten completely.

The poem’s title, “Coward,” refers to the idea of abandoning the traditional style, rather than assuming responsibility for its preservation. If one abandons the tradition one does so as a coward. When presented with the opportunity to rekindle the estranged relationship, the man turns away. This suggests that one’s disregard of one’s

responsibility to poetic style makes one a coward. Therefore, Cawein's acknowledgement of this duty allows him to become a champion for his dying art.

## “The Coward”

Life found the road so long and lone  
That he was fain to turn again.  
The bird's faint note, the bee's low drone.<sup>lxii</sup>  
Seemed to his heart to monotone<sup>lxiii</sup>  
The unavailing and the vain,  
And dirge<sup>lxiv</sup> the dreams that life had slain.

And for a while he sat him there  
Beside the way, and bared his head:  
He felt the hot sun on his hair;  
And weed-warm odors everywhere<sup>lxv</sup>  
Waked memories, forgot or dead,  
Of days when love this way had led

To that old house beside the road  
With white board-fence and picket gate,  
And garden plot that gleamed and glowed  
With color, and that overflowed  
With fragrance; where, both soon and late<sup>lxvi</sup>,  
She 'mid the flowers used to wait.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Was it the same? or had it changed,  
As he and she, with months and years?  
How long now had they been estranged<sup>lxviii</sup>?  
How far away their lives had ranged,  
Since that last meeting, filled with tears,  
And boyish hopes and maiden fears!<sup>lxix</sup>

He closed his eyes, and seemed to see  
That parting now: The moon above  
The old house<sup>lxx</sup> and its locust tree;  
The moths that glimmered drowsily  
From flower to flower<sup>lxxi</sup>, the scent whereof  
Seemed portion of that old time love<sup>lxxii</sup>.

Her face was lifted, pale and wet;  
Her body tense as if with pain:  
He stooped,—yes, he could see it yet—  
A moment and their young lips met,  
And then . . . There in the lonely lane  
He seemed to live it o'er again.

Why had he gone?—'Twas for her sake.—<sup>lxxiii</sup>  
But what had come of all his toil?<sup>lxxiv</sup>

The City, like some monster snake<sup>lxxv</sup>,  
Had dragged him down—down, half awake,<sup>lxxvi</sup>  
Crushing him in its grimy coil,  
Whence none escapes without a soil.<sup>lxxvii</sup>

He was not clean yet<sup>lxxviii</sup>. She would read  
Failure, vice-written, in his face.<sup>lxxix</sup>  
But, haply, now she had no need  
Of him, whose life, like some wild weed  
Full grown, with evil would replace  
The love in her heart's garden-space.

He could not bear to look and see  
The question in those virgin eyes<sup>lxxx</sup>.  
What answer for that look had he?  
He thought it out. It could not be.  
He could not live a life of lies.—  
Better to break all oldtime ties.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

And then he rose. The house was near—  
There where the road turned from the wood.—  
Whose voice was that he seemed to hear?<sup>lxxxiii</sup> —  
Then heart and soul were seized with fear,<sup>lxxxiiii</sup>  
And, turning, as if death-pursued,  
He fled into the solitude<sup>lxxxv</sup>.

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<sup>lxxii</sup> The OED defines drone as “a continued deep monotonous humming or buzzing.”

These lines suggest the only musical quality in this poem is that which is produced by the poem itself, rather than by nature.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> According to the OED, monotone is the “repetition of the same vocal tone...without change of pitch.” This suggests that the sounds themselves have not change, but rather, the man’s attitude toward them has changed.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> A dirge is “a song sung at the burial of, or in commemoration of the dead” (OED).

This suggests that the sounds produces by the bees and the bird is a lament for the now dead style of poetry they once would have help to inspire.

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<sup>lxv</sup> A weed, in general terms, is an “herbaceous plant not valued for beauty” and they often hinder the growth of other plants (OED). Because the smell of weeds is what the man notices furthers the idea that he has lost his ability to appreciate the beauty of nature. He is only noticing the stifling components of nature.

<sup>lxvi</sup> These lines indicate that the speaker was once enchanted by these same surroundings.

<sup>lxvii</sup> The “she” could also be read as a metaphor for Cawein’s poetic style or inspiration. She used to wait amid the flowers, but now he can no longer see this as his sole source for inspiration. Cawein’s failing stability has forced him to look at the ultimate cause behind this and his poetry focused on the human element, rather than just nature.

<sup>lxviii</sup> The OED defines estranged as “alienated in feeling or affection.” The man, by his choice to leave, has become alienated from the nature, and as a result, he has lost the connection and the trust that nature once provided him. Cawein suggests that distance from nature will result in the alienation of the individual and the imagination.

<sup>lxix</sup> These lines suggest the young age of the man. The idea of boyish hopes could relate to Cawein’s hope to become a great poet, and the savior of metrical style. This indicates the immaturity of the man, but given that this is his reflection on the past, it suggests that he is now more mature, just as Cawein as a poet is maturing.

<sup>lxx</sup> The image of the old house is a recurring image throughout much of Cawein’s poetry. In general, it represents the traditional style, especially since his belief in these as what constitutes poetry was evolved from his home life.

<sup>lxxi</sup> The language used in this flashback is the only “nature” language that is abundant in Cawein’s earlier work. Because this imagery is limited, it suggests that Cawein has discovered a sense of restraint, and that there is a certain level of disenchantment.

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Cawein still believes that nature and metrical composition is necessary but it is becoming increasingly challenging to adhere to those standards, especially when they are now viewed as “monotone” and old fashioned.

<sup>lxxii</sup> The “oldtime” draws attention back to the notion that this is an old idea, one that is soon to be forgotten.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> In this line, he is trying to justify why he could choose to leave his love.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> The OED defines toil as both “verbal contention, dispute, controversy” or “battle, strife.” If the poem is read as a metaphor for Cawein’s love affair with metrical nature poetry, these lines suggest that he is not entirely sure as to the success he will have in trying to incorporate new subject matter within his old forms. .

<sup>lxxv</sup> The man recognizes that the City is what has caused the alteration. The city is described as a “snake” which has certain demonic connotations. Although a snake is a natural image, it is given a negative association when paired with the city. This is a prime example of Cawein’s merging of the urban with the natural.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> “Half awake” suggests a sort of dream like state. The man is both aware and unaware that he is constricted by the city.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> This suggests that no one can go to the city without being soiled. This includes Cawein, who upon visiting the city, returned quickly to the country in order to avoid its chaos. However, even Cawein could not escape unsoiled since his poetry began to demonstrate his concern about urbanization.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Yet is the key word in this line. It suggests that the man can be cleansed of the filth he found in the city. However, unlike Cawein, the man in poem chooses to flee rather than staying and coming to terms with his love. This is what makes the man a coward

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and what makes Cawein a hero. Cawein chooses to use nature to comment on the effects of urbanization.

<sup>lxxix</sup> The man realizes that he has failed to achieve his goal, and that his love will read this failure. This suggests that Cawein realizes that his previous works were a sort of failure that others can read. He failed to write about nature in such a way that it would be remembered; therefore, he had to find a way to compromise in changing his subject, but not his metrical style.

<sup>lxxx</sup> This suggests that the girl, or metrical poetry, is the pure form of poetry. In a sense, the man's pureness has been tainted by going to the city.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> This line suggests that the man is not willing to accept the responsibility he has to his love, but instead, chooses to break the "oldtime ties" and part with this particular style.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> This line suggests that the man can still hear the voice of his love, the voice of nature calling out to him.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> The man is struck with fear, which implies that he will now address the flight or fight instinct. The man can answer the call and fight for the validity of traditional poetic form or choose to turn away from it all together.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> The man chooses to run, and fled into solitude. The OED defines solitude as the stating of living or being alone. The man realizes he does not belong in the city, he has clearly returned to country in hopes of being brave enough to find his love again.

However, when presented with the opportunity to rekindle the estranged relationship, the man turns away and fails to be true to his love of natural poetry.



## Conclusion

Madison Cawein, an all but forgotten figure in current literature, is not in any current anthology. If mention of his name does arise, it is only to suggest that he had a poem also titled *Wasteland*. Cawein wrote a tremendous amount of work during his lifetime, most of which deals with Nature. However, Cawein was not *just* a nature poet. One cannot deny that Nature was his primary muse. His father an herbalist and his mother a spiritualist, Cawein's roots developed at an early age. He was educated in the Victorian tradition, reading a great deal of Tennyson and Browning. Furthermore, Cawein was isolated by the Kentucky countryside. He was not a fan of large cities and never traveled outside of the United States. He published 36 volumes of poetry, most of which are undeniably the work of a Nature poet.

Although he was steeped in literary tradition Cawein was not so blinded by his own love for nature that he could not recognize the radical changes occurring in the United States. Cawein realized that the younger generation, who had the responsibility and power to shape the arts, were being drawn away from metrical verse by the free verse movement of modernism. His hatred for this style deepened and resulted in some of Cawein's best poetry. Cawein was reading other writers, such as Yeats, whose styles of writing and mechanics reflected the impending turmoil of society. And, like Yeats, he chose to address what he disliked by using the mechanics of rhyme and metered poetry and by using naturalistic symbolism.

Cawein faced a struggle very different than that of Modernist and free verse writers. He had to find a way to address the issues of moral decay and do so within the confines of traditional poetry. His book *Minions of the Moon* is a great example of his

attempt to do this: its poems show Cawein's evolution from Nature poet to activist. Select poems in that book address the issues of urbanization and the country's turn to a more modern and chaotic world. "Wasteland," "The Old Remain," and "The Coward" address the issues that troubled Cawein, issues that are specifically related to Modernity. However, Cawein was able to address these without feeling restricted by poetic tradition. I believe that his recognition of these problems and his dedication to poetic tradition elevate Cawein to more than just a Nature poet. The combination of these two elements makes Cawein a true *American* poet.



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