

# Aino, Child of the Sea

## Passage - The Stories That We Tell

AS YOU READ, CONSIDER HOW THIS PASSAGE HELPS YOU ANSWER THE FOCUS QUESTION:  
*What do myths tell us about what is important to a culture?*

Based on the Kalevala, the national epic of Finland, and adapted by S. A. Ulrich

Once there was a young girl named Aino. Instead of staying inside to bake bread, clean the home, and weave, she ran along the seashores staring into the distance with her hair wild and tangled. Her mother worried that she would never find a husband.

Aino was also very beautiful, and her brother, Joukahainen, bragged endlessly about her. He also bragged about everything else in his life. He boasted that he was the richest, handsomest boy in the village, and the best at everything.

When Joukahainen heard of a minstrel in Kalevala whose singing could turn iron into water and winter into summer, he strapped his harp into his sleigh and drove for Kalevala at breakneck speed.

Joukahainen was gone for many days. When he finally returned, his clothes were caked with mud, his golden hair dirty and tangled, and he was riding the neighbor's oxcart.

"My son!" his mother wailed. "What has happened? Where are your sleigh and your horses?"

"Gone," Joukahainen said. "All gone! The minstrel wizard of Kalevala—the liar, the braggart, the scoundrel—Vainamoinen is his name! He has taken everything!" He gave Aino a strange glance.

"I found Vainamoinen—the minstrel wizard of whom we'd heard so much empty talk. I challenged him to see which of us had the better voice, the most skill with an instrument, the most knowledge of ancient lore. Vainamoinen pretended to sing only so he could cast a spell on me. He turned my sleigh into a bog, my harp strings into reeds, and my horses into marsh birds that flew away. I called him a cheater, but he laughed and sang his enchantments until I sank to my knees in the mire.

"What will you give me," said Vainamoinen, "if I let you live?"

"I could see his game already, so I offered him something I knew he'd refuse—half my gold and the crops of my fields.

"I have gold and food up to my rafters!" Vainamoinen said. "Offer something else."

"I sank deeper in the mud, but I remained calm because I knew how to beat him. I offered him half my livestock, half my weapons, even half my clothes!

"Vainamoinen waved them away. 'I have enough of all these,' he boasted. 'And what's more, mine are magic. Offer something better or you are doomed.'

"I sank down to my chin in mud. He thought I was afraid, but no! As the mud trickled into my ears, I said, 'I will give you my sister, Aino—the most beautiful woman in Lapland!'"

Aino's mother squealed in delight.

Joukahainen admonished, "The wizard said, 'It is done!' Then he vanished without a trace, and the bog along with him. Even now, he fails to guess how I've outwitted him."

Aino was so angry she took the kettle of water she'd been boiling and poured it right down Joukahainen's trousers. He yelped and jumped to his feet.

"Outwitted?" Aino said. "Outwitted? How can you say so when you've promised me to a man you've called a liar and a scoundrel?"

"Aino, you stupid girl!" their mother said. "Your brother has found you a husband. Not only that, he is a powerful wizard, with magic horses, and gold up to his rafters!"

"None of which would be mine if I were his wife," said Aino. With that, she stormed out of the house.

Aino ran into the woods with hot tears on her cheeks. When she reached the sea cliffs, her golden hair was tangled with vines and her white feet painted with mud.

That's when Vainamoinen found her, having come from Kalevala to claim his bride.

Aino looked at him. His skin was wrinkled and his beard white as frost. His eyes were full of boasting and play—as full as Joukahainen's had been.

“Stay back!” Aino cried.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “It is I, Vainamoinen, your husband.”

“I have no husband,” she said, “and no friends in all this wilderness except those who live in the sea.”

“What an imagination,” Vainamoinen said. “You’ll be perfect.”

He reached for her arm, but Aino struck him, saying, “Don’t touch me!”

“Why are you afraid?” Vainamoinen asked. “Is it because your brother says I am a liar and a scoundrel? I will tell you what really happened: I was traveling peacefully when he came driving like a maniac and crashed his sleigh into mine. Our horses ran off, and Joukahainen said I would have to pay him compensation. He then challenged me to a contest of minstrelsy—but his voice cracked like ice in spring, and his lore was nothing but camp tales.

“Then your brother called me a liar and challenged me to a duel of swords. That’s when I sang my enchantments and trapped him in quicksand.

“Under my spell, Joukahainen begged for his life. I let him sink deeper. But he told me of your beauty, and for once he did not lie! Come with me now and be my wife.”

“I have already told you no,” Aino said.

“Is it my age?” he asked.

“It is not your age that bothers me,” Aino said.

“What then?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Then you are ready to become my wife?”

“No! I do not belong to my brother, and I do not belong to you,” Aino said. “No one can give me, and no one can take me. It is my choice, and I choose—”

“Enough of this! You are mine!” Vainamoinen lunged at her, chanting spells to bind her with iron

cords.

Aino slipped through his arms, broke through his spells, ran to the edge of the cliff, and jumped.

*Väinämöinen* watched her fall. He stood for a long time at the cliff's edge, wondering what he had done to offend the young girl. As the sun reached the horizon, he heard voices in the sea. The chants resounded from the rocks and swelled up through the waves.

"Vainamoinen is a murderer!" Joukahainen shouted, "I gave him Aino, and he drowned her in the sea!"

"What will you do?" his mother wept.

"I will hunt him!" said Joukahainen. "Wherever the coward hides, I will find him."

His mother moaned, but the sound was lost in the storm raging outside. Lightning cracked, winds howled, and rains lashed heavily against the cottage. Amid the hurricane, Joukahainen heard a small sound like a tapping at the door.

"Who knocks?" said Joukahainen.

A voice that crackled like re answered. "A messenger from Tuoni, seeking Vainamoinen."

"What is Tuoni?"

"The river of death that leads into the sunless lands."

Joukahainen lifted the latch. The door blew open and a stooped figure entered, cloaked and dripping with rain.

Joukahainen's mother shrieked, "It's the witch of Pohjola!"

"Louhi is my name," the witch smiled. "I live on the borderlands of death. Long have I sought an end to Vainamoinen. You—boy! Do you have the courage to do as I ask?"

Joukahainen said, "Vainamoinen has killed my sister. My soul can never know rest until she is avenged."

"Good," Louhi cackled.

Vainamoinen spent many days in mourning. He rowed his boat along the shore, straining his ears for the song the ocean sang when Aino fell.

“What have I done?” he whispered. He heard no music, and when the moon rose, he set his oars toward home.

A dark shape winged from the north, alighting on the bow of his boat. It was a raven.

“You are Vainamoinen, the wise wizard? This cannot be!” the raven cackled. “Not some pitiful old fool like you.”

“Old?” said Vainamoinen. “I am old as the world, but I feel older tonight. And who in Lapland is not speaking of Vainamoinen’s foolishness—I who had a wife but could not keep her?”

“You are silly! You chatter like jays and bicker like gulls. Such was your Aino.” said the raven.

Vainamoinen lifted an oar and tried to knock the raven from his perch. The raven uttered out of reach, dancing and cackling.

“I go, Vainamoinen!” it said. “I return to Pohjola, to commend myself to Louhi’s daughter—whose hair is golden like the moonlight, whose voice is like a nightingale’s, whose fame reaches beyond Karelia! Soon she will choose a husband, though not one so foolish as Vainamoinen, who weeps for an unwashed, ill-mannered, gangly stork of Lapland!” The raven flew away.

“I have never heard a ruder mouth,” Vainamoinen mused. “But surely there is some truth in his words. I am Vainamoinen, minstrel wizard of Kalevala! My time of mourning is done, and I have yet to find a wife.”

He rowed ashore and called his horse—a beautiful dapple gray. “You will bear me faster than any boat. Let us follow the raven, seeking Louhi’s daughter!”

His horse galloped north across the waves.

“He comes,” the witch laughed. “It was all too easy.”

Louhi and Joukahainen stood on a mountain halfway along Vainamoinen’s route.

Joukahainen held a crossbow Louhi had crafted, with arrows steeped in poison.

“Be ready to fire!” Louhi commanded as the raven passed overhead. “Do not fear the wizard. The bow is enchanted. Once red, its arrows will always kill.”

Joukahainen aimed the crossbow.

“Ready?” said Louhi. “When he passes beneath us. Now!”

Joukahainen pulled the trigger. The bowstring snapped, the arrow flew, and Vainamoinen disappeared beneath the waves.

“He is dead! I have shot him!” Joukahainen cried in disbelief. “But look! There is nothing. I cannot see his boat.”

“That was no boat, fool!” Louhi hissed. “You shot his horse! Never mind. I will end this.”

“This is my curse!” Louhi shrieked. “The sea shall never give up Vainamoinen! He shall never swim to land! Waves, wash away his magic! Let the storm blow him into the waters of Tuoni!”

Louhi howled with laughter, and the laughter became a gale. Joukahainen cowered in her shadow.

Vainamoinen was stranded in the heart of the storm. The sky was black, the winds and waves lashed his face. He could no longer see land and had no idea which direction to swim. He cast a spell to part the clouds, but they thickened like sludge.

Vainamoinen fought to stay on the boat. The storm raged and darkened. Day became an endless night, and finally his strength ebbed.

It is not such a bad death, he thought. The surface is chaos, but in the deep there is peace.

He prepared to relinquish his last breath. That is when he heard a laugh. Then a voice sang—

*“In the waves I heard his weeping,*

*Currents carried me the secret—*

*Vainamoinen, ancient minstrel,*

*Wept for his betrothed, Aino!*

Two strong hands lifted him until he broke the surface, gasping for breath. He could not see his rescuer.

“Are you a ghost,” he asked, “come to bear me to the deathlands?”

He heard a laugh and the voice said, “I will bear you wherever you wish.”

“I was journeying to Pohjola when you found me.”

The voice hesitated for a moment, then said, “So be it, wizard. I will take you. On one condition: You must not court the daughter of Louhi.”

“How did you know—?”

“Ah! Then I was right. You haven’t changed at all. But I have given you my word.”

Slender, powerful arms held him, and Vainamoinen felt himself carried through the sea at incredible speed. At last the sky brightened, the clouds passed, and Vainamoinen felt sand grind under his feet. He turned to thank his rescuer and saw her standing half out of the water.

“Aino!” he shouted.

“Who else?”

“You’re alive!” he clapped. “And you do love me! I forsake Louhi’s daughter this instant. Come with me now to Kalevala and be my wife!”

Aino laughed, “Vainamoinen, you will never learn!”

She slipped from his grasp a second time, swam out of the shallows, and dived. Vainamoinen saw Aino’s head dip below the waves, but he did not see Aino’s legs follow. Instead he saw the body of a shape with a fan-shaped tail that waved farewell before vanishing.

#### Credits

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