When You Are Old

POEM TEXT

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

SUMMARY

The speaker directly addresses someone else and asks this person to imagine old age, a time of grey hair and general tiredness. The speaker tells the addressee to pick up this book when they're falling asleep by the fire, and to read from it, while dreaming of the soft and shadowed look the addressee's own eyes used to have.

The addressee should also think of how many people loved the addressee's gracefulness and beauty, whether or not these people were sincere in their love. But there was one man who genuinely loved the addressee's emotional and spiritual restlessness. This man also loved the sadness that showed on the addressee's face as it changed over the years.

The speaker imagines the addressee bending down to tend to a fire and muttering sadly about how love ran away to walk restlessly in the mountains and hide among the stars of the night.

THEMES

LOVE AND BEAUTY

"When You Are Old" is a bittersweet poem that reveals the complexities of love. The poem is generally taken to be addressed to Maud Gonne, an Irish actress with whom Yeats was infatuated throughout his life (which is why we're using male and female pronouns in this guide). That said, the poem can also be interpreted more broadly, without specifying the names or genders of either the speaker or the addressee. In any case, the poem argues in favor of a kind of love based not on physical appearances—which fade over time—but on the deeper beauty of the soul.

In the first stanza, the speaker asks the addressee to think ahead to a time when she will be old, tired, and grey. Then, says the speaker, the addressee will look back nostalgically on her life to date, thinking of her youthful looks and vigor as though they were a dream. Those who love the addressee now—that is, at the time of the poem's writing, when this woman is ostensibly still young—are portrayed as superficial and insincere. The speaker implies that the so-called love of these men for the addressee will fade, just as the basis for that love—the addressee's beauty and youth—will fade too.

The speaker contrasts his *own* love for the addressee with the inferior love described above. The *speaker's* love, the poem argues, will stand the test of time because it is based on the addressee's "pilgrim soul" and the "sorrows" of her "changing face." That is, the speaker perceives an inner restlessness of this woman's soul and implies that this will express itself in her "changing face" as she grows old. The speaker, then, claims to experience love that goes beyond the surface—the addressee's face may change over time, but the "soul" that the speaker loves will not.

Furthermore, the pilgrim-like quality of the addressee's "soul" might be the very reason why she seems to have denied the speaker's love. It sounds like the addressee refuses to settle down—meaning that the speaker is expressing love not just in spite of being rejected, but in part *because* of it too.

With the above in mind, though, the speaker isn't exactly painting a rosy picture of the addressee's future. In essence, the speaker is predicting a lonely scene, one in which this woman has only a fire and a book for company. Indeed, the speaker predicts that it will be through reading "this book"—the one in which the poem appears—that the addressee will be reminded of her youth and, ultimately, her failure to embrace love when given the chance. The speaker is suggesting that the poem itself will stand as a testament to the speaker's true form of love, when the shallow love of others is nothing but a distant memory.

The poem expresses a complicated sentiment, then, attesting to the power of love as well as its limits. Indeed, there is a hint of bitterness in the way the speaker predicts that the poem itself be a reminder of how love "fled" from the addressee. But whatever the complexities, there is no doubting the speaker's strength of feeling—and through the poem, the reader is

reminded that true love of the kind described is rarely simple, easy, or certain.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12

AGING

The poem has a fairly bleak outlook on aging, with the speaker suggesting to the addressee that life will grow sadder and lonelier as youthful beauty fades away. The speaker links the enjoyment of life to the addressee's youth, as the poem argues that the addressee should make the most of the younger years she has still has left. Through the speaker's words to the addressee, the poem argues that time passes by quicker than people realize—and that once youth is gone, it is truly irretrievable.

The poem takes an imagined look into the future day-to-day existence of the addressee. It shows a picture that contrasts sharply with the vibrant and vivacious life that this woman seems to have been living at the time of the poem's writing. Old age is depicted in the first stanza as a time of passivity. The addressee is falling asleep by the fire, grey-haired and lacking energy. The speaker here implores her to "take down this book"—likely the collection of poems that holds this poem—and read, in order to be reminded of her former glories.

In the second stanza, the speaker characterizes the addressee's youth in terms of how loved she is, suggesting that youth is a kind of attractive force that brings other people into its orbit. According to the speaker, people love the addressee's "glad grace" and "beauty." But the poem then links aging to sorrow, suggesting that the addressee's "changing face" over the years will reflect an internal sadness that comes with the loss of youth. In the third stanza, the loss of youth also seems to cut short any possibility of love. Love, in this future scenario, has "fled" from the addressee; like youthful looks, love is a kind of present absence in the addressee's old age—that is, it's felt deeply because of the fact that it's no longer there.

Of course, this is all viewed through the perspective of the speaker. It's not necessarily true that the addressee will have to spend old age looking back nostalgically on her youth. But the poem seems to imply that this is likely, given how—in the speaker's opinion—the addressee's current life is governed by things that will vanish over time (beauty and youthful energy). All in all, "When You Are Old" paints a pessimistic picture of old age, suggesting that it's a time of melancholic reflection and regret, particularly for those who focused on shallow forms of love in their youth. It's up to the reader, of course, to decide whether this argument rings true—especially as the poem was written by a young man.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,

The poem begins with a restatement of its title, setting up what follows as direct communication between the speaker and an unnamed addressee. This addressee is usually taken to be Irish Nationalist and actress Maud Gonne, but the poem works equally well with a more general interpretation. Regardless of the precise identities of the speaker and addressee, the poem feels intimate from the beginning, with the reader as an outside observer of a seemingly close relationship.

"When You Are Old" contrasts two moments in time. The first line asks the addressee—and by extension the reader—to think beyond the present moment and imagine the future. This is a time when the addressee will be "old," "grey," and sleepy. This future scene contrasts with the time of the poem's writing, which the reader learns more about from line 3 onwards.

The first line subtly evokes the weariness of old age. The hypnotic /l/ consonance in "old," "full," and "sleep" has a lulling effect, conjuring an image of the addressee drifting in and out of sleep by the fire. The repeated use of "and"—which is developed into more extensive polysyndeton later in the poem—has a similar effect. The "and" between "old" and "grey" is grammatically unnecessary, but its presence makes the line take just a little bit longer, slowing the poem down to a pace befitting a vision of sleepy old age.

In line 2, the poem starts to reveal its speaker's agenda. The speaker offers the addressee an instruction for this far-off future moment: "take down this book." The preceding caesura and the gentle /d/ consonance keep up the sleepy atmosphere. It's not immediately obvious which book the speaker is referring to, but as the mode of communication here—the poem itself—is a form of literature, it could well mean the book in which this poem is collected. This interpretation would support the idea that this poem is, on at least one level, about the complicated relationship between Yeats himself and his muse, Maud Gonne. Regardless, the speaker feels that this *specific* book will, in the future, tell the addressee something about her life, particularly with regard to the contrast between the poem's present and the future it projects.

LINES 3-4

And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

Line 3 continues the instruction from the end of line 2, using imperative verbs. Here, the speaker asks the addressee to read "this book" "slowly," still in the imagined future where the addressee has reached old age. The mention of slowness reinforces the sleepy scenario of the first two lines, further emphasizing the limitations of old age. After the caesura that follows "read" in line 3 (which slows the line down even more), the poem begins its comparison of two moments in time—the poem's present and the imagined future it describes.

The speaker describes the addressee's eyes, characterizing them as soft-looking and with deep shadows. These images suggest a kind of youthful surface beauty combined with intellectual depth. *If* the poem is about Maud Gonne, this would make sense: she was both fervently political and strikingly beautiful.

However, line 4 is not quite the compliment that it might seem at first. The speaker is only hinting at the addressee's current beauty to highlight that it will, over time, fade away. If the "shadows deep" indicate intellect and mental strength, then perhaps this too is predicted to diminish. Whatever point the speaker is trying to make to the addressee, it's now clear that it's based on the difference between youth and old age—in other words, who she is now versus who she is going to become.

In keeping with the /l/ consonance throughout the stanza, lines 3 and 4 use sibilance to similar effect. The gentleness of the /s/ sound in "slowly," "soft," "eyes" and "shadows" is subtly hypnotic, suggesting the pull of sleep on the elderly addressee. Indeed, it also evokes the sound of breathing or snoring that often comes with sleep.

LINES 5-6

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,

Despite the stanza break, lines 5 and 6 are a continuation of the thought from the previous two lines. The speaker here continues to list the things that he thinks the addressee will one day lament. Essentially, the speaker claims that the addressee is going to miss the way people loved her "moments of glad grace"—that is, her youthful beauty and ease of movement. What's more, the speaker suggests in line 6 that while some of this adoration is genuine ("true"), some is actually inauthentic ("false"). In these lines, it begins to come clear that the speaker considers the kind of love the addressee currently experiences as somewhat shallow. Grammatically, all of the above is a continuation of the verb in line 3—these are times that the addressee will "dream" of in the distant future.

Line 5 uses alliteration—"many" and "moments"; "glad grace"—to bring the description of the addressee to life. The deliberately placed letters seem to mirror the "grace" of the addressee. And while line 5 is similar to lines 3 and 4 in the way that it pays the addressee a kind of compliment, line 6 starts to reveal the intent behind the speaker's words. The speaker is trying to divide the addressee's world into two types of people—those who love the addressee superficially and those who love her for more than just surface beauty. Over time, the speaker seems to imply, this dividing line will reveal itself, showing the addressee whose love was "false" and whose was "true." This also subtly but firmly criticizes the addressee, suggesting that she is not able (or perhaps not willing) to tell these groups apart yet—only old age, which brings with it the fading of beauty, will reveal the truth.

Here the poem also starts to use diacope through the repetition of "loved," which helps to draw the distinction between these different types of love. There is one use of "loved" in each line of the stanza, and each is attached a different way of loving, or, more accurately, of *being* loved. As discussed, lines 5 and 6 relate to love that's based on "moments of glad grace"—and that is sometimes "false." It's in the second half of the stanza that the speaker will reveal more about a different (and perhaps worthier) kind of love.

LINES 7-8

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

Borrowing a convention from the sonnet form, line 7 marks the poem's "turn"—that is, the point at which the poem's argument shifts and the speaker's intentions so far are made clearer. The important word here is the conjunction, "But." It indicates a dividing line between the two kinds of love the speaker describes. Essentially, the poem seeks to demonstrate that the speaker's love for the addressee is singular—it's like no other love that the addressee has experience. Having set the scene in the first stanza and then outlined different ways in which the addressee is loved, it's here that the speaker distinguishes his own love from that of others.

The diacope of the repeated "loved" turns the stanza into a process of categorization. Line 7's "loved" is the third, and it states the nature of the speaker's love for the addressee. Alternatively, this could be the speaker describing the love of a third person for the addressee, a "man" who isn't the speaker. This latter interpretation seems unlikely for two reasons: first, literary critics generally agree that Yeats wrote this poem for the Irish nationalist and actress Maud Gonne, a close friend of his with whom he was infatuated. Second, the poem is known to be a kind of allusive rewrite of an earlier poem by the French poet Pierre Ronsard. In that poem—"Quand Vous Serez Bien Vielle" ("When You Are Very Old...")—the speaker tries to convince a lover that he or she will regret not returning the speaker's love. Given that Yeats's poem also points its

addressee towards "this book," and how it seeks to establish the virtues of "one man," it seems unlikely (but not impossible) that this "man" is a someone other than the speaker.

In line 7, the speaker reveals that he loves—or, more accurately, *loved*—the addressee not for her "glad grace" or beauty," but rather for her "pilgrim soul." This is a key phrase with two important connotations. First, a pilgrim is a traveler or wander, especially by foot, and often religious. The word thus suggests independence and a singular determination, and implies that the speaker admires these qualities in the addressee. Second, looking briefly ahead to the geographical setting of the final stanza—the personified "Love" wandering the mountains—the use of "pilgrim soul" here suggests that the addressee is unwilling to follow the speaker's suggested path—to return the speaker's love. It seems, then, that this "pilgrim" quality of the addressee's soul is both the reason for the speaker's love and, perhaps, the reason the addressee rejects it.

Line 8 continues the poem's attempts to separate the speaker's love from other, more superficial loves. Whereas the "many" loved the addressee for things that were temporary and ephemeral—beauty and grace—the "one man" actively "loved" the way that these qualities were in the process of disappearing. That is, the speaker loves the "changing [aging] face" of the addressee because it is a record of the addressee's soul, and it is the soul that the speaker loves—not the surface beauty. The use of polysyndeton in this line—another line that starts with "and"—continues the sleepy, hypnotic feel established in the first stanza. This helps create an air of resignation and inevitability—it seems that the addressee has already made the decision not to return the speaker's love, and, in the speaker's mind, this is the wrong choice.

LINES 9-12

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

While the first stanza set the scene and the second drew the distinctions between different types of love, the third stanza aims to show the future consequences of the way the addressee acts now. In other words, the speaker portrays a vision of future loneliness that is directly linked to the addressee's rejection of the speaker's love.

In line 9, the future addressee is shown tending to a fire, the "glowing bars." This is probably a reference to peat, the main fuel for fires in Ireland. The /l/ sound has already been associated with "sleep" and tiredness in the first stanza, and it returns in lines 9 and 10 to reinforce this point.

In line 10, the addressee is imagined to "murmur" as she tends to the fire. It's notable here how isolated this future figure seems to be—there is no sign of other life around her whatsoever. The specific word choice of "murmur"—in which the first and second syllables mirror each other exactly—evokes a lonely kind of quiet, in which words are only answered by their own echoes. It has a muttering, under-the-breath quality to it that borders on incoherence. The caesura, too, allows the word to linger—it's not until after the word "sadly" that the murmuring has something specific to say. Initially, it's just a sound, as though it's a kind of involuntary utterance.

It's also in line 10 that the poem gently climbs to its poetic height. The words that follow "sadly" are, in a way, both murmured by the future addressee and spoken by the speaker in the poem's present. They personify love, capitalizing the word and hinting that this "Love" may actually be the "one man" of line 7 (as suggested by the male pronoun in line 12). This capitalization could also relate to the more general idea of the addressee's one true love—that is, the chance at which the addressee failed to take. Love *flees*, suggesting fright and/or danger, heading for the mountains. Here, he paces and hides among the stars. The pacing suggests restlessness—perhaps "Love", whether it's the man of line 7 or a more general idea of love, laments the love that never was. The stars, meanwhile, are a symbol of eternity, and in this sense love seems now to be *eternally* hidden from the addressee. This suggestion of eternity could also have something in common with the "book" of line 2; it's possible that the speaker is predicting the poem will outlive the addressee.

The enjambment in these lines helps bring this restless quality to life. The first two stanzas had a slowness to them, in part enabled by caesurae and gentle consonance, but the enjambment in the last three lines creates an opposite effect. "Love" flees, and the enjambment of lines 10, 11 and 12 makes the poem accelerate appropriately, as if the poem itself is now rushing to get away. The assonance between "hid," "his," and "amid"—all using a quick /i/ sound—also contributes to this quickening of the poem's pace and subtly highlights the idea that "Love" has vanished too quickly and effectively for the addressee to ever regain it.

SYMBOLS

FIRE

Fire is functions as a kind of ironic symbol in "When You Are Old." Usually, fire represents passion and intensity. If someone is fiery, it suggests that they possess emotional strength that is powerful, much as the addressee seems to in her youth.

But in this poem's imagined future, fire is primarily just functional—it keeps the elderly addressee warm. It's almost like a companion, something that the addressee tends to instead of maintaining friendships and romantic relationships. Most of all, though, the fire here represents the spent passions of youth.

According to the speaker, old age will no longer be a time in which the addressee is loved for beauty or "glad grace"—instead, it will be a time of reflection and perhaps regret. The addressee will read about the metaphorical fire of her youth by the light of the literal fire that now keeps her warm.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "fire"
- **Line 9:** "the glowing bars"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

In a way, the whole poem is one long allusion. One of Yeats's formative influences was the 16th century French poet Pierre de Ronsard. The latter's *Sonnets pour Hélène* (Sonnets for Helen) contains a poem called "When You Are Very Old," from which Yeats's poem borrows heavily. It's less of a direct translation and more of an alternative rewriting, with Yeats taking the original and mixing it up with elements of his own choosing.

Both poems call on their subject—the addressee—to imagine the future and see a loneliness that contrasts with the vibrancy of youth. In addition, both poems confidently proclaim that their speakers will someday be literary successes, implying that both addressees will regret the choices that they have made—namely, not to love their respective speakers romantically—in part *because* of this future literary achievement. In the Ronsard poem, the speaker predicts that the addressee will someday sing the speaker's verses; in Yeats, the addressee reads the speaker's book in old age. Both addressees are, then, predicted to regret denying their speakers' loves—and this regret will in part be tied to the way in which they come to worship the speakers' poetry, perhaps because these poems have already outlasted the all-too-fleeting beauty of youth.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs sparingly throughout the poem as a way of reflecting and amplifying the situations the speaker describes.

The first instance is in line 5. Here, there are two alliterative sounds at play: /m/ and /g/, in "many ... moment" and "glad grace." The line itself is painting a picture of the youthful addressee, around the time of the poem's present (as opposed to the future moment it imagines). This grace might be physical in the way that the addressee moves, and/or a more general sense of interacting gracefully with other people. "Grace" suggests ease and naturalness—like being a good dancer, for example—together with a sense of precision. In other words, something that is difficult for people seems to come easily to the addressee. This unusual grace is played out through the alliteration—the sound patterning is subtly but deliberately beautiful, choreographed but not overdone. In other words, the alliteration is itself graceful, just like the addressee.

The instance of alliteration has a similar mirroring effect. It comes in line 9, with three /b/ sounds across "bending," "beside," and "bars." The way the /b/ is distributed every few words slows the line down and puts it at odds with the "glad grace" of line 5, which suggested ease of movement. Instead, the alliteration here subtly evokes the physical exertion of old age, with the imagined "bending down" made to feel like a slow and difficult movement.

Taken together, these two instances of alliteration illustrate the sharp contrast between the two different moments in time that the speaker describes.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "m," "m," "g," "g"
- **Line 9:** "b," "b," "b"

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs several times throughout "When You Are Old." For the most part, it functions to link together related ideas and emphasize the connections that the speaker perceives between different parts of the addressee's life. For example, line 3 contains a repeated /ee/ sound in "slowly," "read," and "dream." The similar sounds highlight how the combination of being old ("slowly") and encountering the speaker's poetry ("read") will lead to bittersweet memories ("dream") for the addressee. Assonance has a similar effect in lines 5 and 6, tying together the love that others feel for the addressee with his or her positive, youthful qualities.

Assonance is especially important in the final line of the poem. At this point, the speaker imagines a time in the future when the elderly addressee will mumble while tending to the fire. What the addressee will "murmur" is predicted in the final three lines—how "Love" will flee from the addressee and hide among the stars. This escape is described with verbs "fled" and "paced," which suggest hurry and restlessness. It's here that the assonance comes in, with "hid," his" and "amid" in the last line all sharing the /i/ sound. This short, clipped sound creates a sense of acceleration, as if the poem is rushing to its conclusion in the same way that the personified "Love" had to get away. The preceding ten lines are much more reliant on slow /o/ sounds, which help create the atmosphere of fatigue and sleepiness that the speaker foresees in the addressee's old age.

The other key moment of this quick /i/ sound is in the word "pilgrim" at lie 7. This may not have been a deliberate effect on the poet's part, but it's arguable that this creates a link between two different instances of restlessness: the addressee's in the present day, in which she is too much of a "pilgrim soul" (spiritually and emotionally restless) to embrace the speaker's love, and the future regrets of the addressee, as "Love" flies away forever.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "y," "i"
- **Line 3:** "y," "ea," "ea"
- **Line 5:** "o," "o"
- **Line 6:** "o," "o"
- **Line 7:** "o," "o," "i," "i"
- **Line 8:** "o," "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i," "i"

CAESURA

Caesurae are used to great effect in "When You Are Old." Apart from the last three lines, the pace of the poem is deliberately slow. This, of course, is part of the way that the speaker brings an imagined future moment to life—the time when the addressee will be "old and grey and full of sleep." The speaker wants to paint this as a melancholic scene, with the speaker's own words in "this book" serving as a permanent reminder of what is most likely the addressee's refusal to return the speaker's love.

This scene depends on a sense of tiredness and fatigue, which is meant to demonstrate the addressee's future regret. The caesurae, used three times in the first stanza and twice in the final, are gently but deliberately disruptive to the pacing of the poem. That is, they prevent the iambic pentameter from flowing too easily, instead mimicking the push and pull between sleep and wakefulness. Indeed, the caesurae make the lines "nod," particularly in the first stanza, with each comma representing a moment's rest, as though it is too much effort to reach the end of the line.

The caesura in line 10 puts emphasis on the word "murmur," and creates a delay between the verb and the actual content of what is murmured. This makes the word linger, making it more about the sound rather than its meaning, and thus evoking the kind of seemingly purposeless utterance that sometimes comes with old age.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** ","
- **Line 3:** ","
- **Line 4:** ","
- **Line 10:** "," ","

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used often in "When You Are Old." In particular, there are two key sounds that run throughout: /l/ and /d/.

The first stanza is full of /l/ sounds: old, full, sleep, slowly, look. All of these words—apart from "look"—are closely associated with old age and underscore the poem's argument about the connection between aging and fatigue/tiredness. The sound is gentle, suggesting physical weakness, and the way it is intermittently repeated has a distinctly hypnotic quality. In fact, one word that *sounds* as though it's in the first stanza, but actually isn't, is "lull." That is, these /l/ sounds seem to be deliberately evoking sleep, almost as if they're casting a spell or singing a lullaby. With the function of the /l/ sound established in the first stanza, it then runs throughout stanzas two and three, calling back to this suggested sleepiness. In line 10 it's also associated with "Love" itself, implying that this future mood of tired regret is in part linked to the addressee's inability to accept the speaker's love in the poem's present.

The /d/ sound serves a similar function. It's also gentle, initially linking "old" and "nodding" together. Subsequent /d/ sounds continue this chain of association, bringing sonic life to the image of someone fighting off sleep.

Consonance also performs a similar linking function in other, smaller moments. For example, the /n/ sounds in "one man" highlights the idea that this specific man's love is truly unique. What's more, the closed, conclusive /n/ sound lends these words a sense of force and confidence that further frames this "man" as someone whose opinion should be heeded.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ld," "d," "d," "ll," "l"
- **Line 2:** "d," "dd," "d"
- **Line 3:** "d," "l," "l," "d," "d," "d," "l"
- **Line 4:** "d," "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 5:** "m," "l," "d," "m," "m," "g," "d," "g"
- **Line 6:** "d," "l," "d," "l," "l"
- **Line 7:** "n," "n," "l," "d," "l," "l"
- **Line 8:** "d," "l," "d"
- **Line 9:** "n," "d," "b," "n," "d," "d," "n," "b," "d," "l," "b"
- **Line 10:** "M," "m," "l," "l," "l," "L," "l," "d"
- **Line 11:** "n," "d," "d," "n," "m," "n," "d"
- **Line 12:** "d," "d," "m," "d," "d"

DIACOPE

Diacope is used in the second stanza, in which each line contains the word "loved." One of the poem's aims is to draw a distinction between the love that the speaker feels for the addressee and the ways in which the addressee is loved by others—ways that the speaker implies are inferior.

The use of diacope is a key element in this attempt to divide and categorize the different loves experienced by the addressee. In

fact, each line—and each "loved"—introduces a different way in which the addressee is (or was) loved. Line 5 states how the addressee is, at the time of the poem's present, loved by "many" for his or her "moments of glad grace." This "grace" could relate to physical movement or just the addressee's general ease with other people. Line 6 is about the addressee's physical beauty, and suggests that some people only love the addressee for this more superficial reason, making their love "false." Both these "loves," then, are based on aspects of the addressee's identity that the speaker predicts will diminish over time.

Line 7's diacope, however, introduces the key distinction that splits the stanza in half. The "one man"—most likely the speaker—loved the addressee for their "pilgrim soul," not the more fleeting reasons outlined in lines 5 and 6. That is, the speaker seems to love the very thing that makes the addressee unable to return the speaker's love—the addressee's emotional and spiritual restlessness. In line 8, the speaker outlines how they love the addressee's face *not* for its youthful aesthetic beauty, but for the way it reflects the changes of life as the addressee grows older. Though the face is "changing," there is also a constancy to the fact that it is *always* changing. In other words, then, the speaker loves the addressee for the addressee's two constant features ("pilgrim soul" and "changing face"), both of which, paradoxically, relate to flux and change. The love offered to the addressee by others, however, will fade in line with these changes.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "loved"
- **Line 6:** "loved"
- **Line 7:** "loved"
- **Line 8:** "loved"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment happens once at the end of line 3 and again across the poem's final three lines. At the end of line 3, the enjambment creates a subtle dramatic pause. The "soft look" is left dangling, needing "your eyes" to complete its meaning. This creates a gentle but significant emphasis on the "eyes" themselves, suggesting their allure and "deep" power.

In the final stanza, the enjambment has a markedly different effect. While most of the poem has worked to create a sleepy, hypnotic sound in line with its discussion of old age, the enjambments at the ends of lines 10 and 11 have a quickening effect, suddenly picking up the pace of the poem. This change is in line with the poem's most overtly poetic image: the personified "Love" fleeing the addressee, who is nervously pacing in the mountains and hiding among the stars. The verbs "fled," "paced," and, to a lesser degree, "hid," are completely at odds with the slow action verbs that are found elsewhere in the poem (e.g., "murmur" and "dream"). Accordingly, the poem switches on the enjambment at the introduction of this acceleration, creating a sense that, like "Love," the poem is in a hurry to get away.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "look"
- **Line 4:** "Your "
- **Line 10:** "fled"
- **Line 11:** "And," " overhead"
- **Line 12:** "And"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is used in the final stanza. It's quite a strange and unsettling moment in an otherwise down-to-earth poem. Here, the speaker projects an imagined future onto the addressee, predicting the words that the latter will "murmur" in old age. Of course, these words are chosen by the speaker to reflect what he feels is an inevitable sense of regret that will visit the addressee in the future. In this sense, the words belong as much, if not more, to the speaker as to the future addressee.

The final three lines—the "murmuring"—personify love itself, the capitalization used as a way of turning the word into a proper noun. Here, the timeline of events is a little complicated. The poem is still in its imagined future, but it is not exactly discussing the time that the addressee has been looking back on throughout most of the rest of the poem. At some point, the speaker seems to predict, between the poem's present and this future moment, "Love" will flee from the addressee. Love, described as male in line 12, will pace restlessly in the mountains before hiding among the stars. This "Love" will forever elude the addressee, seemingly as a consequence of the way that the addressee behaves in the poem's present.

However, "Love" also seems to be specifically tied to the "one man" mentioned in line 7. Essentially, the speaker is trying to show the addressee that there is an opportunity right in front of her for a pure, once-in-a-lifetime kind of love—and that passing it up will lead to regret. The placement of this personified "Love" amid the stars also suggests a greater timescale than the addressee's life—perhaps even eternity. This suggestion of eternity can also be interpreted as a link back to the "book" of line 2, which, the speaker implies, may outlive the addressee by virtue of its literary worth.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "Love fled / And paced upon the mountains overhead / And hid his face amid a crowd of stars."

SIBILANCE

Sibilance is used principally in lines 3 and 4: "slowly," "soft," "eyes," "once," "shadows." But it's also a subtle presence

throughout the rest of the poem from then on.

The first stanza's main aim is to breathe life into the speaker's vision of the addressee's future—old age. This is characterized as a time of sleepiness and fatigue, and the sibilance is introduced to help support this image. Firstly, the sibilance is a soft sound that suggests a sense of physical weakness. But it also evokes the actual sound of someone sleeping. When people breathe heavily or snore, there's often a degree of sibilant sound taking place. It's here that the sibilance is most prominent, but it is echoed later in the poem too. As with the recurrence of consonant /l/ and /d/ sounds that are first established in the opening stanza, these sibilant sounds lend the poem a lullaby-like quality, as though it too, like the imagined addressee, is on the border between sleep and wakefulness. Indeed, the final line two lines dial up the sibilance again, as though it is here, while pondering the image of "Love's" escape, that the poem's addressee finally gives into the pull of sleep.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s"
- **Line 2:** "s"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "c," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s," "c"
- **Line 6:** "s"
- **Line 7:** "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "s," "c"
- **Line 9:** "s," "s"
- **Line 10:** "s"
- **Line 11:** "c," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s," "s"

POLYSYNDETON

Out of the poem's twelve lines, seven—over half—begin with "And." The effect of this extended polysyndeton is initially established with the repeated internal "ands" of the first line. Here, the poem is trying to evoke the idea of someone—the addressee—succumbing to the pull of sleep. The use of "and" helps create this nodding iambic meter, but is also—deliberately and significantly—unnecessary in terms of the grammar. Specifically, the "and" between "old" and "grey" replaces the more conventional comma, and this makes the line take a little bit longer than it otherwise would. In other words, the "and" slows the poem down and gives it a more sleepy atmosphere.

The use polysyndeton that follows serves the same function, while also being metrically convenient. Lines 6 and 8 maintain this sense of "nodding" into sleep, but they also help the speaker draw the parallel between the different ways in which the addressee is loved.

In the final stanza, the polysyndeton dominates three out of the four lines. In the final two lines, it helps evoke "Love's" restlessness, making it so that the action that the speaker begins to describe at the start of line 9 isn't actually completed until the end of the poem. At the same time, however, the repeated use of "And" ties these fanciful imagined murmurings back to the more sedate image of the addressee falling asleep by the fire.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "and," "and"
- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 3:** "And "
- **Line 6:** "And "
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And "
- **Line 11:** "And "
- **Line 12:** "And"

VOCABULARY

Pilgrim (Line 7) - A pilgrim is a traveler, usually one with a particular religious or spiritual purpose. For example, Muslims from around the world make the Hajj—arabic for "pilgrimage"—to Mecca to show solidarity with other Muslims and submission to God. Here, the word implies a kind of emotional and spiritual restlessness.

Glowing Bars (Line 9) - This is a reference to the fire by which the addressee of the poem sits (or is imagined to sit in the future). The "bars" are probably a reference to the form in which peat, the most common fuel for fires in Ireland at the time, was generally sold.

Murmur (Line 10) - To murmur is to make quiet, almost inaudible sounds or speech.

Amid (Line 12) - This is just another word for "among," taken from the same root word as "middle" (and therefore meaning "in the middle of" or "surrounded by").

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"When You Are Old" has a tight and simple form, consisting of three stanzas, each of which are quatrains of iambic pentameter (with some variation).

This poem takes a much earlier poem as its inspiration: "When You Are Very Old" by the 16th century French poet Pierre de Ronsard. Like that poem, Yeats's poem features a speaker telling an addressee that she will regret not returning the speaker's love. Both poems paint a picture of a solitary elderly figure, quietly reflecting on what might have been. Ronsard's

poem is a sonnet, and though Yeats's is not, evidence of the original form remains. In line 7 of this poem there is a turn (a.k.a a *volta*), which is an integral part of the sonnet form. This is the point at which the poem reveals the terms of its argument—why it has said what it has said so far, and how this information is relevant going forward. For Yeats's poem, it's the moment when the speaker differentiates himself from the others who love the addressee for allegedly more superficial reasons.

It's also worth noting that the poem is, essentially, one long sentence. The strongest punctuation comes in the form of semi-colons, and this lack of full stops helps give the poem a hypnotic, lulling sound. Its phrases seem to rise and fall without ever quite resolving, mimicking the tension between sleep and wakefulness that the poem describes. The first stanza sets the scene, the second differentiates various types of love, and the third describes the regret that the speaker predicts the addressee will experience in the future.

METER

"When You Are Old" is written in iambic pentameter (five poetic feet with a da DUM rhythm, creating a total of ten syllables per line) throughout. The steadiness of the rhythm has a lulling effect that mirrors the poem's discussion of sleep vs. wakefulness. In combination with the use of consonance and placement of caesurae, the meter of the first stanza helps paint a vivid picture of someone sitting by the fire in old age, with the unstressed and stressed syllables of the iamb embodying the pull of sleep and the resistance of wakefulness. Lines 1, 2 and 4 fit the iambic pattern:

When you | are old | and grey |and full | of sleep,

Interestingly, the first "and" of line 1 is arguably superfluous—in the grammatical sense, at least. Including it makes the line take a little bit longer than it would otherwise, and so it helps establish the poem's generally slow, meditative pace. Indeed, "and" is used frequently throughout—with a number of lines employing polysyndeton—for the purpose of both keeping the meter regular and reinforcing the sleepiness of the future the speaker imagines.

Though lines 3 and 5 vary the meter slightly, it's line 10 that is the most interesting variation.

Murmur, | a litt- | -le sad- | -ly, how | Love fled

Here, a trochee substitutes for the iamb in the first foot, and it is immediately followed by a caesura. This is a surprising moment that lends the word "murmur" greater emphasis and making it feel almost involuntary—like the kind of verbal utterance it describes. Then, the return of the iambs after the rest provided by the caesura takes on a sad sense of persistence as the poem pushes towards its conclusion.

RHYME SCHEME

"When You Are Old" has a highly regular rhyme scheme. In each quatrain, the first and second lines form one rhyming pair and the middle two lines form another. So, the scheme goes like this:

ABBA

CDDC

EFFE

The purity and regularity of the rhymes have a hypnotic effect, as though the lines themselves are designed to put someone to sleep. There is a gentle tension at play in the poem between sleep and wakefulness, and the rhymes contribute to this effect, alongside deft use of consonance and caesurae.

The neatness of the rhymes also foregrounds the poem's discussion of beauty. All of the end words are in harmony—but there is a tension between that superficial regularity and the fact that the poem is discussing old age and the *loss* of beauty.

SPEAKER

Though the poem doesn't explicitly say so, the speaker is generally taken to be William Butler Yeats. Yeats wrote numerous letters and poems to Maud Gonne, an Irish actress and prominent political campaigner. Accordingly, this poem, as with many others, is usually seen in the context of Yeats's infatuation with Gonne. That does seem to make sense, given that the speaker implores the addressee, in the old age the speaker imagines, to take down "this book"—presumably the book in which this very poem appears, which would be Yeats's *The Rose*.

With the above in mind, though, the poem can easily be interpreted as discussing love and romantic relationships more generally. In essence, it's one person's prediction of the future, but the speaker's feelings could apply to a wide range of real people beyond Yeats himself. The speaker feels like the addressee is making a mistake in refusing the love of the "one man" who loves the addressee for the right reasons—it's a common enough situation that the speaker and addressee don't need to have specific identities for the poem to be effective.

SETTING

"When You Are Old" calls upon its addressee—and by extension the reader—to engage in a kind of imaginative time travel. From the first line, though the poem's present hums away in the background, both addressee and reader are implored to imagine a future time in which the addressee is old,

grey, and tired. The poem is thus set in this atmosphere of old age, or more precisely, in the way that the speaker imagines it. That is, the poem isn't *in* the future; it's a prediction *of* the future. In that sense, then, the setting is in part the speaker's mind.

The actual scene described is "a little sad" (line 10) and solitary. The addressee doesn't seem to have anyone else around, with "Love" having fled long ago; now the addressee has just the speaker's words and the fire to keep her company. What's more, the speaker asks the addressee, in the future, to take down "this book" in order to presumably read this very same poem. In a strange way, then, the setting of the poem is actually the poem itself!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Along with Seamus Heaney, William Butler Yeats is one of the foremost poets ever to come out of Ireland. He was born in 1865 and began writing around the age of seventeen, and this poem appears in his second collection, *The Rose* (1893). Yeats's influences were wide and diverse, including the English Romantics—figures such as Wordsworth, Blake, and Keats—and the French Symbolists, such as Stephen Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud. Irish mythology and folklore were also especially formative to his work, particularly given his desire for Ireland's political independence from England. Yeats was also interested in mysticism and the occult.

With these influences still in mind, however, this particular poem also has one very specific literary influence : a poem by the 16th century French Renaissance poet Pierre de Ronsard. Ronsard's poem, "Quand vous serez bien vielle" (which translates as "when you are very old") is the literary prototype from which Yeats created his own poem. Both comment on unrequited love, and in particular try to point to future literary fame and worth as impending proof that the poems' addressees are making fundamental errors in not reciprocating the speakers' feelings. Ronsard's poem is a sonnet, and Yeats's retains an echo of that form in the way that the poem turns on line 7, revealing its intention to contrast the speaker's love with the allegedly more superficial love of others. And no mention of love when it comes to Yeats would be complete without also mentioning Maud Gonne, an Irish actress and nationalist with whom Yeats was infatuated throughout his life. It's generally agreed by most critics that this poem, as well as many others, is written form Yeats's perspective with Gonne as the intended addressee.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Yeats was a prominent public figure, the first Irishman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was integral to the Irish Literary revival, which in turn was a key part of the Irish push for self-autonomy and the move toward a sense of distinctly Irish culture. Indeed, Yeats's Irish patriotism was in part the reason why so much of his early poetry is filled with references to Irish mythology (though this poem does not contain such references). Many of his poems were overtly political. "Easter, 1916," for example, was written in response to an Irish uprising against British rule that was ultimately unsuccessful. Though Yeats generally eschewed violence as a means of resistance, he had conflicting feelings about those involved in the armed insurrection. Later in life, Yeats tried to distance himself from politics but was frequently brought back into its orbit. In 1922, Ireland descended into civil war.

Notably, however, this poem contains no mention of any of these developing political and historical complexities; it could almost be set in any time or place. It's perhaps a testament to the depth of the love behind this poem that it completely ignores the historical context that was so meaningful to Yeats in real life, focusing instead of the speaker's ideas about love and its importance.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More Poems and Further Reading — A selection of materials on Yeats curated by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)
- A Reading by Colin Farrell — A reading of the poem by Irish actor Colin Farrell. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ttISOHESJE)
- A Reading by Cillian Murphy — Another Irish actor gives a reading of "When You Are Old." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYJzRfLR50E)
- An Insight Into The Yeats-Gonne Relationship — A 1908 letter from Maud Gonne to the poet. (https://poets.org/text/letter-w-b-yeats)
- An Insight into Yeats's Literary World — This is the speech given by Yeats upon his acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. (https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1923/yeats/lecture/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming

- The Wild Swans at Coole

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