**When you are Old**

William B. Yeats

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| WHEN you are old and gray 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, | *5* |
| 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 | *10* |
| And paced upon the mountains overhead, |  |
| And hid his face amid a crowd of stars. |  |

**POETRY ANALYSIS**

**Sample**

In the poem "When you are Old" by William Butler Yeats, the central theme of love can be found in the poem's use of imagery and language. In his poem, these two fundamentals of writing elegantly work together to create a piece that represents the nostalgic elements and depressing characteristics of lost love.

The poem begins with the image of an elderly woman, "gray and old and full of sleep", who is sitting by a fire and reminiscing about "the soft look" her eyes held once. She takes down the book that holds Yeats poem as she remembers how beautiful and young she once was. This scene is very powerful because it sets the mood and tone for the entire poem. If the woman had been in the kitchen or in the basement, rather than in a living room near a glowing fire, the feeling of longing and remembrance might not have been as strong. In most houses, living rooms hold the memories, displaying framed pictures of family members on their walls and sentimental items of their shelves.

Yeats also uses a variety of symbols to illustrate the power and melancholy elements of love. The first symbol he uses is of a fire, which the old woman is "nodding" beside. Like all fires, once vibrant and flickering with life, she too will fade and burn out eventually. Nothing lasts forever, and in this poem the elderly woman realizes that the only man who loved her has gone away. The fire symbolizes her desire for warmth or comfort and her want for the fiery love she once rejected. To further illustrate the fleeting capabilities of love, in the 3rd stanza Yeats writes that she bent "down besides the glowing bars," as if to imply that the fire had burnt down already and now she has to possibly use an electric heater.

The last two symbols of the "mountains overhead" and the "crowd of stars" go hand in hand. They both symbolize something the elderly woman can always see and always know is there, but never fully reach. She can take down a book of poetry and reminisce about her past love, but he is no longer with her or just no longer around. Like the mountains and the stars, he is unobtainable. Another interpretation of these two symbols could be that they imply her "Love," capitalized in the poem to possibly entail personification, has passed away and is now in heaven "among a crowd" of other loves she might have lost. However, if the narrator is Yeats, then the death of her love might more so symbolize the near fatal affects some people suffer from a broken heart.

Language is also very imperative to the construction and meaning of a poem. In "When You Are Old," language plays a key role in its musicality, mood, and aesthetic qualities. First, the way Yeats chose to write this poem influences the overall feeling a reader gets from reading it. The poem is written in second person, rather than first or third, which makes the poem not only more intimate, but also very sad. Writing in the second person gives the poem a regretful tone, as if the narrator were saying what he wished she would have done and should have realized. Yeats' poem is written like an addressed note or letter, telling the elderly woman what do to when she is old. This poem is more so like a list of directions because the narrator is literally instructing the woman on what to do and as she does those things, she consequently reflects on the knowledge she is gaining.

In addition, Yeats uses alliteration, stressing the consonant sounds at the beginning of words or in stressed syllables. The use of this technique adds to the pace and the sad mood of the poem, as well as making the lines more memorable. Since one of the overriding themes of this poem is reflecting on memories from the past, using alliteration to make the lines easy to remember seems appropriate. A good example of alliteration in the poem can be found in line 9: "And bending down beside the glowing bars." Also, alliteration is used in the constant repetition of the word "love" throughout the poem and in the first stanza's use of the words "sleep", "slowly", "soft", and "shadows."

Assonance, the repetition of similar vowel sounds, is also heavily used in this poem. In each stanza, Yeats utilizes this technique in order to give the poem a softer and dreamy sound. Traditionally assonance makes a poem sound more like music, which one can hear if they pay attention to the sounds. At first, it may be hard to recognize the similar vowel sounds, but with a close reading one can easily pick them out and see how they add to the overall sound of the poem: "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;"

This poem, written in iambic pentameter, also follows the "abba" rhyme scheme, which Yeats probably intended to give the poem a fixed rhythm. Doing so provides the poem with more romantic, attractive, and hypnotic qualities. The rhyming almost hypnotizes the reader, like staring at a fire sometimes does. In his rhyming, Yeats uses almost all masculine rhymes such as "book" and "look"; "grace" and "face"; and "bars" and "stars." The only feminine word is "overhead," but even that word rhymes with the masculine word "fled." Possibly Yeats did this to over emphasize that the narrator was a man or to give the poem a harsher sound to illustrate the bitterness and regret the narrator might have over never being recognized by his love.

Everything in this poem makes sense once the reader understands it in its context. William Butler Yeats, the famous Irish poet, met the love of his life in 1889 at twenty four years old. Her name was Maud Gonne and like him, she was heavily into Irish politics, mythology, and history. He thought her a brilliant and passionate woman, and soon he fell in love with her. However, when he asked for her hand in marriage, she refused his proposal. This he contended later, caused the problems of his life to begin. This poem is most likely about his first true love, who rejected him. She never understood until it was too late that he was not one of the men who "loved [only her] beauty with love false or true," but more so her "pilgrim soul" and the "sorrows of [her] changing face." He would have been there with her into her old age and loved her despite her fading beauty. Yet, she allowed love to flee and become extinguished like the fire in her living room soon will be. Now she can only murmur, as those who are alone might do instead of speaking aloud, testifying to her isolation and reiterating the disposition of the poem, "a little sadly."