

WHEN YOU ARE OLD William Butler Yeats

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,
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.

The poem begins "**When you are old...**," rather than "Now that you are old..." which suggests that it is a warning, or a judgment upon an unrequited subject of love. The poet wants the addressee, after she has become aged (**old and grey**) and is "**full of sleep**" (carries the broad connotation of death, and describes the sleeping that leads to dreaming) **take down this book** (He projects that his poem will appear in a collection of his published poems) and begin to read his poem and think back on his love for her. Reading, then, these words, she begins to dream about the past and her own youth in a self-reflective way. **nodding by the fire** = seduta accanto al fuoco col capo tentennante. He asks her to remember the "soft look / [Her] eyes had once," but he also wants her to remember "their shadows." His love for her would remain unfulfilled, especially because those shadows were "deep."

The second stanza is descriptive of her dream of the past. The poet then refers to the situation that is galling him, that many more men than he have "love[d] [her] **moments of glad grace**" and they have also loved her beauty (**beauty with love false or true**). Both "grace" and "beauty" are vague and nondescript, yet these lines work to contrast those who loved these general aspects of her with the "one man" who loved her pilgrim soul. He alone can "love the pilgrim soul" she is and, no doubt, will continue to be. He loves her inner beauty as well as her outer beauty. This suggests a love willing to journey into age as a companion with her, still loving the "**sorrows**" of her "**changing face**" as she shifts through the years.

In the final quatrain, the dream continues and the poet dramatizes the future moment when she will be reading this heartfelt poem addressed to her, and it will make her sad as she bends down to tend to the fire "**down beside the glowing bars**" (curvandoti di fronte ai ceppi ardenti) of the fire (perhaps seeking warmth or comfort). She murmurs, "a little sadly". He foretells that she will "murmur" in her melancholy that "Love fled / And paced upon the mountains overhead / And hid his face amid a crowd of stars". From this concrete image the dream again expands, and we see Love, capitalized as an absolute, fleeing, into mountainous distances. **fled and paced** = fuggì e passò. She did not accept the love when it was offered to her, and it escaped like smoke that rises and dissipates into thin air.

His face hid "amid a crowd of stars" an abstract image issuing from a more concrete description of loneliness and regret. He wants her feel sad now for what she will have lost if she does not recognize and reciprocate his love.

Thème: Appearing in 1892, "When You Are Old" is one of Yeats's earliest poems, which Yeats dedicated to Maud Gonne. Is an example of love poetry he wrote before he was thirty-five and which is intimately related to his life. Indeed, three years prior to its publication, he met the fiery and beautiful Maud Gonne, and as he famously said "the troubles of my life began." She was his one love, and yet she was unattainable. He proposed to her countless times, and yet she always turned him down.

The poem is based on Ronsard's "Quand Vous Serez Bien Vieille," Sonnets Pour Helene (1578), which maintains the Maud Gonne/Helen of Troy parallel that Yeats so often draws. The idea of love in age is an ancient one, meant to express the fact that love inheres not merely in youth, but in something deeper and more lasting. The composition is full of mythical imagery. The poet imagines her in front of a fire and he asks her to read a book of his life. The dominant mood is one of serenity, of melancholy and memory.

Form: The poem consists of three quatrains with the rime scheme, ABBA, CDDC, EFFE.