

When you are old' is  
one of w.b. yeats  
essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Written in 1893 and published in the poet's collection *The Rose*, 'When You Are Old' is one of W. B. Yeats' (1865-1939) most popular poems. As with many of his works, the poem is influenced by Greek Mythology. In this case, it is the legend of Helen of Troy, which inspires Yeats. 'When You Are Old' is believed to have been written for Maud Gonne, the love of Yeats' life. It is based upon a much earlier poem by Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585), which was part of the French poet's 'Sonnets for Helene'. The poem is three quatrains in length, has an ABBA rhyming scheme and is written in iambic pentameter. Through clever use of punctuation, and the repeated use of "and", Yeats manipulates the pace of the poem and encourages the reader to slow down. The subsequent effect, therefore, lends itself to the slower pace of life that accompanies old age. 'When You Are Old' is narrated by an anonymous man, who is expressing his deep and undying love for a woman who has, thus far, rejected his advances. Although Yeats never makes direct reference to himself with the use of the first person singular, his use of allusion leaves little doubt as to who the "...one man..." may be.

The first stanza, asks the woman to consider her future and what her life will be like when she reaches old age. He believes that she will no doubt reflect upon her youth and lost beauty. "...the soft look /Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep". As alluded to above, it is the repeated use of "and" throughout this stanza, which sets the slow and very deliberate tempo of the poem. This slightly melancholic opening, is followed by a stanza, which asks the woman to view her current situation from the perspective of her future self, when she was "loved". Interestingly, the word "loved" is used four times in this quatrain and implies that the many who "...loved your moments

of glad grace,/And loved your beauty..." will cease to be enamoured with the passing years. In the last two lines of the second stanza, Yeats introduces himself and claims he is different from 'the many', "But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,/And loved the sorrows of your changing face". It is at this point, that the reader discovers the relationship between the poet and his subject. There is a tone of longing and yearning, as he announces that he does not simply love her for her external beauty, but adores her "...pilgrim soul..." with a kind of reverence.

Moreover, he claims that, because his love is not shallow, he will continue to her adore despite her "...changing face..." The final quatrain opens with the image of the old woman bending by the fire, as she reflects upon the lost chance of love, "Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled..." The use of "Love" is reminiscent of the personification of love in Greek Mythology. However, it also allows Yeats to reference himself again without using the first person singular "I". At this point of the poem, the reader might expect bitterness or recrimination towards the woman who has refused to return the poet's affection. Instead, Yeats suggests that his unrequited love will continue despite her advancing years. He suggests that he will always be watching over her, "...amid a crowd of stars." 'When You Are Old' is more than just another love poem. In it, Yeats asks the object of his affection to consider a future, in which she may regret missed opportunities of love. His purpose may be to encourage a return of his affections, or simply serve as a undying reminder of his adoration.