

The advice of the old should never be taken lightly essay

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



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E. A. Houseman's poem "When I was One-and-Twenty" consists of two eight-line stanzas, which follow a traditional ballad rhyme scheme, where the second and the fourth line of each group rhyme. It is initially a very straightforward and simplistic poem, where the speaker expresses the willingness of youth to disregard the advice of the wise elder, who appeals to the youth to freely give away materialistic possessions, such as money, pearls and rubies, but to give a long and hard thought as to whom he is giving his heart to. The wise, old man offered valuable advice on the issue of love, foolishness and youth, probably himself knowing that his advice will be rejected, but in the end, it was exactly how he said it would be: the youth gets heartbroken, but still learns a valuable lesson.

The most important motif in the poem is of course, love. But, since this is not a traditional poem praising the power and beauty of love, it is being compared to some unusual objects. The youth is advised to give away all his earthly, materialistic possessions freely, without even thinking about it, but never to give away his heart. It appears that the poet is juxtaposing money with the heart, the two opposing symbols: money as a cold, rational idea of the mind and the heart, which is the center of human emotions, also pearls and rubies and one's power of imagination. He is mentioning selling one's heart instead of giving it away freely, hinting at the Marxist perspective that commodities make the world go round. In the end, when the heart is given away, it is never for free. The poet is stating that the broken heart is paid with sorrow, regret and depression, something much more valuable than any financial commodity. Even though the poet might be comparing the heart with money, he still believes that the one who gives it away freely and gets

heartbroken, has paid much more for it than mere rubies, pearls, crowns, pounds and guineas.

The idea of foolishness is closely connected to the idea of youth in the poem.

The young are usually very foolish in their naïve belief that they know everything better than everyone else, and rarely, if ever, take valuable advice offered by the elderly. Still, it is usually so happens that the elderly were right, but the young have learned a valuable lesson on their own.

Sometimes, this is better than being told what to do and how to act. The young are also very foolish in giving their heart away freely, not realizing the potential dangers of a broken heart. The young speaker was not aware how painful this experience would be, but at the very end of the poem, it is clear that he takes his grief and sorrow very seriously, at the age of twenty two, when he has loved and lost. He finally realized the foolishness of his ways and that the wise, old man was actually right and was only trying to help him by talking him out of making such a mistake. Still, the mistake was made, but what counts the most is that the young speaker has learned his lesson well. He is not foolish anymore in the affairs of the heart, and knows that when you give your heart away, it is always at a very high cost.

The speaker is very young: he is only twenty one. Back in the time when the poem was written, he was most probably considered much older and more mature than in today's society. And, after only one year, he has learned a valuable lesson. He says himself that when he was only twenty one, there was no use talking to him, meaning that he would not listen to any advice given to him by anyone. He believed he can handle any life situation on his own, that he does not need the advice of an older and wiser man. It turns out

that he was wrong. In only one year, he became aware of the pain of a broken heart, and how he sold his heart for regret, sorrow and pain. He considers his experience extremely valuable and we see this from his words about what happened. He is sad and is in pain, but given his very young age, it will serve as a helpful experience in his next relationship, when he will give his heart away yet again. Even though he is still very young, after all, only a year has passed when he was thinking like a careless youth, but the reader notices a new kind of maturity in the young speaker. He has really learned a lesson which has made him a better and more mature person. He knows now that love can cause serious pain and will definitely be more cautious in the future.

This poem does not have a serious tone, despite the fact that it speaks of a broken heart. Quite the contrary, the readers have the impression that the younger speaker will get over this heartbreaking experience pretty soon, like most young people do. Still, he might have acted differently and might have ended up less hurt if he had take the old man's advice on the issue of love, foolishness and youth. Because, in the end, it was exactly how the old man said it would be: the youth gets his heart broken, but still learns an important lesson.

Reference:

Madden, Frank. Exploring Literature: writing and thinking about fiction, poetry, drama and the essay. 4th ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2009. Print.