

Being one and twenty



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Turning 21 defines a threshold into adulthood where an individual's actions define them further in life. By allowing leniency and the assurance to make mistakes and learn, 21 year olds live free of obligation and constraint. Both "To Sir John Lade, on his Coming of Age" and "When I was One-and-Twenty" respectively by Samuel Johnson and A. E. Housman, characterize this feeling of freedom that comes with the age of 21. Through the individual structure and cadence of the poems both poets reflect on their experiences at age 21 and relay a message about freedom. By advising the readers how to experience life at 21 through different perspectives with attitudes of freedom in one and caution in the other, Johnson and Housman recommend an adventurous outlook of the future.

Each poem echoes advice to the twenty one year old in different perspectives to create a personal atmosphere. Johnson uses his poem to address Sir John Lade, a colleague, who he congratulates for enduring life and advises to let loose and enjoy the coming year. He writes, "Loosened from the minor's tether," explaining that Sir John is free from the expectations and obligations he was once bound by. Throughout his poem, Johnson uses words referring to birds including "flown," "feather," and "fly," which hold the connotation of freedom and weightlessness. In being "loosened" Johnson conveys an image of a bird being set free. Contrastingly, Housman uses a personal anecdote of being advised to prompt an image of a caged heart. At first a "wise man," tells the narrator to live freely but guard "your heart away." Housman reveals that he did not listen, "No use to talk to me," as a way to advise readers just as the wise man did to him. Through this personal recollection, Housman's analogy serves to encourage

readers into living freely whereas Johnson used a broader perspective of all 21 year olds to relay a similar message.

In conveying the message, the two authors create different tones in their poems that ultimately lead to different approaches to the same advice. Whereas Johnson encourages worry-free freedom, Housman describes more of a warning to live with caution. Johnson's poem innately acts joyous telling readers to "Let it wander as it will," or not to worry too much. Thus, the structural ABAB rhyme scheme of each stanza creates this lighthearted and fun tone throughout the poem. Housman, on the other hand, seems regretful from the beginning as he recall his experience as 21. He writes, "'Tis paid with sighs a plenty." With no clear rhyme scheme and syntax, reflecting remorse, he creates a gloomy tone compared to Johnson and conveys a message of warning. He hopes the reader will live with caution and listen unlike him when he was 21. The contrast of attitudes reveals the duality of freedom that both authors highlight.

Johnson and Housman describe the double edged nature of freedom through their premise of living at age 21. In the last quatrain, Johnson informs, "You can hang or drown at last." This line stands out against the joyous attitude of the rest of the poem as Johnson describes that one has to live to their full potential until the end or "drown" into a mundane life of obligations. Thus, the 21st year determines the rest of one's life as they finally have the freedom to live on their own terms and they must choose to live adventurously or filled with worry. Similarly, Housman leans toward a worry free approach to living by warning readers to "keep your fancy free." Thus, he is advocating avoiding troubles of the heart and living instead to the best

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of one's potential and on one's own terms. This human struggle of choosing oneself over societal pressures encompassed by both poems reveals that one has to choose themselves when they get the opportunity, described as the age 21 in the poems.

Being 21 allows one to make mistakes and live for themselves and both Johnson and Housman encourage readers to take this opportunity. Housman recalls his regrets in giving his heart away whereas Johnson addresses the reader directly to convey this message. Both poets advocate a chance for freedom at the age of 21. Although they use different tones of worry free versus regretful, they motivate readers to abandon obligations in order to experience life. Overall, both Johnson and Housman use turning 21 as a jumping point to determine how one will live the rest of their life and, thus, encourage one to live for themselves.