When You Are Old by William Butler Yeats

by Tina Agarwal

When you are old and grey 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.

W.B. Yeats

When You Are Old by William Butler Yeats is a poem about love and loss. It is told from a man’s point of view. He is addressing an elderly woman, and asks her to reminisce about the life she has had. The poem is sad and nostalgic; it is full of remembrance.
Yeats speaks of the woman as being “old and grey”, not only meaning her physical state, but also a mental one. This woman is looking over the memories of her past, especially those of the man who loved her. Perhaps the “grey” alludes to the idea that her life is dull and meaningless without love. Yeats reminds the woman of the many men who were infatuated by her, both those who believed they were in love with her and those who did not. He goes on to say that only one man, perhaps himself, loved her truly. “The pilgrim soul in you” alludes to the idea that this man saw beneath her exterior, and loved her for her spirit and mind.

The narrator is using this poem as a piece of advice to a woman whom he loves. This poem is not actually meant for an old woman. He is warning her that, if she does not choose to love him, she will lead a “grey” life. Perhaps he is speaking to the woman after she has left him, telling her that he is still very much in love with her and that they would be happy together. The narrator is clearly hoping that the woman will see her chance and take it before it is too late, that one day, he will no longer be waiting for her. Yeats depicts, through this poem, a man pleading with a woman to love him. The man, the narrator, tells the woman that she will ultimately regret losing his love; he predicts her future without him.

The first quatrain is fairly melancholy, looking into the future of the woman in question. However, the second quatrain gives hope to the reader. It describes the hope of a man to win the heart of the woman, and his love of her “pilgrim soul”. However, the third quatrain is sombre and dark. It describes the elderly woman’s sad
memory of love ‘fleeting’ away from her and never coming back. There is a hint of bitterness in Yeats’ writing here – his tone suggests that the man’s love would not be everlasting, that he would not wait forever if the woman did not reciprocate his love.

Perhaps Yeats was writing autobiographically. He proposed to Maud Gonne, an Irish actress and feminist, four times during the late 19th Century. She refused his offers. There was speculation as to whether or not he was obsessed with her. This poem could have been a declaration of love to Gonne. Though his love for Maud was not returned, Yeats leaves the outcome of the couple to the reader. Whether or not the woman accepts the man’s love is entirely the reader’s choice. The poem is a warning to people, of all ages, not to squander their lives. A person has only one life to live and they should not be blind to love.