When You Are Old

W.B. Yeats
Background

Published in 1893 in his collection of poems called ‘The Rose’, most of which was with Maud Gonne in mind as his inspiration. Yeats met Maud in 1888 when he was 23. He fell in love with her and offered marriage a number of times and was rejected.

Maud and Yeats were Anglo-Irish, yet Maud rejected this heritage and her sole passion in life was her mission toward an independent Irish nation.

Yeats was unable to fully support her violent political activism or completely reject his Anglo-Irish heritage. Maud was also more attracted to men who were physical leaders and who were the strong, active type, like the man she eventually married, John MacBride.
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.
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
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Moments are fleeting, not permanent.
Alliteration adds to hypnotic quality of rhythm, rhyming pattern.
Pilgrim: a person who journeys to sacred places as an act of devotion.
Superficial love of beauty juxtaposed with deeper, more meaningful love of the soul.
Face changes with age, and other men would be put off by that, but not him.

Quantitative question
Repetition of ‘loved’ (past tense) emphasises that this is looking at the past and that she was a loved woman.
Contradiction of previous line emphasises the vast difference between the ‘many’ who loved her and the ‘one’ who loved her.
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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. }

Onomatopoeic ‘murmur’ suggests a whisper that shows that she has no passion or zest left. Adds to imagery of age and weariness

‘Little sadly’ contrasts with the passionate ‘sorrows’ of previous stanza

Personification: pacing suggests that she was given a chance as ‘Love’ waited for her; being on the ‘mountains overhead, suggests that ‘Love’ waited on a higher plain than that which she inhabited

‘Hid his face’: hid his grief and also suggests the preoccupation with producing his works

Refers to the sort of small electrical bar heater used in apartments to prevent the coldness of winter. The metaphor of death and age add a further despondency to the image. Also adds to idea of solitude and loneliness.

Capitalised ‘L’ for love suggests that it is not just a person that she has lost, but the ultimate true and everlasting possibility of love

Choice of the active verb fled suggests that this ultimate love has made the decision and has run away of its own accord.

Last two lines refer more to the poet’s reactions and he places his own reactions into the poem. Yeats considers himself the embodiment of love, which she has rejected.