When I Was One-and-Twenty

POEM TEXT

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
"Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;
Give pearls away and rubies
But keep your fancy free."
But I was one-and-twenty,
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard him say again,
"The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue."
And I am two-and-twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

SUMMARY

When I was 21, a wise man gave me some advice. He said it would be better to give all my money away before I even think about giving someone my heart. It would even be better to lose precious jewels, he continued, than to give someone my affections. Of course, I was only 21 at the time—so there was no point saying this stuff to me.

When I was 21, the wise man doubled down on his advice. He told me that when people give their heart away they always lose something too—love comes with a price of plentiful sighs and endless misery. And now that I'm 22, I see how right he was!

THEMES

YOUTH, NAIVETY, AND EXPERIENCE

"When I Was One-and-Twenty" is a poem that focuses on the naivety of youth, looking at the way that young people usually fail to listen to the advice of those that are older and, perhaps, wiser. The poem implies that this is simply the way life works—and that the young have to make mistakes for themselves in order to learn.

The poem develops this idea by putting the wise man's advice front and center in both stanzas. The speaker can't, then, say that they weren't *warned* about the perils of falling in and out of love. In the first stanza, the wise man tells the speaker to give away anything but the heart, while the second stanza discusses the consequences of heartbreak. But the speaker admits that there was "no use talk to me" at the age of "one-and-twenty." That is, the speaker's youthfulness was always going to get in the away of the man's supposedly sage advice.

Though the speaker doesn't go into detail, it's clear enough from the last two lines that the speaker *did* have their heart broken soon after the wise man offered his advice. The almost over-the-top world-weariness of the repeated "'tis true" at the end of the poem is the speaker's way of admitting to youthful naivety. But it also seems a little over dramatic, maybe suggesting that the speaker is *still* in that naive stage of life. Indeed, maybe naivety is just a fact of life more generally—was it all that wise of the presumably older man to think that the youth would actually listen to his advice, for example?

That said, the poem does make a serious point about how things like falling in and out of love are major milestones in growing up. These mistakes shape people as they get older—which is why, though the speaker is now only 22, it does seem plausible that the speaker's whole perspective on life has changed. The poem allows for this ending to be seen as both humorous and serious at once.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 15-16

LOVE AND PAIN

"When I Was One-and-Twenty" has one clear message about love: that it inevitably leads to suffering. A wise man, presumably speaking from experience, tries to warn the young speaker not to fall in love—because giving "the heart" away is "paid with sighs a plenty" and "endless rue" (that is, misery). On first glance, then, poem could almost be seen as anti-love. But perhaps it's more accurate to think of the poem as showing the way that love is an irresistible force, even when it's warned against.

This link between love and sorrow is set up by the wise man's words in the first stanza. Essentially, he says it would be better to give everything away than the "heart." That is, it would be better to experience other kinds of destitution—namely, falling

from riches to poverty—than to fall in love. Love, continues the man in the second stanza, is a kind of transaction in which the lovers always come off worse, eventually.

This world-weary advice contrasts with the speaker's inability to heed it. But that doesn't necessarily mean that the speaker is stubborn—it might just speak to the way that love ultimately proves more powerful than being sensible or playing things safe. Ultimately, though, the poem confirms that there is definitely some truth in what the wise man says—that there's a kernel of wisdom in his words.

The poem then ends by switching from the past to the present tense, with the speaker confirming that they now know what the wise man said was right: "'tis true, 'tis true." The slight air of resignation here also subtly suggests that things will always be this way. The speaker doesn't, for example, really try to convince the reader to follow the wise man's advice—but just wearily admits that he was right.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
"Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;

Housman's "When I Was One-and-Twenty" takes the form of a cautionary fable, the unnamed speaker relating what happened when the speaker failed to take the advice of a "wise man." The opening two lines establish the speaker's age at the time—21—and contrast the speaker with the figure of the wise man. By implication, this latter man is older and thereby more experienced in the ways of the world—and, in particular, love.

The whole poem has a very child-like sound to it, evoking the tone and rhythm of a nursery rhyme. Here, in particular, the /w/ sounds in "when," "was," "one" and "wise" are particularly light and playful. This alliteration perhaps suggests the youthful naivety of the speaker at the time in question.

Lines 3 and 4 cite the wise man's advice. Essentially, this advice compares falling in love to a kind of financial transaction, saying it would be more sensible for someone to give away all their money rather than risk giving away their heart ("crowns and pounds and guineas" are all types of British coins). The polysyndeton in line 3, with the repeated "and," emphasizes the wise man's words, but also contributes to the poem's overall playful sound.

As with much of Housman's poetry, critics are divided over whether his poems actually are naive and adolescent, or whether they deliberately mimic the kind of thought processes and feelings that come with being adolescent (Housman himself wrote this poem in his mid-30s). The reader might *also* question the usefulness of the wise man's advice. That is, to what extent can falling in love—and being heartbroken—really be compared to giving money away.

The wise man's words are especially musical:

> "Give crowns and pounds and guineas
> But not your heart away;

The assonance of /i/, /ow/, /a/, and /aw/ sounds highlighted above gives the man's words the air of an old saying, advice handed down from generation to generation. The internal rhyme of "crowns and pounds" adds to this effect. But it also makes his words sound kind of throwaway—easy to remember, but hard to put into practice.

LINES 5-8

Give pearls away and rubies
But keep your fancy free."
But I was one-and-twenty,
No use to talk to me.

Lines 5 and 6 continue the wise man's advice, extending it to include the giving away of precious gems—"pearls" and "rubies"—as well as money. It's worth noting that these lines repeat words from lines 3 and 4. "Give" and "But" are repeated as anaphora, and "away" repeats as an instance of "diacope." The speaker also repeats "and," continuing to employ polyptoton, in which conjunctions are repeated for emphasis. All in all, lines 5-6 parallel the structure of lines 3-4, intensifying these earlier lines while basically saying the same thing.

The man's words certainly have the ring of an old wise truth, which is again emphasized by assonance ("rubies," "keep," "free,") and alliteration ("fancy free"). This sound patterning makes the advice easy to remember—but, again, doesn't necessarily make it accurate or easy to apply to life. The reader might question how many young people actually have "crowns and pounds and guineas" and precious gems to give away in the first place!

So far, the poem has been spoken in the past tense, and lines 7-8 make the reason behind this clear—this is advice the speaker *failed* to listen to. It might be presumed that now the speaker, who is no longer 21, is wiser. Like the wise man, the speaker now has more experience and can reflect on those experiences. The speaker both realizes that the wise man's advice deserved more careful consideration, and that, at 21, the speaker was too immature to actually give that kind of attention.

Perhaps, then, the poem is less about trying to warn its readers against falling in love, and more about how advice given from

old to young is rarely followed—especially when it comes to matters of the heart. As if to drive home this point, the poem's first line stubbornly repeats (slightly modified) in line 7: "But I was one-and-twenty." This use of refrain captures how stubborn the speaker is at 21.

LINES 9-14

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard him say again,
"The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue."

The second stanza precisely parallels the first, using direct repetition of the opening line as a refrain and, like the first stanza, granting the middle four lines to the "wise man's" words. This repetitive form also mirrors the way that the wise man made his warning not once, but twice (at least). Even the enjambment is the same! At this stage in the story, the speaker was still 21, and still ignored the wise man.

In this section, the wise man develops the reasoning behind his caution against love. Lines 11 and 12 explain that to give "the heart out of the bosom" always comes with a price—it is never done "in vain." This metaphor continues the first stanza's setup of love as a kind of transaction, one which ultimately, according to the wise man, is not worth it. And while this section is just following suit with the first stanza in terms of its enjambment, it's worth noting the way that the space after the word "bosom" in line 11 suggests a kind of emptiness. That is, it subtly represents the "bosom" *after* the heart has been given away.

Lines 13 and 14 continue with the wise man's advice, completing the quote begun in line 11. Here, he explains the price of love and heartbreak: when someone gives their heart away, they pay for it with "sighs a plenty" and receive "endless rue," or misery. In other words, they pay with suffering only to get more suffering. By comparing this process to monetary exchange, the wise man shows how absurd falling in love is. It's like paying money now in order to have to pay more money later on. The implications are clear enough: love results in pain.

One thing that's interesting to note is how the wise man's advice seems to steer quite close to stereotypical adolescent emotion. That is, he seems to take the view that heartbreak is something that people never get over—the pain it causes is apparently "endless." As with the first stanza, alliteration here has a dual effect:

> 'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
> And sold for endless rue."

Firstly, it makes the wise man's words easier to remember, making them sound like a classic old saying handed down from generation to generation. Secondly, and paradoxically, the prominent alliteration also makes his words seem more playful and frivolous, undercutting the apparent seriousness of his warning. There is a kind of tension, then, between what may well be valid advice and the musicality of how it is presented.

LINES 15-16

And I am two-and-twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

The poem's final words return to the main speaker's voice. Line 15 adapts the opening line (the poem's refrain), changing it very slightly by adding a year to the speaker's age and changing "But" to "And" at the start of the line. The tense also changes from past to present. Put simply, this is the poem's way of showing that, on the one hand, very little has changed since the speaker was 21—yet, on the other, *everything* has changed.

Now, of course, the speaker *knows* what the wise man was talking about—precisely because the speaker didn't follow his advice. In a year or less, the speaker has moved from disregarding the wise man's word to finding out the hard way that there was some truth in them. Again, the poem isn't exactly saying people should never fall in love. Rather, the poem highlights the risk of pain and heartbreak that comes with being in love. It's not as if the speaker has suddenly become completely wise to the world—they've just become a little more experienced.

The last three lines all begin with "And," an example of polysyndeton as well as anaphora. This creates a sense of continuity between the lines, linking "rue" (misery) to the speaker's present state ("I am two-and-twenty") *and* the truthfulness of the wise man's words ("'tis true"). The repeated "And" also give the impression that this pain is ongoing—running continuously now in the speaker's life from one moment to the next and appearing to be "endless."

In the repeated "'tis true," the final line uses another type of repetition known as epizeuxis. It's an almost overly poetic moment, particularly coupled with the poetic cliche of "oh" just before. This perhaps lends a slight tragicomic air to the poem, the speaker effectively wallowing in their misery in a way that's both over the top and true to life.

Finally, it's worth noting that the alliteration between the /t/ sounds of the speaker's age and the poem's last four words keeps up the overall musical and playful sound:

> And I am two-and-twenty,
> And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

Some critics view Housman's poetry as distinctly adolescent—that is, undeveloped and overly dramatic—while others view a poem like this as a song *of* adolescence, deliberately evoking the kind of thoughts and feelings of youth. This alliteration—and overall lightness of tone—can easily

support both points of view. It evokes how dramatic one's first heartbreak can be.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"When I Was One-and-Twenty" is a very musical-sounding poem, and much of this effect is achieved through alliteration. Overall, this helps give the poem a bright and breezy flow which is somewhat at odds with the subject of heartbreak. Perhaps the poem does this intentionally in order to suggest the way that young people tend to ignore the advice of the "wise" and need to make their own mistakes.

The first example of alliteration is across lines 1 and 2:

> When I was one-and-twenty
> I heard a wise man say,

The insistent /w/ sound here is playful, suggesting the once carefree attitude of the speaker. A similar early example of alliteration comes in line 6, which is part of the wise man's advice (which the speaker quotes directly): "Fancy free." The phrase also has a playful sound, contrasting light /f/ consonants with the heaviness of a broken heart. Similar alliteration is also found in lines 13 and 14 through "paid," "plenty," "sighs," and "sold." This alliteration again fits in with the musical playfulness.

Lines 7 and 8 also use alliteration through /t/ sounds:

> But I was one-and-twenty,
> No use to talk to me.

These are best considered together with the same sound that appears in the poem's last two lines (the equivalent section of the second stanza):

> And I am two-and-twenty,
> And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

The alliteration is one element among many that makes these two pairs of lines extremely similar. The whole point here is to show the reader that between the time of first love and of first heartbreak there is very little difference—but, in reality, everything changes. The two pairs, lines 7-8 and 15-16, are almost the same, but one relates to naive optimism and the other to melancholic understanding.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When," "was one"
- **Line 2:** "wise"
- **Line 3:** "Give," "guineas"
- **Line 5:** "Give"
- **Line 6:** "fancy free"
- **Line 7:** "was one," "twenty"
- **Line 8:** "to talk to"
- **Line 9:** "When," "was one"
- **Line 10:** "heard him"
- **Line 13:** "paid," "sighs," "plenty"
- **Line 14:** "sold"
- **Line 15:** "And," "am two-and-twenty"
- **Line 16:** "And," "'tis true, 'tis true"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "When I Was One-and-Twenty." Generally speaking, assonance, much like the speaker's frequent alliteration, contributes to the poem's overall sound, which is musical and playful. Arguably, this is at odds with the poem's subject matter—perhaps deliberately so. It gives the poem an overly dramatic and perhaps naive tone (even to the point of being humorous), which fits with the poem's youthful speaker.

An early example of assonance is in line 3, which is also the first line of the wise man's advice to the young speaker:

> "Give crowns and pounds and guineas

These chiming short /i/, /ow/, and /a/ vowel sounds suggest numerousness, reinforcing the man's point that it is better to give anything—and everything!—away rather than "your heart." Assonance also contributes to the internal rhyme between "crowns" and "pounds," adding a sing-song-like quality to the line. This, in turn, makes the wise man's advice sound like a sort of memorable aphorism, or common saying; it also adds to the general light-heartedness of the poem.

There are also assonant sounds across lines 5 and 6:

> Give pearls away and rubies
> But keep your fancy free."

These vowel sounds feel light and playful, suggesting the state of being carefree.

Because the poem's lines are so short, and the use of sonic devices so precise, sometimes assonant sounds ring out across several lines. For instance, "say" in line 10 and "vain" in line 12 call to each other, even though they're separated by a line. Similarly with "sighs" in line 13 and "I" in line 15. Finally, /oo/ sounds links "two" in line 15 and "true" in line 16. Though they're on separate lines, these lines are so short and musical that linked vowel sounds are made more prominent. Interestingly, in this latter example, this links the speaker's increased age (from 21 to 22) to the newfound status of the wise man's words—the way that they suddenly seem so "true"!

All together, these distant alliterations capture the poem's interest in consequences and delayed response. Just as the speaker takes a while to actually listen to the wise man's advice, so too do these instances of alliteration take some time to play out. In this way, they mimic the speaker's own thought process.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I was one"
- **Line 2:** "I," "wise"
- **Line 3:** "Give crowns and pounds and guineas"
- **Line 4:** "heart away"
- **Line 5:** "away," "rubies"
- **Line 6:** "keep," "fancy free"
- **Line 7:** "was one"
- **Line 9:** "was one"
- **Line 10:** "say"
- **Line 12:** "vain"
- **Line 13:** "'Tis paid with sighs," "plenty"
- **Line 14:** "sold," "endless"
- **Line 15:** "I," "two"
- **Line 16:** "oh," "true," "true"

CAESURA

Caesura is used only twice in "When I Was One-and-Twenty"—right at the end of the poem. Until that point, the two stanzas have an identical form, totally absent of punctuation.

There are three effects to notice in the poem's use of caesura. First of all, these two caesurae allow for the poem's dramatic—perhaps *over*-dramatic—ending:

> And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

"Oh" is an expression of exasperation that is also a kind of poetic cliché, perhaps indicating the extent to which the speaker is wrapped up in feelings of loss and heartache (so much so that these feelings seem inescapable). The caesurae also set up the epizeuxis, which is the immediate repetition of "'tis true." This emphasizes the strength with which the speaker feels the truthfulness of the wise man's words, though, of course, it's too late to listen to them (at least that is heavily implied).

Finally, these caesurae slow the poem's pace down so that the last line seems a touch more full of "rue" than the rest, ending on a deliberate kind of downer. Coupled with the switch to present tense, this builds a picture of the speaker as still being in the grips of heartache—with each moment passing by slowly and painfully.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "," ","

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "When I Was One-and-Twenty." Generally speaking, it is built into the form of the poem, with the enjambments in the first stanza taking place in the corresponding lines of the second. This helps create a kind of mirror between the two stanzas, contrasting two different points in time—the speaker before and after love and heartbreak.

In many of these instances—which parallel each other—the enjambment takes on a slightly more specific meaning. Lines 3, 5, 11, and 13 all concern the act of giving something away—money, the "heart," or "sighs." The use of empty space at the end of each line helps convey this, as if the white page is receiving the things that speaker has to offer, be they "guineas," "rubies," or "The heart out of the bosom." These end words seem to float dangerously in the page's white nothingness, which captures the risks taken in falling in love. Such enjambments throw the poem slightly off balance.

It's also worth noting how all the lines in the poem come in pairs (1 and 2, 3 and 4, and so on). When these lines are enjambed, it is effectively like breaking one longer line into two. For one, this helps emphasize the cause-and-effect nature of the wise man's warning—that is, one line leads to another just as love leads to heartbreak. Additionally, the line breaks subtly act out the poem's main subject: heartbreak. That is, the broken line signifies the broken emotional state of someone going through the pains of lost love.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "twenty / I"
- **Lines 3-4:** "guineas / But"
- **Lines 5-6:** "rubies / But"
- **Lines 9-10:** "twenty / I"
- **Lines 11-12:** "bosom / Was"
- **Lines 13-14:** "plenty / And"

REPETITION

Various forms of repetition are used throughout "When I Was One-and-Twenty." Firstly, there is the repeated form between the two stanzas, which is an instance of parallelism. This is also discussed in the form section of this guide, but, put briefly, the way that the stanzas closely mirror one another allows the poem to contrast two different moments in the speaker's life—before and after heartbreak. This helps the poem demonstrate the way that, though on the surface not much has changed, to the speaker it feels as though *everything* has been turned upside down.

Line 3 uses polysyndeton in its repeated "and." This creates a sense of numerousness, reinforcing the wise man's view that it's better to give anything—and everything!—away than "your heart." Polysyndeton is also used in the last three lines, where

"And" links the wise man's advice to the speaker's slightly increased age—and, accordingly, the speaker's newfound understanding of the truthfulness of that advice.

The repeated "And" in these last three lines, along with the repeated "Give" and "But" in the first stanza, are all instances of anaphora. These moments emphasize the repetitiveness of the wise man's advice. They also heighten the drama both of this advice and of the speaker's heartbreak, to an effect that is both sad and—perhaps—almost comic.

The close repetition of "away" in lines 4 and 5—a technique known as diacope—subtly emphasizes the poem's sense of loss. This foreshadows the speaker's revelation that now, at the slightly older age of twenty-two, the speaker has a better understanding of what the wise man meant.

The poem also ends with repetition through epizeuxis. The repeated "'tis true" demonstrates the extent to which the speaker now feels that the wise man's words were accurate. But it also sounds quite dramatic, perhaps hinting at a degree of continuing naivety—that is, perhaps the speaker *still* isn't quite as world weary as they might think.

Finally, the poem employs a refrain: "When I was one-and-twenty." This refrain begins and closes out each stanza (ending the second stanza in a modified form: "I am two-and-twenty"). In its original form, this repeated phrase emphasizes how much the speaker's attitude is connected to the speaker's age: the speaker ignores the wise man's advice because the speaker's only 21. Then, the subtle change in the refrain, "was" to "am," "one" to "two," captures how the passage of time has totally shifted the speaker's perspective.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When I was one-and-twenty"
- **Line 3:** "Give," "and," "and"
- **Line 4:** "But," "away;"
- **Line 5:** "Give"
- **Line 6:** "But"
- **Line 7:** "But," "I was one-and-twenty"
- **Line 9:** "When I was one-and-twenty"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "And," "I am two-and-twenty"
- **Line 16:** "And," "'tis true, 'tis true"

CONSONANCE

Consonance in the poem supports the effects created by alliteration and assonance. The poem is very musical-sounding, which helps make its message all the more striking and memorable. At the same time, that fact that it is so "*poetic*" adds a sense of lightness to the words—they feel almost like a nursery rhyme or song, which subtly undermines the seriousness of the speaker's pain. The poem can be thought of as being a bit tongue-in-cheek, recited by a speaker who thinks they're wiser than they actually are, and the poem's sonic devices add to this effect.

Many of the sounds repeated in the first stanza are sharp plosives and hard consonants—the /t/, /g/, /k/, /d/, and /b/ sounds, for example. Such sounds add a sense of bounciness and intensity to these lines:

> "Give crowns and pounds and guineas
> But not your heart away;
> Give pearls away and rubies
> But keep your fancy free."

There's a sort of crispness to the wise man's words that makes them all the more sharp and memorable. Another striking moment of consonance appears in line 12, in the second stanza:

> Was never given in vain;

Here, /v/ and /n/ sounds infuse the line, adding intensity to the wise man's proclamation that love *always* has a price. Overall, the whole poem feels like an aphorism—a sort of general, widely known truth about life—and the consonance contributes to this by infusing the stanzas with similar sounds over and over again.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When," "was," "one," "and," "twenty"
- **Line 2:** "wise," "man"
- **Line 3:** "Give crowns and pounds and guineas"
- **Line 4:** "But," "not," "heart," "away"
- **Line 5:** "Give," "pearls," "away," "rubies"
- **Line 6:** "But," "keep," "fancy free"
- **Line 7:** "was," "one," "twenty"
- **Line 8:** "to talk to"
- **Line 9:** "When," "was one," "twenty"
- **Line 10:** "heard him"
- **Line 11:** "heart"
- **Line 12:** "never given in vain"
- **Line 13:** "paid," "sighs," "plenty"
- **Line 14:** "sold," "endless"
- **Line 15:** "two," "twenty"
- **Line 16:** "'tis true, 'tis true"

METAPHOR

The poem has one clear metaphor, which appears in lines 11-15. Here, the wise man is telling the speaker that the "heart" is "never given in vain," but rather is "paid" for "with sighs a plenty / And sold for endless rue." The wise man isn't *literally* saying that people buy and sell their hearts; this is a metaphorical way of talking about the steep cost of falling in love and inevitably having one's heart broken.

The heart here is, of course, a metonym for love, as it has been throughout the poem. Sighs are expressions typically associated with sadness or exhaustion, while the phrase "endless rue" is a rather hyperbolic way of saying "never-ending regret." The wise man is essentially saying that love is never free; it always has a metaphorical price attached to it, and is "paid" for with lovers' deep pain and regret.

In the first stanza, the wise man insists that the young speaker part with *anything* other than the heart, which is thus implied to have a value far beyond that of money ("crowns and pounds and guineas") or material goods (things like "pearls" and "rubies"). The first stanza thus argues that such precious items pale in comparison with the preciousness of the heart. The metaphor in the second stanza picks up on this general treatment of love as a kind of financial transaction whose figurative cost is simply too high for anyone to bear.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-14:** ""The heart out of the bosom / Was never given in vain; / 'Tis paid with sighs a plenty / And sold for endless rue.""

VOCABULARY

One-and-twenty (Line 1, Line 7, Line 9) - A poetic way of saying 21—i.e., the speaker is 21 years old.

Crowns and pounds and guineas (Line 3) - Different British coins. Only the pound is still in use!

Keep your fancy free (Line 6) - "Fancy" refers to a person's whims, wishes, desires, and so forth. To keep this "free" here means to keep your heart free from the pain and turmoil if romantic love.

Bosom (Line 11) - Chest.

In vain (Line 12) - Without sacrifice or purpose.

Rue (Line 14) - Bitter regretfulness.

Two-and-twenty (Line 15) - A poetic way of saying 22. The speaker is now a year older.

'Tis (Line 16) - An abbreviation of "it is."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"When I Was One-and-Twenty" is comprised of two stanzas, both eight lines in length (also known as octaves or octets).

The stanzas are not just similar in length, but in many other ways too. They each start and end with the poem's refrain, "When I was one-and-twenty," and each stanza has the same structure: the first two and last two lines belonging to the main speaker, and the inner four lines quoting the "wise man" directly.

In the first stanza, the speaker recounts how the wise man warned that giving away anything and everything would be better than heartbreak. The speaker comments on this at the end of the stanza, saying it was "no use to talk to me."

In the second stanza, the wise man is quoted once again, expanding on his advice by outlining the pains of heartbreak. The circular nature of this warning—as though the wise man warns people all the time, and, likewise, is never listened to—perhaps speaks to the way love is a stronger force than wisdom. The poem ends with an important shift, switching into the present tense with the speaker's admission that the wise man spoke some truth.

The use of the refrain in the first and seventh line of each stanza captures the poem's sense both of circularity and of change. In the repetition of the speaker's age, the poem emphasizes how the speaker's attitude is determined by how old they are, rather than the advice the wise man repeatedly gives. At the same time, the change in the speaker's age from 21 to 22 captures how people's perspectives change after they have new life experiences.

METER

"When I Was One-and-Twenty" is a tightly regulated metrical poem. The meter is iambic trimeter, meaning there are three stresses per line in a da-DUM pattern. Here is line 2:

I heard | a wise | man say,

There is one key adjustment throughout the poem, however: every odd-numbered line has an *extra* unstressed syllable at the end (this is technically called a feminine ending). To demonstrate, here is line 1 (an odd-numbered line):

When I | was one- | and-twen- | ty

This ends the line on a swinging, song-like effect that contrasts with the straight-up iambic even-numbered lines (like line 2 quoted above). For another example, take lines 3 and 4. Line 3, the odd-numbered line, again has that extra dangling syllable at the end, whereas line 4 is perfect iambic trimeter:

Give crowns | and pounds | and guin- | eas
But not | your heart | away;

The effect of this regularity—combined with the quirky extra syllable—is very musical, giving the poem a sing-song, almost nursery-rhyme style. This can be read as a subtle expression of youthful naivety. Critics have often argued whether this naivety is an effect that Housman purposefully created, or if it's

unintended. Either way, it certainly helps define the poem.

The poem is also notable for how closely it sticks to the meter. Rather than changing up the meter at key points for emphasis, the rhythm of the poem stays constant. This helps draw attention to how the two stanzas mirror one another. By keeping the meter the same throughout, the speaker captures the repetitive nature of the wise man's warnings (as well as the speaker's own disregard for those warning).

The constant meter also keeps the poem moving very quickly, as if the speaker's 21st year flies by. This unflagging pace makes the final two lines, which function almost like a punch line, hit that much harder and unexpectedly.

RHYME SCHEME

"When I Was One-and-Twenty" uses end-rhyme throughout its 16 lines, which is typical of Housman's poetry more generally.

The scheme itself is slightly up for debate depending on whether line 1 ("twenty") is said to rhyme with lines 3 and 5 ("guineas" and "rubies") or not. Though "twenty" lacks consonance with "guineas" and "rubies," these words are still assonant. The shared long /e/ sound arguably produces a slant rhyme.

Given that the other rhymes are quite precise, the scheme for the first stanza that *doesn't* count lines 1 and lines 3/5 as the same would be as follows:

ABCBCDAD

The second stanza is very slightly different, because here the word "twenty" (the first A in the scheme below) clearly rhymes with "plenty" in line 13:

ABCBADAD

The precise scheme doesn't matter too much in this instance, because the *effect* of the rhymes is the same either way. The shortness of the lines coupled with the obviousness of the rhyme sounds makes for a very musical, playful kind of poem. Perhaps there is a certain irony at play between the seemingly serious subject matter and the light tone in which it is presented.

One rhyme that seems particularly important is the last one: "rue"/"true."This is the speaker's way of confirming the wisdom in the wise man's words—the rhyme sings loud and clear, marking itself as the poem's final sound. This links "rue" (misery and regret) with the truthfulness of the wise man's advice.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is a 22-year-old who has experienced heartbreak. Beyond that, readers don't get more specific information about this person—no name, gender, occupation etc. All readers know is that a wise man advised this speaker not to fall in love back when the speaker was 21, but the speaker did so anyway; now, now at the ripe old age of 22, the speaker understands the wise man's warning. That said, there's a sense of youthful naivety in the speaker's lamenting tone at the end of the poem—which is perhaps deliberately ironic. The speaker's newfound confidence in the ways of the world comes across as a little silly, given that the speaker is just a year old at this point. That said, this revelation could also be taken more sincerely, at face value.

Essentially, the poem takes the form of a nugget of wisdom, passed on from the "wise man" to the speaker and, in turn, the reader (with added commentary from the speaker). Thus the other speaker in the poem, of course, is the wise man himself. He appears to be quoted directly in lines 3-6 and 11-14. The degree to which his advice—to not fall in love—is actually *wise* is up for debate. But he does seem to point to a universal truth in the sense that love and suffering do often go hand in hand.

SETTING

"When I Was One-and-Twenty" doesn't really use any specifics to build a sense of setting, though the mention of British coins in line 3 ("crowns and pounds and guineas") perhaps gives a clue in terms of location.

There is, however, a sense of time setting in relation to the speaker. The speaker is talking to the reader from the present—and thus from within the midst of their "endless rue," a.k.a. their heartbreak.

The poem, then, has two main points in time: before this heartbreak and after. These are marked by the speaker's age: 21 in the first line, and 22 in the penultimate. This an attempt to show that, while little has changed about the speaker's life in a general sense, in another way *everything* has been changed by the experience of love and loss.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Many of the poems in *A Shropshire Lad*, in which this poem first appeared, were composed after the death of Housman's friend Adalbert Jackson, and the collection often touches on themes of death, grief, and the fleeting nature of youth. The collection also valorizes soldiers, which eventually helped lead to its popularity throughout Britain during the Boer War as well as World War I.

That said, Housman is a poet whose literary reputation is still up for debate. For some, he is a complicated soul whose poetry—especially *A Shropshire Lad*—captured a sense of mood and place particular to his home country, England ("Shropshire" is an English county). For others, he is a fusty writer with an almost adolescent way of looking at the world. Ezra Pound, the

famous Modernist, once characterized Housman's poetry as "woe, etc." Some critics see his poems as more like *songs* of adolescence—poems that, like William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* over a hundred years earlier, take on different voices to explore a particular type of life. Others just see his poetry as somewhat naive and trite. It's worth remembering that *A Shropshire Lad* was published when Housman was in his mid-thirties (1896).

Housman was a keen classical scholar of Latin, which perhaps informs the tightly wrought form on display in this poem. The main subject matter itself—the pains of love—is perhaps one of the oldest and most enduring of all subjects in art. The poem could fairly be compared to a modern-day pop song just as much as a Shakespearean sonnet or, indeed, the poetry of Housman's contemporaries—people like Oscar Wilde or Algernon Charles Swinburne.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Housman published his main collection, *A Shropshire Lad*, near the end of the Victorian Era. Its popularity rose in part due to the Boer War, a British conflict in South Africa that stirred up strong feelings about nationhood and a kind of nostalgia for a certain way of British life. Similarly, the same collection was popular during World War I.

Though it's completely unreferenced in the collection, one of the most intriguing aspects of *A Shropshire Lad* is the way in which it relates to Housman's sexuality. Housman fell in love with Moses Jackson while they were both studying at Oxford. His feelings were unreciprocated—Jackson was not homosexual—and Housman felt this rejection deeply. Perhaps this unrequited love makes its way into the poem, then. But it's worth remember how life as a homosexual was very different then than it is now, in the sense that homosexuality was still illegal (and widely considered to be immoral) in late 19th-century Britain. Housman would have been taking a huge risk to discuss any of his feelings towards Jackson openly in his work, but a focus on the male form—and particularly in terms of athleticism—can be found throughout Housman's poetry.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Housman's Life and Work — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/a-e-housman#tab-poems)
- The Poem Out Loud — The poem read by Jason Shelton. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gIVA8u7pYE)
- "The Invention of Love" — A clip from a play by Tom Stoppard, which imagines A.E. Housman visiting the classical underworld. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teg8-iqkYOA)
- Ezra Pound's Parody — In this poem, American modernist poet Ezra Pound mocks Housman's tendency towards "woe." (https://www.americanpoems.com/poets/ezrapound/song-in-the-manner-of-housman/)
- "A Shropshire Lad" — The full text of Housman's most popular book of poems, from which "When I Was One-and-Twenty" is taken. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5720/5720-h/5720-h.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER A. E. HOUSMAN POEMS

- To an Athlete Dying Young

HOW TO CITE

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