Growing Old

POEM TEXT

What is it to grow old?
Is it to lose the glory of the form,
The luster of the eye?
Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?
—Yes, but not this alone.

Is it to feel our strength—
Not our bloom only, but our strength—decay?
Is it to feel each limb
Grow stiffer, every function less exact,
Each nerve more loosely strung?

Yes, this, and more; but not
Ah, 'tis not what in youth we dreamed 'twould be!
'Tis not to have our life
Mellowed and softened as with sunset glow,
A golden day's decline.

'Tis not to see the world
As from a height, with rapt prophetic eyes,
And heart profoundly stirred;
And weep, and feel the fullness of the past,
The years that are no more.

It is to spend long days
And not once feel that we were ever young;
It is to add, immured
In the hot prison of the present, month
To month with weary pain.

It is to suffer this,
And feel but half, and feebly, what we feel.
Deep in our hidden heart
Festers the dull remembrance of a change,
But no emotion—none.

It is—last stage of all—
When we are frozen up within, and quite
The phantom of ourselves,
To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost
Which blamed the living man.

SUMMARY

What does aging mean? Does it mean losing our bodies' beauty and our eyes' brightness? Does it mean forfeiting the glory (the metaphorical victory wreath) of our good looks? Yes, but it means more than this, too.

Does aging erode not only the freshness of youth but our strength in general? Does it cause our limbs to stiffen, our bodily functions to deteriorate, and our nerves to fray?

Yes, but it does more than this, too. Aging isn't what we hoped it would be when we were young! It doesn't make our lives easy and mellow, as if we were fading into the sunset. Our declining years aren't golden years.

Aging doesn't mean observing the world as if from a great height, with the wise eyes of a prophet and a heart full of emotion. It doesn't mean nostalgically weeping and missing the years of our youth.

It means going days without feeling as if we *had* a youth. It means feeling trapped in the present, as if inside a hot jail cell, and suffering pain and fatigue for months on end.

It means feeling all this pain while even our ability to feel is badly weakened. Deep down, rotting in our heart, lies the memory of some significant change, but we don't attach any emotion to it whatsoever.

In the final phase—when we're frozen over inside and feel like ghosts of what we once were—aging means listening to people praise our ghostly selves, even though they criticized us when we felt fully alive.

THEMES

AGING, DECLINE, AND LOSS

Matthew Arnold's "Growing Old" is just what its title suggests: a reflection on aging. As the poem's speaker grows older, he reports that all the worst stereotypes about aging are true but that all the positive ones are false. For example, aging *does* take away one's strength, beauty, mobility, etc., but it *doesn't* bring a "Mellow[]" calm in return. Nor does it bring "prophetic" insight or the comforts of nostalgia. Instead, it brings a cruel combination of physical pain and emotional numbness. The poem offers no reassurance at all, then, but warns aging readers to prepare for a long struggle—for years that will be anything but "golden."

The speaker reports that growing old is a process of prolonged, painful "decline." He confirms that aging weakens the body and

eyesight, frays the nerves, stiffens the limbs, and erodes physical beauty. But he repeatedly adds, in effect: *wait, there's more!* These well-known effects of aging aren't even the worst part of the process.

The speaker then debunks the common idea that age brings contentment and wisdom. He warns that old age is not what "in youth we dreamed 'twould be." In other words, he has no good news to offset the bad; any comforting "dream[s]" about the "golden" years are simply myths. He reports that age doesn't "Mellow[]" the mood or cast a "sunset glow" over one's life. Nor does it offer a "prophetic" vision of the world or "stir[]" the heart with intense nostalgia. Instead, aging *numbs* the emotions. While the body suffers "weary pain," the "heart" freezes over—to the point where one can no longer remember youth, let alone miss it.

In short, the poem offers a sober warning; it encourages an attitude of stoic realism toward the aging process. Toward the end, the speaker echoes the "All the world's a stage" speech from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which warns that old age destroys teeth, taste, eyesight, and "everything" else in life. Similarly, Arnold's poem cautions readers not to expect any gains in return for all that old age takes away.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-35

REPUTATION AND LEGACY

"Growing Old" mentions only one apparent upside of old age—and even this turns out to be a bitterly ironic drawback. According to the speaker, when we've grown so old that we feel like "hollow ghost[s]" of our former selves, people around us start to praise our achievements. But this praise is hypocritical and insincere, the speaker implies, because it's the opposite of what the same people *used* to say about us. Thus, the speaker denies older people even the comfort of believing they will leave proud legacies behind. Even the highest reputations, the poem suggests, are themselves "hollow," and liable to change from one moment to the next.

When we near the end of our lives, the speaker claims, "the world" starts to shower us with praise that we can't truly enjoy. By the time we're near death, we're emotionally "frozen up," so we can't take real satisfaction from praise to begin with. Even if we could, the praise signals a suspicious change in attitude. To grow old, the speaker says, is "To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost / Which blamed the living man." In other words, the same people who criticized us when we were at the height of our abilities turn around and applaud us when we're shells of our former selves. Their sudden praise is impossible to savor because it's impossible to take seriously.

Broadly, then, the poem implies that reverence for the elderly is shallow, and any reputation we hope to leave behind is flimsy at best. The speaker doesn't say *why* the world changes its attitude toward the very old but implies that this about-face is phony and superficial. It could be sentimental or driven by guilt; it could also be driven by greed (dying people often leave inheritances behind!). Regardless, the "applau[se]," which might seem to be a perk of aging, turns out to be yet another downside. It may even be the worst downside, since its phoniness kills any dream of a secure legacy that will outlive us.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 31-35

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

What is it to grow old?
Is it to lose the glory of the form,
The luster of the eye?
Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?
—Yes, but not this alone.

"Growing Old" is a very logically structured poem; it's about exactly what its title suggests. The first stanza lays out the theme clearly, in a didactic (lesson-like) style. The speaker begins with three rhetorical questions:

> What is it to grow old?
> Is it to lose the glory of the form,
> The luster of the eye?
> Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?

The speaker asks first what old age is like, and then whether it fulfills popular stereotypes. Does old age mean losing the "glory" of one's "form," or body? Does it mean losing the "luster," or gleam of alertness, in one's "eye"? (This second question might also hint at loss of eyesight, since some vision problems, such as cataracts, can cause the eyes to water or cloud over.) Does it mean giving up the metaphorical victory "wreath" of "beauty," as other, younger people assume the honor of being considered beautiful? In short: does old age mean that your physical grace, alertness (or eyesight), and sex appeal deteriorate?

These questions are followed by a blunt, ominous answer: "—Yes, but not this alone." In other words, all these clichés about aging are true, but there's more to the story than that.

The speaker seems to have some authority on the subject of aging. In other words, he (the poem's final line suggests he's male) feels qualified to address these common fears about growing older. Matthew Arnold was only in middle age when he wrote the poem, so the speaker may or may not literally be the

poet!

LINES 6-10

Is it to feel our strength—
Not our bloom only, but our strength—decay?
Is it to feel each limb
Grow stiffer, every function less exact,
Each nerve more loosely strung?

Lines 6-10 pose more rhetorical questions about aging. First, the speaker asks whether age weakens the body:

> Is it to feel our strength—
> Not our bloom only, but our strength—decay?

The "bloom" here is the metaphorical freshness and vitality of youth. *That* will inevitably fade, of course, but the speaker questions whether physical "strength" will "decay" as well. Notice how the two caesuras in line 8, as well as the repetition of "our strength," cause the sentence to slow and stagger a little, as if it, too, were growing weaker.

The speaker wonders about other changes, too: will age make "each limb / Grow stiffer"? (That is, will it bring muscle stiffness and joint pain?) Will age make "every" bodily and mental "function less exact"? (Will it make us less physically adept and mentally acute?) Will "Each nerve" become "more loosely strung?" (Will aging wear on our nerves and/ or dull our perceptions?)

Again, these questions aren't coming out of nowhere: they're common conceptions about the aging process, problems that many real-life older people have reported throughout the ages. The poem seems to be asking (rhetorically) not whether these problems are *possible* but whether they're *inevitable*. The following stanzas answer these questions, delivering no good news in the process.

By now, the poem has established its form: unrhymed five-line stanzas (cinquains) that alternate between shorter (trimeter) and longer (pentameter) lines. This alternation makes the stanzas themselves seem to stagger a bit (much as caesuras stagger the movement of individual lines, and much as age disrupts the body's movements). The lack of rhyme gives the language a fairly plain surface, appropriate to a speaker who purports to tell the unvarnished truth.

LINES 11-15

Yes, this, and more; but not
Ah, 'tis not what in youth we dreamed 'twould be!
'Tis not to have our life
Mellowed and softened as with sunset glow,
A golden day's decline.

In the third stanza, the speaker claims that all the negative rumors about aging are true—and then begins to shoot down all the positive ones.

Following the rhetorical questions of lines 6-10, which ask whether age really weakens the body, the speaker responds with an emphatic "Yes." All "this" deterioration "and more," he says, will plague us in our senior years. But the problem is worse than that, because there's no good news to balance out the bad. Old age, the speaker laments, is "not what in youth we dreamed 'twould be!"—in other words, it doesn't live up to our naive, youthful hopes. Notice that the "we" pronoun here implies that the speaker's own "youth" is behind him; in other words, he's speaking from bitter experience.

Aging, the speaker warns, doesn't leave "our life / Mellowed and softened as with sunset glow," nor does the whole process feel like "A golden day's decline." These lines point toward—and mock—a set of sentimental clichés about aging, which persist to this day. In Arnold's time, just as now, the years of old age and retirement were sometimes called "golden years" or compared to the "sunset" of one's life. The speaker insists that these popular metaphors are lies: old age isn't beautiful, pleasant, or emotionally "Mellow[]" at all. In fact, the poem's final stanzas will portray it as a kind of nightmare.

LINES 16-20

'Tis not to see the world
As from a height, with rapt prophetic eyes,
And heart profoundly stirred;
And weep, and feel the fullness of the past,
The years that are no more.

Lines 16-10 continue to shoot down clichés about old age. Through an extended simile, the speaker roasts the idea that aging offers some sort of superior vantage point on life:

> 'Tis not to see the world
> As from a height, with rapt prophetic eyes,
> And heart profoundly stirred;
> And weep, and feel the fullness of the past,
> The years that are no more.

In other words, old age isn't like looking down on the rest of the "world" with the wisdom of a "prophet[]." It doesn't leave you "rapt" (entranced) with "profound[]" insight or emotion. It doesn't even leave you nostalgically "weep[ing]" for the "past," registering the "full[]" value and meaning of "The years that are no more." (Notice how the anaphora in these lines—the repetition of "And [...] And [...] and"—evokes a surge of deep emotion, even as the speaker claims it won't happen.)

Arnold isn't exactly the first to deny that old age gives us "prophetic" insight. Many other, previous literary works have suggested that age and wisdom don't automatically go together. (Shakespeare's play *King Lear* is a famous example.) But it *is* unusual to deny that old age makes us *nostalgic*. Justifying this counterintuitive claim requires further explanation, which the speaker provides in the following stanza.

LINES 21-25

It is to spend long days
And not once feel that we were ever young;
It is to add, immured
In the hot prison of the present, month
To month with weary pain.

After two stanzas explaining what old age *isn't* like, lines 21-25 begin to explain what it *is* like. Once again, anaphora ("It is to [...] It is to") lends a logical, list-like structure to the speaker's claims:

It is to spend long days
And not once feel that we were ever young;
It is to add, immured
In the hot prison of the present, month
To month with weary pain.

According to the speaker, old age means going "days" at a time without "feel[ing]" that "we were ever young" at all. It's as though youth has become a vanished dream. The previous stanza claimed that old people don't get tearfully nostalgic, and these lines explain why: one can't be nostalgic for events that no longer seem real.

But that's not all. The speaker elaborates: to grow old "is to add [...] month / To month with weary pain," while remaining "immured" (confined) "In the hot prison of the present." Translation: growing old means feeling trapped in a metaphorical jail cell of fatigue and pain. One can spend months in that state, yet lose all sense of the passage of time, because pain keeps the mind focused so sharply on the "present." No wonder the elderly don't get bogged down in nostalgia (according to the speaker): they're too busy struggling to get through each day.

LINES 26-30

It is to suffer this,
And feel but half, and feebly, what we feel.
Deep in our hidden heart
Festers the dull remembrance of a change,
But no emotion—none.

Lines 26-30 pile on more bad news about growing old. Previously, the speaker has claimed that the "weary pain" of old age focuses the mind on the "present"—it doesn't leave room for weepy nostalgia. Now, the speaker adds a further twist: old age means "suffer[ing] this" pain, yet feeling "but half, and feebly, what we feel." In other words, it's a painful experience rather than a nostalgic and pleasant one, but even the pain is dulled due to bodily deterioration. The elderly suffer, but they're only partially and weakly aware of their suffering.

Here, the speaker seems to be describing *advanced* old age, which can bring dementia and other forms of cognitive decline. The metaphor in the following lines supports this reading:

Deep in our hidden heart
Festers the dull remembrance of a change,
But no emotion—none.

The "change" from youth to age, in other words, becomes a hazy memory ("dull remembrance"). That memory metaphorically "Festers," like an untreated wound, in our inmost "heart." On some "Deep" psychological level, the loss of youth and vitality causes continuing pain—perhaps even a festering resentment toward the universe. But by the time this happens, our faculties have dulled to the point where we feel no conscious "emotion" at all. There's a cruel irony at work here: advanced old age not only deprives us of our looks, strength, mental faculties, etc., but it also deprives us even of the capacity to mourn or rage at our loss.

LINES 31-35

It is—last stage of all—
When we are frozen up within, and quite
The phantom of ourselves,
To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost
Which blamed the living man.

Lines 31-35 describe the final phase of old age: the "last stage of all." This phrase is a subtle Shakespearean allusion. In the classic "All the world's a stage" speech from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (c. 1603), the gloomy character Jaques also describes the final phase of life:

[...] Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Advanced old age, in other words, is a kind of terrible "second child[hood]": a state of confusion, weakness, and radically limited capabilities. Ultimately, it becomes a psychological "oblivion"—an essentially unconscious state—followed by the permanent oblivion of death.

The last stanza of "Growing Old" describes a similar scenario. According to the speaker, advanced old age turns us into a mere "phantom of ourselves": a "hollow ghost" that has totally "frozen up within." These descriptions evoke a kind of death in life (though they could also hint at an afterlife scenario, such as a ghost looking down on the corpse they've left behind). In this last stage of existence, the speaker claims, we witness a final, bitter irony. We hear "the world applaud the hollow ghost" we've become, even though it "blamed," or criticized, "the living man" we used to be. In other words, we receive hypocritical praise from people who used to scorn us. Perhaps this praise carries a whiff of ageist condescension, as when young people

applaud seniors just for continuing to live and function.

The male pronoun here ("man") might suggest that the speaker is himself male, and is worrying about his own legacy (though writers in Arnold's time often used male pronouns to generalize about humanity as a whole). Arnold would have had some reason to fear this particular scenario, as he was a famous but sometimes controversial writer and critic in his own day. Perhaps he dreaded growing old and hearing cloying, insincere tributes from people who had previously attacked him. In any case, his poem warns that some version of this depressing scenario awaits everyone who reaches old age.

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

"Growing Old" is structured around repetition—specifically, a repetitive series of rhetorical questions and answers. In lines 1-10, the speaker asks about the nature of old age, using parallel phrasing each time:

> What **is it to** grow old?
> **Is it to** lose [...]
> **Is it** for beauty [...]
> **Is it to feel** our strength [...]
> **Is it to feel** each limb [...]

The speaker then answers his own questions, again using parallel or repetitive phrasing, as in lines 5 ("**Yes**, but not **this** alone") and 11 ("**Yes**, **this**, and more"). He repeatedly declares, with the help of anaphora, what aging *isn't* ("'Tis not to [...] 'Tis not to") and what it *is* ("It is to [...] It is to"). The result is a highly logical structure that suits the poem's didactic purpose. In other words, the poet/speaker is trying to teach the reader a lesson, so he makes the lesson easy to follow and hammers home his point.

He also uses other forms of repetition along the way, such as the diacope in lines 24-25: "**month** / To **month** with weary pain." Here, the repeated word helps capture the repetitiveness of aging itself—the way old age brings a seemingly endless series of painful days.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "is it to"
- **Line 2:** "Is it to," "the," "of the"
- **Line 3:** "The," "of the"
- **Line 4:** "Is it"
- **Line 5:** "Yes," "this"
- **Line 6:** "Is it to feel," "our strength"
- **Line 7:** "our," "our strength"
- **Line 8:** "Is it to feel," "each"
- **Line 10:** "Each"
- **Line 11:** "Yes," "this," "not"
- **Line 12:** "'tis not"
- **Line 13:** "'Tis not to"
- **Line 16:** "'Tis not to"
- **Line 18:** "And"
- **Line 19:** "And," "and feel"
- **Line 21:** "It is to"
- **Line 23:** "It is to"
- **Line 24:** "month"
- **Line 25:** "month"
- **Line 26:** "It is to"
- **Line 27:** "And feel," "feel"
- **Line 31:** "It is"
- **Line 34:** "To"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The first two stanzas of the poem consist almost entirely of rhetorical questions. There are three in the first five lines, for example:

> What is it to grow old?
> Is it to lose the glory of the form,
> The luster of the eye?
> Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?
> —Yes, but not this alone.

The second stanza is all questions of a similar type:

> Is it to feel our strength—
> Not our bloom only, but our strength—decay?
> Is it to feel each limb
> Grow stiffer, every function less exact,
> Each nerve more loosely strung?

The speaker goes on to answer these questions in the remainder of the poem. In other words, they are not expressions of curiosity, asked in order to obtain information. They are a rhetorical device that allows him to make a point. They express conventional beliefs (clichés) about old age, which the speaker is eager to affirm—and go beyond.

Through these questions, the speaker builds up an element of tension and suspense over the first two stanzas. (Some, but not all, of this tension is defused in line 5, which answers the questions in lines 1-4 but ominously adds that there's more to the story.) Readers who hadn't previously feared aging might finish the first two stanzas with seeds of doubt planted in their minds—just as the poet intends.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "What is it to grow old?"
- **Lines 2-3:** "Is it to lose the glory of the form, / The luster of the eye?"
- **Line 4:** "Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Is it to feel our strength— / Not our bloom only, but our strength—decay?"
- **Lines 8-10:** "Is it to feel each limb / Grow stiffer, every function less exact, / Each nerve more loosely strung?"

ALLUSION

The allusions in "Growing Old" are subtle but noteworthy. First, there's a minor historical/literary reference in line 4: "Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?" This conventional metaphor refers to the victory wreaths awarded in contests in ancient Greece: olive wreaths for Olympic athletes, laurel wreaths for the winners of poetry competitions, and so on. Here, it simply implies that youthful "beauty" must give way, or forfeit its honors, as old age makes the face and body homelier.

Later, the phrasing in line 31—"last stage of all"—echoes a classic literary meditation on aging. In William Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It*, the melancholy Jaques character delivers his famous "All the world's a stage" speech, which divides the human lifespan into "seven ages" and ends as follows:

> [...] The sixth age shifts
> Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
> With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
> His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
> For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
> Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
> And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
> That ends this strange eventful history,
> Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

The lesson is clear: growing old means gradually letting go of "everything," from one's robust "voice" and physique to one's "teeth" and sense of "taste." By subtly mimicking Shakespeare's (or Jaques's) wording, Arnold signals that he, too, holds no illusions about old age.

Finally, many critics believe that "Growing Old" is an implicit retort to Robert Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra," even though it never explicitly alludes to the Browning poem. "Rabbi Ben Ezra," published in 1864 (a few years before "Growing Old"), famously begins: "Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be." Browning's speaker claims that "the first" part of life was "made" for the "last," and bravely accepts the end of the life cycle: "Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!" In the polar opposite spirit, Arnold's poem insists that old age brings no consolations whatsoever, and gloomily remarks that if we grow old enough, we forget "that we were ever young."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?"
- **Line 31:** "It is—last stage of all—"

CAESURA

The poem contains a number of caesuras, which, together with its staggered line lengths (alternating trimeter and pentameter), give it a slow and halting rhythm. This effect is most pronounced when the speaker is talking about a loss of vitality, as in line 7:

> Is it to feel our strength—
> Not our bloom only, but our strength—decay?

A similar example occurs in line 27:

> And feel but half, and feebly, what we feel.

Both passages refer to the physical decline that accompanies old age: the gradual loss of "strength" and "feel[ing]." It's fitting, then, that caesuras cause the lines themselves to stagger "feebly" along, as if pausing frequently for breath.

The pile-up of caesuras can also convey a hesitant tone, as in lines 11-12:

> Yes, this, and more; but not,
> Ah, 'tis not what in youth we dreamed 'twould be!

Here, four caesuras and an enjambment cluster together in the space of eight words. The speaker seems hesitant to say what he's thinking—perhaps because what he finally does say is painful and sad. Old age, he admits, is not at all what "we dreamed 'twould be!" Notice that this phrase ends with an exclamation point, adding to the sense that it's a pained outburst after some initial hedging.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Yes, but"
- **Line 7:** "only, but," "strength—decay"
- **Line 9:** "stiffer, every"
- **Line 11:** "Yes, this, and more; but"
- **Line 12:** "Ah, 'tis"
- **Line 17:** "height, with"
- **Line 19:** "weep, and"
- **Line 23:** "add, immured"
- **Line 24:** "present, month"
- **Line 27:** "half, and feebly, what"
- **Line 30:** "emotion—none"
- **Line 31:** "is—last"

- **Line 32:** "within, and"

METAPHOR

The poem uses a number of metaphors and similes to describe the aging process. Several of these are conventional metaphors, which the poet did not invent but has borrowed and adapted. Line 3, for example, asks whether old age forces "beauty to forego her wreath." This phrase invokes the image—common in classic English poetry—of an ancient Greek victory wreath. The speaker is really asking, then, whether youthful beauty will have to give up its bragging rights as old age sets in, and perhaps also whether it will wither like a wreath of flowers. (Line 7 picks up on this same conventional idea, suggesting that the "bloom" of youth will "decay.")

Similarly, lines 13-15 play on cliché descriptions of old age as "the golden years" or the "sunset" of life:

> 'Tis not to have our life
> Mellowed and softened as with sunset glow,
> A golden day's decline.

Here, however, the speaker invokes these common metaphors only to knock them down—to stress that they are "not" true.

The speaker's metaphors become more harrowing as the poem goes on, driving home his argument that old age is a nightmare. He claims that the pains of age leave us unable to focus on past or future, confining us "In the hot prison of the present." In other words, growing old feels like being locked in a hellish jail cell. He then claims that the memory of losing our youth becomes a "dull remembrance" that "Festers" in our "heart." The word "Festers" literally means to become infected; figuratively, it implies, here, that aging wounds our psyches and fills us with a deep, rotten resentment. Finally, the speaker claims that old age "fr[eezes] up" our emotions and turns us into a "phantom of ourselves." These last metaphors imply that we experience a *figurative* death before our literal death: that extreme old age leaves us corpse-like and "ghost[ly]" while we're still technically alive.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?"
- **Line 7:** "Not our bloom only, but our strength—decay?"
- **Line 10:** "Each nerve more loosely strung?"
- **Lines 13-15:** "'Tis not to have our life / Mellowed and softened as with sunset glow, / A golden day's decline."
- **Lines 16-17:** "'Tis not to see the world / As from a height,"
- **Lines 23-24:** "immured / In the hot prison of the present,"
- **Lines 28-29:** "Deep in our hidden heart / Festers the dull remembrance of a change,"
- **Lines 32-33:** "When we are frozen up within, and quite / The phantom of ourselves,"
- **Line 34:** "the hollow ghost"

VOCABULARY

The form (Line 2) - The body.

Luster (Line 3) - Brightness. "The luster of the eye" means the gleam (of alertness, etc.) in the eye.

Forego (Line 4) - Give up; forfeit.

Wreath (Line 4) - Glory; honors (based on the conventional metaphor of a victory wreath, the kind awarded in ancient Greek competitions).

Bloom (Line 7) - A conventional metaphor for the freshness of youth.

Function (Line 9) - Here meaning, specifically, a bodily function or mental ability.

'Tis (Line 12, Line 13, Line 16) - Old-fashioned contraction of "it is."

'Twould (Line 12) - Old-fashioned contraction of "it would."

Rapt (Line 17) - Entranced; full of wonder, bliss, etc.

Immured (Line 23) - Confined or imprisoned.

Festers (Line 29) - Rots; grows worse (like an infected wound).

Blamed (Line 35) - Here meaning criticized in general (as opposed to blamed for something specific).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Growing Old" has an unusual form that combines two meters. Its five-line stanzas, or cinquains, feature alternating lines of iambic trimeter (three-beat lines with a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm) and iambic pentameter (five-beat lines, same rhythm). It has no rhyme scheme—no rhymes at all, in fact—so its style sounds fairly plain, in keeping with its spirit of unvarnished truth-telling.

There's no name for this form; it's basically one that Arnold devised himself for the purposes of the poem. It vaguely evokes blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), which features in many classic English poems and plays, except that the shorter, interspersed lines make up the majority of the poem. Perhaps the staggered alternation between long and short lines is meant to convey *short-windedness*, as if the aging speaker lacks the energy for a whole poem's worth of pentameter. The phrase "lose the glory of the form" (line 2) could also be a clue.

Perhaps this weary speaker, rather than taking on any of the conventional forms of the English tradition, is making do with a less glorious substitute.

METER

"Growing Old" combines two meters. It alternates between lines of iambic trimeter (three-beat lines that generally follow a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm) and iambic pentameter (five-beat lines that follow the same rhythm). One can hear this pattern clearly in lines 16-20, for example:

> 'Tis not | to see | the world
> As from | a height, | with rapt | prophet- | ic eyes,
> And heart | profound- | ly stirred;
> And weep, | and feel | the full- | ness of | the past,
> The years | that are | no more.

Not all the lines are so rhythmically predictable; like most metrical poems, this one varies the meter sometimes for expressive effect. For instance, line 5 starts with a trochee (a metrical foot with a DUM-da rhythm) rather than an iamb (da-DUM):

> —Yes, but | not this | alone.

This has the effect of emphasizing "Yes," which is the poem's first confirmation that old age is no fun.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem has no rhyme scheme or rhyming of any kind. In English poetry, the use of meter without rhyme is relatively uncommon, outside of blank verse and old-fashioned accentual verse. ("Growing Old" qualifies as neither.) The absence of rhyme here makes the language sound stark and unadorned, as if the poet has little interest in appealing to the reader's ear. In other words, it fits the poem's mission: to tell blunt, harsh truths about aging.

SPEAKER

Matthew Arnold was only in his early- to mid-40s when he wrote "Growing Old," so it's fair to wonder whether the speaker is supposed to be the poet himself. The answer is: maybe! Average lifespans were shorter in the 1800s than they are now, and Arnold himself lived only to age 65. The poem might be expressing Arnold's *experience* of older age—or what he considered older age—but it might also be expressing his *fears* about aging, via a speaker who's supposed to be genuinely elderly.

Clearly, the speaker (a "man," as the final line suggests) is past his prime. He speaks with the authority of someone who's "grow[n] old" himself and believes his experience is typical. (That's why he generalizes his experience, using first-person plural pronouns like "we" and "our" rather than singular pronouns like "I" and "my.") In line 12, for example, he declares that old age is "not what in youth we dreamed 'twould be!" He may even have reached the age where he no longer "feel[s]" that he was "ever young" (line 22).

But the poem is at least partly a work of imagination, as opposed to firsthand testimony. The final stanza describes growing so old that "we" no longer feel like a "living man," but rather a "hollow ghost." This conjures up the image of someone at death's door—or someone who's dead already! So while the speaker may voice Arnold's own disgust with aging, fears about his legacy (as a writer whom "the world" might "applaud" only briefly), etc., the poem ultimately departs from his literal experience.

SETTING

"Growing Old" doesn't have a defined setting. It's a meditative poem about old age in general rather than a description of a particular person's old age. The absence of setting detail (physical, temporal, or geographical) gives the poem a universal quality: it could be describing old age for anyone, anywhere, at any time.

The speaker does mention that old age locks people, metaphorically, in "the hot prison of the present." In other words, the pain and confusion of growing old gradually make people forget about both the past and the future. So this might be another reason the poem withholds all setting detail: in order to mimic the sense of confinement and disorientation some elderly people feel.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) was one of the preeminent poets and critics of England's Victorian era. "Growing Old" appears in his 1867 collection *New Poems*, which also includes his famous "Dover Beach." Like "Dover Beach," it offers a bitterly pessimistic view of life, which it refuses to sugarcoat in any way.

Many critics have read "Growing Old" as a retort to another famous Victorian poet (and poem). Robert Browning's popular dramatic monologue "Rabbi Ben Ezra" (1864), published a few years before Arnold's poem, begins with the well-known couplet: "Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be [...]" Browning's speaker paints a relatively sunny portrait of old age, which he suggests might bring us "peace at last!" Arnold's poem seeks to crush that notion altogether.

The final stanza of "Growing Old"—particularly the phrase "last

stage of all"—also echoes the famous "All the world's a stage" soliloquy from Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* (c. 1603). This speech, delivered by the melancholy character Jaques, lists the various stages (or "ages") of man's life. After describing some of the ravages of old age, the speech ends:

> [...] Last scene of all,
> That ends this strange eventful history,
> Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

In the same melancholy spirit, Arnold warns that old age snatches away all our joys and comforts.

In its pessimism and spiritual doubt, Arnold's poetry is sometimes considered a forerunner of the 20th-century modernist and existentialist movements. Among Victorian poets, Thomas Hardy probably comes closest to expressing a similar worldview. Hardy, too, examines the erosion of faith in a world dominated by science and provides a largely unconsoling view of life and death.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 19th century, which encompassed most of the UK's Victorian era (1837-1901), profoundly changed the way humanity saw its place in the world. In the 1830s, for example, Charles Lyell's innovations in the study of geology cast serious doubt on the biblical account of the world's creation. During the early decades of the century, fossil collector Mary Anning discovered prehistoric skeletons in the beach areas of southern England, further upending conventional accounts of the world's history. Advances in evolutionary biology, including Charles Darwin's monumental 1859 study *On the Origin of Species*, challenged the idea that humanity occupies the center of a divinely created universe.

In short, Matthew Arnold was writing in a time of large-scale readjustment and anxiety. "Growing Old" doesn't refer to any of these historical and scientific developments, or to any topical events at all. But the poem's anxious pessimism may partly reflect the spirit of its times. Though only in his 40s, Arnold expected the rest of his life to be one long decline—and not the "golden" kind. He ranked among the literary giants of his age, but this poem, with its complaints about excessive "blame" and phony "applau[se]" alike, suggests that he feared "the world" would be unkind to his reputation.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a short biography of Matthew Arnold at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/matthew-arnold)
- Arnold and the Victorian Era — Read an introduction to the literary and historical period with which Arnold is closely associated. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/153447/an-introduction-to-the-victorian-era)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "Growing Old." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVjC1xMALZg)
- More About the Poet — More information about, and poems by, Arnold at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/matthew-arnold)
- The Poem in Context — Read "Growing Old" in an 1867 edition of Arnold's poems. (https://archive.org/details/newpoems00arno/page/142/mode/2up)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MATTHEW ARNOLD POEMS

- Dover Beach

HOW TO CITE

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