Very Old Man

POEM TEXT

I well remember how some threescore years
And ten ago, a helpless babe, I toddled
From chair to chair about my mother's chamber,
Feeling, as 'twere, my way in the new world
And foolishly afraid of, or, as 't might be,
Foolishly pleased with, th' unknown objects round me.
And now with stiffened joints I sit all day
In one of those same chairs, as foolishly
Hoping or fearing something from me hid
Behind the thick, dark veil which I see hourly
And minutely on every side round closing
And from my view all objects shutting out.

SUMMARY

I distinctly recall how, 70 years ago, as a defenseless infant, I stumbled from one chair to another in my mom's bedroom, exploring a brand-new world, so to speak. Sometimes I was stupidly afraid of—or, alternatively, stupidly happy with—the unfamiliar features of my environment. Now that I'm old, with aching joints, I spend my whole day in one of those chairs I used to explore. I still stupidly look forward to or dread something obscure, but now it seems to lie behind a heavy black curtain that closes in on me by the hour and minute, hiding everything around me from sight.

THEMES

CHILDHOOD, OLD AGE, AND DEATH

In "Very Old Man," the speaker compares life as an old man with life as a "helpless babe"—that is, a toddler. He notes that, fundamentally, not much has changed: the unknown still fills him with a mix of hope and fear. Now, however, he lacks the energy and, perhaps, the youthful enthusiasm to explore the world. Moreover, he now senses a "thick, dark veil" closing around him—which could refer to the increasing failure of his eyesight as he gets older or the metaphorical darkness of approaching death. (Or both!) Life comes full circle, the poem suggests, without revealing what it was all about; death brings life to an end, but not to a resolution.

The speaker portrays childhood as a time of intense hope and fear, combined with curiosity. When the speaker was a kid, the world was a vibrant, mysterious place. Under the watchful eye of his mother, he would get to know "th' unknown objects" around him, demonstrating a keen interest in his environment and life itself. Roaming "from chair to chair" in his mother's room, the infant-speaker discovered things that could make him "foolishly afraid" or "foolishly pleased." He was a kind of explorer, establishing the terrain and limits of his "new world" (which, of course, was new only to him!).

The speaker then describes aging as a kind of second childhood, charged with similar emotions—but also an impending sense of the end. Now in his seventies, the speaker no longer goes exploring as he did in childhood, but he does feel a similarly "foolish" hope and fear. Despite the intervening years, then, his life now resembles his life then. He sits "with stiffened joints" in "one of those same chairs" that once seemed so mythical and large. He can't summon the energy to move around, and he knows death is not far off. Instead of discovering objects around him, he lives behind a "thick, dark veil" that increasingly blocks his view. This metaphor (there's no actual veil) could describe his failing eyesight, but it could also refer to the mystery of death and the afterlife. The speaker can't investigate death as he could, say, a chair when he was a kid; it's just a vast, unknowable, encroaching darkness. He can only sit in place, "foolishly / Hoping or fearing something" that lies beyond death's "veil." He's physically immobile and also, in a sense, spiritually immobile.

Implicitly, the poem wonders: what was it all about? Life has led the speaker back to where he started, and little has changed in the meantime—other than the gradual decline of his body. He feels he was foolish as a child and is *still* foolish in old age, even if the nature of his hopes and fears has changed somewhat. Perhaps, then, it's naive to try to make sense of one's life and world: living is the slow realization that life (as well as death) is a mystery.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

I well remember how some threescore years
And ten ago, a helpless babe, I toddled
From chair to chair about my mother's chamber,

The speaker is the very old man of the title (note that this is a companion poem to "Old Man," in which the speaker is 60 rather than 70). He's in a nostalgic mood, recalling what it was like to be a toddler, waddling from one "chair" to another in his mother's bedroom. The poem thus immediately sets up a juxtaposition between two stages of life: infancy and old age.

The speaker has lived a fairly long time, given the era in which the poem was written (70 seems a lot younger now than it would have in the 19th century!). When the speaker mentions his age—"some threescore years / And ten"—the enjambment in lines 1-2 effectively draws out the phrase, as if to emphasize the length of his life. Looking back 70-ish years, the speaker describes his younger self as a "helpless babe." In a way, this phrase foreshadows his current state; his old age is a kind of second childhood, a return to limited mobility and dependency on others.

As a toddler, the speaker was only just learning to walk (now he's pretty much immobile). He "toddled / From chair to chair about my mother's chamber" (that is, around her bedroom or living quarters). He was so small and unsteady that he had to pause and prop himself against furniture as he navigated the room. The enjambment between lines 2 and 3 makes the poem itself sound as if it's pausing a moment before moving on to the next thing. The caesuras around "a helpless babe" also contribute to this hesitant sound. As an infant, then, the speaker moved tentatively, but he was adventurous in exploring the unknown world.

These opening lines establish the poem's meter: iambic pentameter (five metrical feet per line, each with an unstressed-stressed syllabic pattern). Listen to the rhythm of line 1, for example:

> I well | remem- | ber how | some three- | score years
> [...]

Unrhymed iambic pentameter is known as blank verse. It's an old and traditional form in English poetry, and it's often used in monologues (e.g., Shakespearean soliloquies), since it's thought to closely approximate the rhythms of spoken English. As a result, it's well suited to the brief monologue of this "Very Old Man."

LINES 4-6

> *Feeling, as 'twere, my way in the new world*
> *And foolishly afraid of, or, as 't might be,*
> *Foolishly pleased with, th' unknown objects round me.*

Lines 4-6 continue the long sentence begun at the start of the poem. The speaker recalls the experience of toddling around his mother's room, interacting with "th' unknown objects" around him.

Of course, this is a vital stage in the development of a human being. Kids touch and test things in their environments, figuring out their place in the world. During the toddler phase, they learn that objects exist independently of them, and that to be human is to be a small part of a vast, complex system.

What these lines portray, then, is a quest for knowledge—what the speaker describes as "Feeling, as 'twere, [his] way in the new world." The phrase "new world" here is no accident. It was commonly used during the so-called "Age of Discovery," principally to describe the Americas—which, to European explorers, seemed like a perplexing and mysterious environment. This phrase casts the speaker as an explorer of his own small world: its treasures, dangers, and limits.

During his adventures, he felt variously afraid of or pleased with the objects he discovered. He calls these responses "foolish[]," probably because they had little basis in reality. That is, the objects probably didn't merit any special fear or joy; they were just part of the speaker's internal childhood drama, playing out under his mother's gaze. The parallel phrases "foolishly afraid of" and "Foolishly pleased with" underscore that both reactions were fairly arbitrary, and part of the same learning process.

These lines contain several caesuras, as well as an enjambment between lines 4 and 5:

> Feeling, as 'twere, my way in the new world
> And foolishly afraid of, or, as 't might be,
> Foolishly pleased with, th' unknown objects round
> me.

These effects make the lines sound as tentative as the young speaker. It's as though the language itself were cautiously moving this way and that, pausing for a comma or peering over a line break. The qualifiers "As 'twere" and "as 't might be" (also parallel phrases) convey a hesitant, uncertain frame of mind. The mystery of those "unknown objects" informs the way the speaker represents the memory; he senses that he can't precisely capture the experience in language.

LINES 7-9

> *And now with stiffened joints I sit all day*
> *In one of those same chairs, as foolishly*
> *Hoping or fearing something from me hid*

In lines 7-12, the speaker pulls the poem back into the present. He juxtaposes the childhood scene of lines 1-6 with his current situation:

> And now with stiffened joints I sit all day
> In one of those same chairs,

His immobility has given him time to reflect on his life. Notice how the /s/ alliteration and /i/ assonance in "stiffened" and "sit" make the line itself feel heavy, like the speaker slumped in his chair.

And this isn't just any old chair: it's one of those that used to furnish his "mother's chamber." Maybe he's still living in the house he grew up in; maybe he's retained some of the furniture from that house. Either way, the chair provides an element of continuity between his infancy and old age, making the juxtaposition feel more natural.

Rather than highlighting the *difference* between now and then, the speaker notes *similarities*. As a toddler, he was often "foolishly afraid of" or "pleased with" objects in his mother's room. Nowadays, his emotions are much the same, just like the furniture in the room. He describes himself as "foolishly / Hoping or fearing something from me hid." Notice that "Hoping" is enjambed over the line break and starts line 9 with a trochee rather than an iamb:

> [...] as foolishly
> Hoping | or fear-| ing some-| thing from | me hid [...]

These effects accentuate the word, making the speaker's "Hop[e]" seem more urgent—even desperate.

The word "something" is usefully ambiguous. The speaker *might* be talking about objects again, or his hopes and fears might now involve more searching, spiritual questions. That hidden "something," for example, could be his own approaching death. Regardless, the fact that he feels in old age as he did in childhood—uncertain, vulnerable, curious, anxious—raises the question: what was his life all about? What has he learned, if anything, along the way?

LINES 10-12

> *Behind the thick, dark veil which I see hourly*
> *And minutely on every side round closing*
> *And from my view all objects shutting out.*

Lines 10-12 conclude the sentence that began in line 7. (The whole poem consists of a mere two sentences!) They end the old man's monologue on a mysterious, unsettling note, as he starts to lose contact with his world.

The speaker explains that the things he "foolishly" fears or hopes for are hidden "Behind the thick, dark veil[.]" This "veil" is metaphorical or symbolic, not literal. It might refer to the dimness that accompanies the loss of eyesight (a common effect of aging). Alternatively, or additionally, it could refer to the speaker's approaching death. For him, his life and surroundings are like a vision that's gradually growing weaker. His world isn't expanding as it did in childhood; it seems to be getting smaller by the day. In short, he's losing his grip on life.

This "thick, dark veil" encroaches on the speaker "hourly / And minutely." (Notice how enjambment makes the veil seem eerily persistent as it follows the speaker from one line to the next.) The shift from "hourly" to "minutely" sounds ominous and claustrophobic, as though time itself is closing in on the speaker. The repetition of "And" at the start of lines 11 and 12 (an example of anaphora) compounds this sense of an accelerating process, which ends abruptly with the poem's last full stop.

In the final line, the speaker mentions "objects" again. This time, the "veil" hides them from view. So there *is* a key difference between the speaker's infancy and old age: while infancy was a time of supervised exploration, old age has put an end to such discovery and adventure. The "shutting out" of objects signals that the *nothing* of incapacity and death are fast replacing the *something* of life.

Appropriately, the poem shuts the reader out just as the speaker describes his world shutting down. The last word of the poem, "out," signals a kind of exit, which leaves unanswered questions hanging: what did the speaker's life mean? What was it all for? Did he truly change or learn anything along the way?

SYMBOLS

THE CHAIRS

Chairs are a multi-purpose symbol in "Very Old Man." In lines 2 and 3, the speaker recalls his interaction with the chairs as a little kid:

> [...] I toddled
> From chair to chair about my mother's chamber,

Here, the chairs are a symbol of the "new world" the speaker has started to navigate. They're like mountains in some vast new landscape. But they also hint at the stability of the adult world, and the fact the speaker's explorations were supervised by his mother.

Now 70 years old, the speaker sits in "one of those same chairs" (line 8). They represent a link with the past, suggesting that, for all the life the speaker has lived, not much has truly changed (at least in terms of his private emotions). The chairs were once part of his early adventures; now they hold him in his immobile years. As sturdy pieces of furniture, they symbolize stability and stasis.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "I toddled / From chair to chair about my mother's chamber,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "And now with stiffened joints I sit all day / In one of those same chairs"

POETIC DEVICES

CAESURA

The poet uses caesura to control the poem's rhythm and pace. It's a particularly important effect early on in the poem, where mid-line commas create a stumbling, exploratory sound that fits with the speaker's description of his infancy:

> I well remember how some threescore years
> And ten ago, a helpless babe, I toddled
> From chair to chair about my mother's chamber,
> Feeling, as 'twere, my way in the new world
> And foolishly afraid of, or, as 't might be,
> Foolishly pleased with, th' unknown objects round
> me.

Line 1 establishes the poem's iambic pentameter; in line 2, commas start breaking up the flow. Like the toddler-speaker "Feeling" his "way" around his mother's room, the poem seems to be trying to find its (metrical) feet. The effect is even stronger in lines 4-6; it's the poetic equivalent of stumbling around in the dark. Try reading the poem out loud to hear the difference between lines like 1 and 3—which have no caesuras—and the other lines surrounding them.

Notably, the poem moves away from this caesura-heavy sound when it shifts to the present tense. As a kid, the speaker toddled around awkwardly, exploring his world, and the mid-line pauses reflect this. Now that he's suffering from "stiffened joints," he's pretty much stuck in a chair all day. While caesuras do appear in lines 8 and 10, they're less prominent in the second half of the poem than the first, reflecting the sedentary, predictable life the speaker now leads.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "ago, a," "babe, I"
- **Line 4:** "Feeling, as 'twere, my"
- **Line 5:** "of, or, as"
- **Line 6:** "with, th' unknown"
- **Line 8:** "chairs, as"
- **Line 10:** "thick, dark"

ENJAMBMENT

"Very Old Man" uses enjambment to create dramatic emphasis and to reflect aspects of the speaker's life on the page.

First, the poem breaks line 1 in the middle of the phrase "threescore years and ten" (an old-fashioned way of saying 70). To the speaker, 70 seems "Very Old"—remember, the poem was written in the 19th century, when average lifespans were shorter! By dragging this phrase out across two lines, the poem evokes the sheer length of the speaker's life.

The enjambment in lines 2-3 captures the daring, yet uncertain step of a toddler:

> [...] a helpless babe, I toddled
> From chair to chair about my mother's chamber,

The line break just after the verb seems to reflect the speaker's hesitation as he stumbles "From chair to chair."

Enjambment can also place extra stress on the word just before or after the line break. Look at lines 8-9, for example:

> [...] as foolishly
> Hoping or fearing something from me hid [...]

The break after "foolishly" seems to accentuate the speaker's harsh self-judgment, while the emphasis on "hoping" makes his hope sound intense and desperate. ("Hoping" is also a trochee in an otherwise iambic line, so it stands out even more.)

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "years / And"
- **Lines 2-3:** "toddled / From"
- **Lines 4-5:** "world / And"
- **Lines 7-8:** "day / In"
- **Lines 8-9:** "foolishly / Hoping"
- **Lines 9-10:** "hid / Behind"
- **Lines 10-11:** "hourly / And"
- **Lines 11-12:** "closing / And"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is built into the structure of "Very Old Man." In fact, the poem divides neatly into two juxtaposed elements: lines 1-6 focus on the speaker's infancy, while lines 7-12 focus on his present-day, "Very Old" self. The poem thus compares and contrasts the first and last stages of life.

What strikes the speaker most isn't the *difference* between early childhood and old age, but rather the strange *similarity* between how he felt back then and how he feels now. As a "babe," he was "foolishly afraid, or, as 't might be, / Foolishly pleased with" the objects he discovered while exploring his mother's room. The world was full of surprise and uncertainty. Now, as a man of about 70, he *still* feels intense, even "foolish[]" hope and fear. True, these feelings are now prompted more by a sense of impending death than by, say, a table leg. But for all his years of experience, his inner life has changed very little.

The juxtaposition does highlight at least one key difference between infancy and old age. The speaker no longer feels his former vigor and thirst for knowledge. He now lacks the energy to move about; instead, he lives mostly inside his head.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

REPETITION

Repetition appears in several forms in "Very Old Man."

First, notice how many lines start with "And" (lines 2, 5, 7, 11, and 12; the last two examples qualify as anaphora). This repeated conjunction stresses the continuity of the speaker's experience, linking his former, infant psyche with his present, 70-year-old self. It evokes the swift, smooth flow of time from early youth to old age.

Line 3 uses diacope, describing how the speaker would "toddle[]" about from "chair to chair" in his mother's bedroom. This device highlights the chairs as significant landmarks in the "new world" the speaker was trying to navigate. Later, the same "chairs" return as fixtures of the speaker's old age, again illustrating the continuity between the two stages of life.

Sometimes the infant speaker's surroundings would make him happy, sometimes afraid. As he puts it, he would be "foolishly afraid of, or, as 't might be, / Foolishly pleased with, th' unknown objects round me." The parallel structure of these phrases suggests that, no matter what emotion the objects inspired, the speaker felt "foolish[]" or naive as he learned about the world and its limits. He then uses similar phrasing in lines 8-9—"foolishly / Hoping or fearing"—to show that not much has changed, at least in his emotional life, 70 years later.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 3:** "chair," "chair"
- **Line 5:** "And," "foolishly afraid of"
- **Line 6:** "Foolishly pleased with"
- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "chairs," "foolishly"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"

VOCABULARY

Threescore years and ten (Lines 1-2) - Seventy (one "score" equals 20).

Babe (Line 2) - Infant or toddler.

Chamber (Line 3) - Bedroom.

As 'twere (Line 4) - A contraction of "as it were," meaning "so to speak."

As 't (Line 5) - A contraction of "as it." The phrase "as 't might be" is equivalent to the expression "as the case may be."

Th' unknown (Line 6) - A contraction of "the unknown."

Minutely (Line 11) - By the minute. (Pronounced MIN-it-ly.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Very Old Man" consists of a single 12-line stanza, written in unrhymed iambic pentameter (see the Meter section of this guide for more). It divides neatly into two halves, which juxtapose the speaker's infancy and old age (lines 1-6 cover the former, lines 7-12 the latter).

The absence of stanza breaks, along with the consistent meter, implies a continuity of experience from one life stage to another. In other words, the speaker doesn't feel too much has changed since he was a kid. He points out an important thread connecting his youth and old age: he still has "foolish[]" hopes and fears about the world, just as he did when he was a toddler.

METER

"Very Old Man" uses iambic pentameter: lines with five metrical feet, each of which has an unstressed-stressed pattern. The typical rhythm of each line, then, goes: da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM. This meter gives the poem a measured consistency, which may reflect the speaker's old age and quiet routine.

You can hear the meter clearly in line 7, for example:

And now | with stiff- | ened joints | I sit | all day

The poet varies the meter in small ways for expressive effect. Notice, for example, how the trochee (DUM-da) at the start of line 9 emphasizes the word "Hoping," making it sound all the more strained and yearning. Line 4 ends with a combination of pyrrhic and spondaic feet—"in the new world"—which makes that strongly stressed "new world" sound bold, exciting, and intimidating.

RHYME SCHEME

"Very Old Man" doesn't have a rhyme scheme. It's unrhymed iambic pentameter, also known as blank verse.

The absence of rhyme contributes to the poem's plainspoken, straightforward tone. The speaker seems to be discussing his experience honestly and openly, without trying to sound too lyrical. To him, life remains a mystery, so the neatness of rhyme would risk sounding too confident and conclusive in this context.

SPEAKER

The speaker is the "Very Old Man" of the title, and, presumably, the same person who appeared as the "Old Man" in this poem's

companion piece. He's lived for "some threescore years / And ten," meaning he's 70 years old or thereabouts. He's in a reflective state of mind, looking back on his infancy and wondering what, if anything, has truly changed (apart from the fact he doesn't move around as much as he used to).

The speaker senses death approaching and, with it, an end to life's futile search for certainty. The "thick, dark veil" around him seems to represent this approaching void, though it could also indicate the failure of his eyesight in old age.

SETTING

The poem takes place near the end of the speaker's life—he's the "very old man" of the title. Notably, he sits in "one of those same chairs" he used to toddle around as an infant. This detail implies a domestic setting. Perhaps the speaker still lives in his old family home (where his mother had her "chamber," or bedroom), or perhaps he's brought some of his parents' old furniture to wherever he lives now.

The poem thus implies that not much has changed: the speaker's life has come full circle and entered a kind of second childhood. The phrase "hourly and minutely" (lines 10-11) indicates diminishing intervals of time, hinting that his death is getting closer and closer.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

James Henry (1798-1876) was an Irish poet, physician, and classical scholar. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and worked in medicine until 1845. His literary work was largely neglected during his life and isn't very widely read in the present day, either. He self-published five collections of his own work, and it wasn't until his inclusion in the *New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* in 1987 that his poetry began to receive some attention. Henry was heavily influenced by classical literature and spent much of his life researching and writing about the great Roman poet Virgil.

Though Henry was—and remains—an obscure figure, the 19th century was full of some of poetry's biggest names. "Very Old Man" was written and published in 1854, during a period defined by the work of poets like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

"Very Old Man" has a companion poem called "Old Man," written from the perspective of the same speaker when he was "threescore" (60) years old. That poem predicts how the speaker will feel in this one, and the prediction comes true: now that he's 70, life seems more mysterious, fleeting, and frustrating than ever.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

James Henry wrote during the reign of Queen Victoria (who ruled England from 1831 to 1901), a time of massive scientific, societal, and religious upheavals. Considered a literary golden age, the Victorian era saw writers grappling with vast shifts in the religious, moral, and class structures of their world. New ideas such as Darwin's theory of evolution challenged people's conception of their place in society, while the rise of dangerous factory work and economic disparity prompted an increased focus on poverty, child labor, and the mistreatment of women.

Henry worked for many years as a physician and wrote a number of provocative pamphlets about various aspects of the medical profession. He eventually made enough money to abandon medicine and devote himself to his true passion: Virgil. From 1848 on, Henry traveled around Europe with his wife and daughter, examining every Virgil manuscript he could find. He chronicled some of these travels in verse before returning to Ireland to live out his later years. He wrote "Very Old Man" when he was in his late fifties—no longer young, but not quite as elderly as the speaker of this poem.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- James Henry Biography — Learn more about the poet's life over at the Dictionary of Irish Biography. (https://www.dib.ie/biography/henry-james-a3941)
- The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse — Check out the seminal 1987 anthology in which a handful of Henry's poems were published. (https://archive.org/details/newoxfordbookofv0000unse_d9j9)
- Christopher Ricks on Henry — Literary critic Christopher Ricks talks about discovering Henry's work while compiling an anthology of Victorian poetry. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/oct/19/featuresreviews.guardianreview33)
- Henry's Poetry and Philosophy — Poet David Wheatley discusses Henry's neglected poetry and his views on religion. (https://www.irishtimes.com/news/fame-at-last-for-the-fan-of-happy-pigeons-poetry-1.1103921)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JAMES HENRY POEMS

- Old Man

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Very Old Man*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Aug 2022. Web. 22 Sep 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Very Old Man*." LitCharts LLC, August 18, 2022. Retrieved September 22, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/james-henry/very-old-man.