

# Old Man



## POEM TEXT

1 At six years old I had before mine eyes  
 2 A picture painted, like the rainbow, bright,  
 3 But far, far off in th' unapproachable distance.  
 4 With all my childish heart I longed to reach it,  
 5 And strove and strove the livelong day in vain,  
 6 Advancing with slow step some few short yards  
 7 But not perceptibly the distance lessening.  
 8 At threescore years old, when almost within  
 9 Grasp of my outstretched arms the selfsame picture  
 10 With all its beauteous colors painted bright,  
 11 I'm backward from it further borne each day  
 12 By an invisible, compulsive force,  
 13 Gradual but yet so steady, sure, and rapid,  
 14 That at threescore and ten I'll from the picture  
 15 Be even more distant than I was at six.

belief that life will all make sense one day; whatever it is, the speaker hoped for it then and hopes for it still. With the benefit of experience, however, the aging speaker knows that his ideal vision isn't getting any closer. In fact, it seems even farther away than it was when he was six. Broadly, then, the poem depicts life as the constant pursuit of an impossible dream.

The speaker recalls a "picture" he strained to "reach" as a child: the dream of an ideal life. The poem describes this picture as "painted, like the rainbow, bright, / But far, far off in th'unapproachable distance." It's a glimpse of a more beautiful world; perhaps it's what the child-speaker felt awaited him as an adult. Life sets up expectations, hopes, and dreams, which together form a kind of fantasy land: a place just over the horizon where everything will be bright, beautiful, and joyful. The speaker "strove the livelong day" (worked constantly) to reach his ideal. His hopeful desire filled his "childish heart" and defined his youth.

Now sixty, the speaker feels a little closer to this "selfsame picture," yet it still seems beyond his "grasp." Decades of accumulated experience and wisdom haven't been enough to make his dream a reality. That dream, "With all its beauteous colors painted bright," still holds the same magical allure it once did. His "outstretched arms" try and fail to hold it. But for all his best efforts, the speaker feels "an invisible, compulsive force" pulling him away from his dream "each day." Pretty soon, the speaker thinks, the dream will be even *farther* away than it was when he was six. The invisible "force" might be the aging process itself, which robs the speaker of time, energy, willpower, etc. Or he might feel that the more he sees of the real world, the less credible his dream becomes.

Regardless, his ideal remains as unattainable as ever—it *never* was within reach. By extension, life never lives up to our most cherished dreams. The speaker's life has entered its later stages, and he no longer expects to attain his ideal "picture." Again, he never clearly defines this "picture," but that's part of why the poem packs a punch. Everyone can relate to the hope that some "bright[er]," better life is on the horizon, even if different people define this life differently. The generic nature of the speaker's ideal turns the poem into a broader statement on the human condition. People want to feel purpose and meaning; they nurture dreams and long to understand what life is all about. But the poem suggests that, even if we spend all our years striving for such fulfillment, it will ultimately elude us.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15



## SUMMARY

When I was six, I saw a painted image ahead of me. It resembled a dazzling rainbow, but it looked unreachably distant. My whole younger self yearned to get to this image, and I tried over and over all day, but with no luck. I'd move toward it, slowly, a handful of feet at a time, but I never seemed to close the gap by much.

Now that I'm sixty, I'm practically close enough to touch that same image, with its glorious range of vibrant, painted colors. And yet: every day I'm pulled farther away from the image by some unseen, irresistible force, which works on me bit by bit—continually, firmly, and swiftly. Because of this force, I'll be even farther away from the image by the time I'm seventy than I was when I was six.



## THEMES



### HOPE, DISAPPOINTMENT, AND AGING

In "Old Man," a sixty-year-old speaker compares his current life with his life at age six, finding some surprising common ground between the two. At both ages, the speaker felt/feels an almost inexpressible longing for something "far off," described as a "bright," rainbow-like "picture." This might be a vision of how life should be, or the



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## LINES 1-3

*At six years old I had before mine eyes  
A picture painted, like the rainbow, bright,  
But far, far off in th' unapproachable distance.*

The speaker is the "Old Man" of the title, and he's in a reflective mood. He begins by describing a picture he used to see "before [his] eyes," though the rest of the poem makes clear that this image is really in his mind (he's not talking about a physical painting).

Line 1 uses [enjambment](#) to create a brief moment of tension, which leaves the reader to guess what's coming next. Line 2 reveals that the speaker used to see "A picture painted, like the rainbow, bright." Decorative [alliteration](#) helps evoke the beauty of the picture; those, punchy plosive /p/s also hint at the picture's powerful impact on the speaker's life.

The speaker compares this picture—which he never describes in detail—to "the rainbow, bright." His [simile](#) suggests that the picture was beautiful and awe-inspiring, but also a kind of illusion. Rainbows exist only as a trick of the light; they might look solid, but one can never get close to them and touch them. Already, then, the poem hints that this isn't a real picture but a [symbolic](#) vision, reflecting some fundamental promise and/or disappointment related to life itself.

Indeed, this picture only ever appeared "far, far off in th'unapproachable distance." The emphatic [epizeuxis](#) of "far, far" makes this distance seem all the more "unapproachable." If the reader is wondering, by now, what the picture means—well, that's kind of the point. As a child, the speaker felt a deep-rooted longing for something, but he didn't know then (and doesn't know now) precisely what it was. The [juxtaposition](#) established by the title is important here: this is an "Old Man" reflecting on his time as a kid, when the world seemed new and beautiful. Perhaps, back then, he felt instinctively optimistic that his future life would turn out as he hoped. Or maybe this far-off "picture" held out the promise that the confusion of childhood would someday resolve into certainty. In any case, he yearned for something that wasn't yet his.

These opening lines also establish the poem's form. "Old Man" is written in [iambic pentameter](#), meaning that most of its lines contain five metrical feet following an unstressed-STRESSED pattern (da-DUM). Listen to lines 1-2, for example:

At six | years old | I had | before | mine eyes  
A pic- | ture paint- | ed, like | the rain- | bow, bright,

This steady, measured rhythm seems appropriate for someone speaking from long experience, reflecting soberly on the idealism of his younger days.

## LINES 4-7

*With all my childish heart I longed to reach it,  
And strove and strove the livelong day in vain,  
Advancing with slow step some few short yards  
But not perceptibly the distance lessening.*

Lines 4-7 continue the speaker's wistful description of the picture he saw in his mind's eye. The poem draws its power from treating this rainbow-like vision as if it were real. The speaker longed to "reach" that bright fantasy world but, naturally, didn't know how.

The speaker felt this longing "With all [his] childish heart"; in other words, it was central to his emotional life. "Childish" might simply mean that he felt this longing in his youth, or it might imply that his longing was naive and immature. Trying to reach the "picture" was a constant effort:

[I] strove and strove the livelong day in vain,

The [repetition](#) (specifically, [epizeuxis](#)) of "and strove" makes the speaker's efforts seem more heartfelt and desperate. The long /o/ sound in "strove" gives the line a pained, strenuous sound.

The poem sustains its central mystery by refusing to explain what this "picture" represents. It seems to be some deferred state of happiness and understanding, some idealized future in which *everything somehow works out*. (In other words, the poem may be suggesting that life is what happens while we wait for a moment that never arrives.) The young speaker tried to move towards this "picture," but he couldn't really get any closer to it. He advanced with "slow step," just a few "yards" at a time, never seeming to "lessen[]" the "distance" by a "perceptibl[e]" amount. Notice how [alliteration](#) ("slow step some") and heavy monosyllables ("with slow step some few short yards") slow the pace of line 6 to a crawl, mimicking the speaker's motionless motion.

The following line picks up on the /s/ sounds by adding further [sibilance](#):

But not perceptibly the distance lessening.

These hushed, whispery tones send a chill through the poem (while slowing its pace). It's as though the "picture," though rainbow-like and beautiful, is also a kind of ghost world, haunting and taunting the speaker from somewhere over yonder.

Finally, notice that these four lines form one complex sentence. In fact, the whole poem consists of just three sentences, which increase in length—from three lines (1-3) to four (lines 4-7) to eight (lines 8-15). This structure creates an effect of increasing delay, subtly reflecting the way the speaker never attains the "picture" despite his best efforts.

## LINES 8-11

*At threescore years old, when almost within  
Grasp of my outstretched arms the selfsame picture  
With all its beauteous colors painted bright,  
I'm backward from it further borne each day*

From line 8 onward, the speaker compares how he felt when he was six to how he feels at sixty ("threescore years old"). In other words, he [juxtaposes](#) childhood with old age. (Sixty might not seem so old now, but the poem was written in the 19th century, when life expectancy was much shorter!)

There's a neat verbal symmetry between **six** and **sixty**: he's ten times his former age, but just as the word "sixty" *contains* the word "six," his present experience still contains the essence of his past. He's entered a kind of second childhood, which the poet explores further in the companion poem "[Very Old Man](#)."

In truth, not much has changed for the speaker. Having become the "Old Man" of the title, he still wants to reach the "selfsame picture" that captivated him as a child—and he still can't get there. Over the years, he felt like he got close to it—so close, it was "almost within" his "Grasp"—but now it only seems to recede further away. He never explains what this "bright" and "beauteous" picture represents to him, but that mystery is part of the poem's power. Maybe it represents happiness, confidence, wisdom, or other things he pretended to gain in adulthood, but realizes he still lacks now that he's nearing death. Whatever it is, it's unattainable.

These lines also use complex syntax and [enjambment](#) to dramatic effect. The main verb of the sentence doesn't arrive until line 11, meaning the reader has to wait several lines for grammatical resolution. (And even then it's not a full resolution, as the sentence continues.) Enjambment gives the lines a yearning, reaching, suspenseful quality:

At threescore years old, when almost **within**  
Grasp of my outstretched arms the selfsame **picture**  
With all its beauteous colors painted bright,  
I'm backward from it further borne each day

That first [line break](#) is pretty radical, withholding the object of a preposition at a crucial moment. Enjambment then powerfully emphasizes the word "Grasp," making it sound strained and urgent. (The slight variation in the poem's [meter](#) also heightens the emphasis, as "Grasp" is a stressed syllable at the start of an [iambic](#) line.)

The [alliteration](#) in line 10 ("beauteous colors painted bright") highlights the powerful appeal of the faraway "picture." But this alliteration continues with the words "backward" and "borne" in line 11, which create a subtle sense of anticlimax. The speaker wants to reach that bright beauty in the distance, but he feels he's slipping away from it—borne backward rather than forward.

Like a rainbow, then, the "picture" is a kind of mirage. After describing the speaker's frustration, the sentence continues for four more lines, further evoking the lengthening gap between the speaker and the picture.

## LINES 12-15

*By an invisible, compulsive force,  
Gradual but yet so steady, sure, and rapid,  
That at threescore and ten I'll from the picture  
Be even more distant than I was at six.*

In the poem's closing lines, the speaker describes a "force" that pulls him "backward," away from the "picture" he's always longed for. It's an "invisible, compulsive force" that works on him in the background—and though it's hidden, its effects are very real.

The speaker spent his whole life yearning after something, and while he *thought* he was approaching it, it was always unattainable. Now, in old age, he sees the impossibility more clearly; he feels that a "compulsive force" was working against him the whole time. Indeed, aging itself might be part of this "force." It ushers the speaker toward death, which will forever end his hopes of reaching the "picture."

In line 13, the speaker characterizes this force as "Gradual but yet so steady, sure, and rapid." Here, the poem suggests that people never really shape their own lives; rather, their lives are shaped by something beyond their perception and control. Though "invisible," this "force" reveals itself in subtle ways. For example, one might look in the mirror and suddenly realize that most of one's life is over.

The invisible force might simply be time, which is always passing, "so steady" and "sure." To the aging speaker, it does seem as if the years have blurred together, bringing him no closer to his dream. (The [sibilance](#) of "so steady" in line 13 recalls the "slow step" in line 6, setting up a contrast between the speaker's halting forward progress and the constant backward motion of the "force.") But the "force" could represent other things, too: some flaw in the speaker's goals, for example, or some unconscious reluctance to attain them, for fear success will disappoint.

Regardless, this "force" promises permanent failure. In lines 14-15, the speaker observes that, by the time he's seventy, he'll be *even further* from the picture than he was "at six." This [juxtaposition](#) packs a powerful punch: despite all his years and experience, he thinks he'll effectively end up back where he started as a kid. In fact, he'll be even *more* distant from his dream, perhaps because he now understands how impossible it is. (Readers wondering how the speaker actually ends up feeling at age seventy can check out the sequel poem "[Very Old Man](#).")

This ending portrays life as a fundamentally incomprehensible riddle—one that sometimes tricks people into thinking they've

found the solution, but inevitably frustrates them in the end.



## SYMBOLS



### RAINBOW

The speaker compares his "picture" of an ideal life to "the rainbow." Rainbows are traditional [symbols](#) of unattainable beauty, since they're vibrant, mirage-like, and untouchable (basically a trick of the light).

They also appear in many myths and fairy tales, where they're often associated with fantasy lands. In Irish folklore, for instance, leprechauns stash their gold at the end of the rainbow. (There's also the famous land beyond the rainbow in *The Wizard of Oz*, though that book was written decades after "Old Man.") Rainbows can carry religious symbolism, too; in the Bible, a rainbow appears as a blessing after the Great Flood and represents God's promise never to destroy the earth again.

Thus, the rainbow in the poem might represent beauty, happiness, good fortune, or a blessed state. Whatever it represents, it's unattainable!

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "At six years old I had before mine eyes / A picture painted, like the rainbow, bright,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "the selfsame picture / With all its beauteous colors painted bright,"



## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

"Old Man" uses [alliteration](#) for both musical and dramatic effect.

Since he was six, the speaker has seen a "picture painted" (line 2) before his eyes (though really it's in his mind). It's an inviting, rainbow-like vision, though it remains always out of reach—even now, when he's sixty. That /p/ alliteration has a decorative effect, perhaps suggesting the beauty of this strange yet alluring image. This /p/ is also a punchy, plosive sound, hinting at the picture's impact on the speaker's entire life.

The speaker then describes how, as a kid, he "strove" to "reach" that picture. He advanced towards it with "slow step some few short yards" (line 6). These [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds "slow" the poem's pace, mirroring the speaker's movement as the picture remains tantalizingly out of reach. As the following line dials up the sibilance ("perceptibly the distance lessening"), the hushed, whispery tones create an atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty—as if the picture is a kind of ghost that haunts the speaker. This sibilant sound returns in line 13 as well ("so

steady").

In lines 10 and 11, the poem deploys more plosive sounds:

With all its beauteous colors painted bright,  
I'm backward from it further borne each day [...]

As with "picture painted" in line 2, these are bold, compelling sounds that capture the magnetic pull of that far-off picture. But line 11 modifies this effect by using the same sound to describe how the picture remains forever out of reach. The speaker feels he is "backward [...] borne," receding further away from what he yearns for. Here, the plosives convey the strength of the "compulsive force" that imposes itself on the speaker's life—whether at age six or sixty!

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "picture painted"
- **Line 6:** "slow step some"
- **Line 10:** "beauteous," "bright"
- **Line 11:** "backward," "borne"
- **Line 13:** "so steady"

### ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses [enjambment](#) to create tension with one main aim: to show how that "picture painted" lies frustratingly out of reach. It's hard to say exactly what this picture represents, but it's something the speaker has always wanted. It creates an ever-present yearning—perhaps for happiness, meaning, understanding, or all of these at once. Yet the picture is defined by one key trait: it's unattainable. It's like some magical fantasy land that lies just over the hillside, only the hillside never gets any closer.

Enjambment adds to this sense of distance and delay because spreading a phrase across multiple lines delays the satisfaction that comes with its completion. The enjambment between lines 2 and 3, for example, creates a moment's tension as the reader waits to learn what the young speaker saw:

At six years old I had before mine eyes  
A picture painted, like the rainbow, bright,

Though the second line starts to provide this information, the poem's accumulating enjambments and long, complex sentences (three sentences in 15 lines) build up a sense of deferred satisfaction.

In fact, lines 8 to 15 consist of a single, heavily enjambed sentence. Here, enjambment highlights how the "picture" seems to recede further from the aging speaker with each passing day. The beginning and end of the sentence are far apart, mirroring the growing distance between speaker and picture. The enjambment in lines 8-9 also adds emphasis to

"Grasp" (which begins line 9 with a stressed syllable, varying the poem's [iambic](#) pattern). As a result, the word sounds especially strained and desperate.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "eyes / A"
- **Lines 6-7:** "yards / But"
- **Lines 8-9:** "within / Grasp"
- **Lines 9-10:** "picture / With"
- **Lines 10-11:** "bright, / I'm"
- **Lines 11-12:** "day / By"
- **Lines 14-15:** "picture / Be"

## JUXTAPOSITION

[Juxtaposition](#) is built into the structure of "Old Man." The poem compares two points in time: back when the speaker was six, and now, when he is sixty.

The first seven lines describe the speaker's childhood days, in which he first saw the "picture painted." He yearned for something deep within his "childish heart," like a traveler desperately seeking a destination.

In line 8, the speaker ties the poem back to the present. Now, he's "threescore years old" (sixty). The specific ages make for a clear comparison: **six** versus **sixty**. At ten times his former age, he claims that "the selfsame picture" is almost within his grasp—only he doesn't really believe this. He feels he's being propelled away from the picture by some "invisible, compulsive force," one that's presumably been acting on him his entire life. By the time he's seventy, he remarks, he'll "be even more distant" from the picture than he was when he was six.

In part, then, juxtaposition highlights the similarity between these two ages: the speaker yearned for something unattainable back then, and he still yearns for it now. However, it also highlights differences: he now has the benefit of experience and knows he doesn't have many years left. He's no longer naive enough to believe he can reach that unreachable thing, whether it's happiness, peace, certainty, or some other ideal.

#### Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

## REPETITION

"Old Man" uses [repetition](#) to create a tone of desperate intensity. Since he was six, the speaker has seen some beautiful, rainbow-like vision calling out to him. All his hopes and dreams found expression in this "picture painted." It's no surprise, then, that the word "picture" appears three times in the poem. This simple repetition illustrates the speaker's obsession with that unattainable fantasy land—that other life he was always trying

to live.

In line 3, the speaker describes the picture as "far, far off in th'unapproachable distance." The immediate repetition of "far" (an example of [epizeuxis](#)) makes that picture seem *doubly* distant. It also echoes the kind of language found in fairy tales (which often take place "long ago and far, far away"), making the picture seem all the more fantastical.

More repetition appears in lines 4-5, as the speaker describes how hard he worked to "reach" this ideal vision:

With all my childish heart I longed to reach it,  
And strove and strove the livelong day in vain,

This is epizeuxis, too, and it again serves as an intensifier. What sounds like a greater effort than striving? Striving twice over! The poem's [iambic meter](#) stresses both "strove"s, adding further intensity to the line.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "picture"
- **Line 3:** "far, far"
- **Line 5:** "And strove and strove"
- **Line 9:** "picture"
- **Line 14:** "picture"

## SIMILE

There's a mystery at the heart of "Old Man": the reader never learns much about the "picture painted," even though it's the object of the speaker's obsessive, lifelong focus. The clearest detail provided about the picture comes in the form of a [simile](#) in line 2:

At six years old I had before mine eyes  
A picture painted, like the rainbow, bright,  
But far, far off in th' unapproachable distance.

Think about the qualities most closely associated with rainbows. They're visually stunning and mysterious. They seem vividly real, but they're also a kind of trick of the eye. And, most importantly, they're impossible to get close to—even if you [fly directly toward one](#), they seem to shift, recede, or vanish. (That's why they appear in so many tales about fantasy lands and impossible dreams: for example, the legend that leprechauns store their gold at the end of the rainbow.)

These qualities apply to the speaker's "picture," too. The image seems beautiful, mysterious, and real. It calls to him; he wants to go towards it and make it his. Yet it's also a kind of illusion. Whatever he's been yearning for since childhood—some kind of happiness, wisdom, or meaning, perhaps—remains forever out of reach. In this sense, he's only just discovered, at sixty, that his rainbow isn't truly attainable.



**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "A picture painted, like the rainbow, bright,"

**VOCABULARY**

**Mine** (Line 1) - Archaic form of "my."

**Th'unapproachable** (Line 3) - Contraction of "the unapproachable."

**Strove** (Line 5) - Made a great effort.

**The livelong day** (Line 5) - All day long.

**In vain** (Line 5) - Without the desired result; fruitlessly.

**Perceptibly** (Line 7) - Noticeably.

**Threescore** (Line 8) - Sixty (two times twenty).

**Selfsame** (Line 9) - Exact same.

**Beauteous** (Line 10) - Beautiful.

**Borne** (Line 11) - Carried or transported.

**Compulsive** (Line 12) - Irresistible.

**Threescore and ten** (Line 14) - Seventy.

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

"Old Man" consists of one 15-line stanza, in which the speaker compares his feelings as a kid to his feelings as an old man. The fact that he traces this comparison in a single, uninterrupted block of text might reflect the way not much has changed for him. He yearns for something unattainable now, just as he always has. The yearning has been a constant in his life, and the lack of a [stanza](#) break reflects this continuity.

It's also worth noting that, at fifteen lines, the poem is only one line longer than a traditional [sonnet](#). Sonnets often feature longing as their subject, and they typically share this poem's [meter](#) ([iambic pentameter](#)) as well. "Old Man" could be read as a kind of warped, unrhymed sonnet, in which the speaker's longing is doomed to remain frustrated.

**METER**

"Old Man" uses [iambic pentameter](#): lines with five metrical feet, each of which has an unstressed-stressed pattern of syllables (da-DUM). Here's line 1 as an example of the [meter](#) at work:

At six | years old | I had | before | mine eyes

The meter gives the poem a steady, regular motion, like the speaker's "slow[ly]" advancing "step[s]" in line 6. It might also evoke the "steady" and "compulsive force" that pulls the

speaker away from his longed-for vision. The meter works in the poem's background much as that force does in the speaker's life.

Like most metrical poems, "Old Man" contains a few variations in rhythm. One example is the [trochee](#) (DUM-da) at the start of line 9, which helps capture the speaker's strained, frustrated [tone](#) by emphasizing the first word: "Grasp of."

**RHYME SCHEME**

"Old Man" has no [rhyme scheme](#), or any [rhyme](#) at all. As a result, it has a straightforward, unfiltered quality, as if rhyme would be too neat and contrived a formal choice. Rhymes often suggest resolution, pairing up with a satisfying click. The speaker's point here is that life never really resolves into that bright, hoped-for picture.

**SPEAKER**

The poem's speaker is the "Old Man" of the title. Now that he's sixty, he's in a reflective mood—but he doesn't offer the pearls of wisdom the reader might expect. Instead, he observes that being sixty isn't so different from being six, because for him, both ages are defined by an insatiable yearning. Since early childhood, he's pursued "a picture painted" before his mind's eye: a bright, idealized vision. He still yearns for it now, except that he's not naive enough to think he can actually reach it. Some "invisible, compulsive force" (perhaps aging itself, perhaps life's inherent limitations and disappointments) continually prevents him from achieving his goal. He's looking ahead to his death, which he views as an end but not a resolution to his questions about life.

It's worth noting that "Old Man" has a companion poem, "[Very Old Man](#)," written from the same perspective ten years later ("at threescore and ten").

**SETTING**

"Old Man" contrasts two moments in time, but doesn't describe a physical or geographical [setting](#). The poem [juxtaposes](#) the speaker at age six (the past) and age sixty (the poem's present). It also looks ahead ten years to when the speaker will be seventy (check out the companion poem, Henry's "Very Old Man," for more). Broadly, this old man still yearns for the same unattainable thing as he did when he was a kid. He calls this unattainable ideal "a picture painted"—a bright, rainbow-like vision of some other place, time, experience, or way of life. The vagueness of his vision is part of its power, and he depicts his frustrated longing as an attempt to traverse an impossible distance—as though he's been trying to reach some destination that doesn't really exist.



## 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 ancient Roman poet Virgil.

Though Henry was—and remains—an obscure figure, the 19th century was full of some of poetry's biggest names. "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.

"Old Man" has a companion or sequel poem called, appropriately, "[Very Old Man](#)." In this poem, the speaker is "threescore and ten" (seventy) as anticipated in line 14. During the intervening decade, the speaker's prediction has come true: 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 social reformers to focus increasingly 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. "Old Man" was written when he was in his late fifties, so not far off the speaker's sixty years of age.



## MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [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>)
- [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](https://archive.org/details/newoxfordbookofv0000unse_d9j9))
- [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>)
- [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>)



## HOW TO CITE

## MLA

Howard, James. "Old Man." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Aug 2022. Web. 20 Sep 2022.

## CHICAGO MANUAL

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