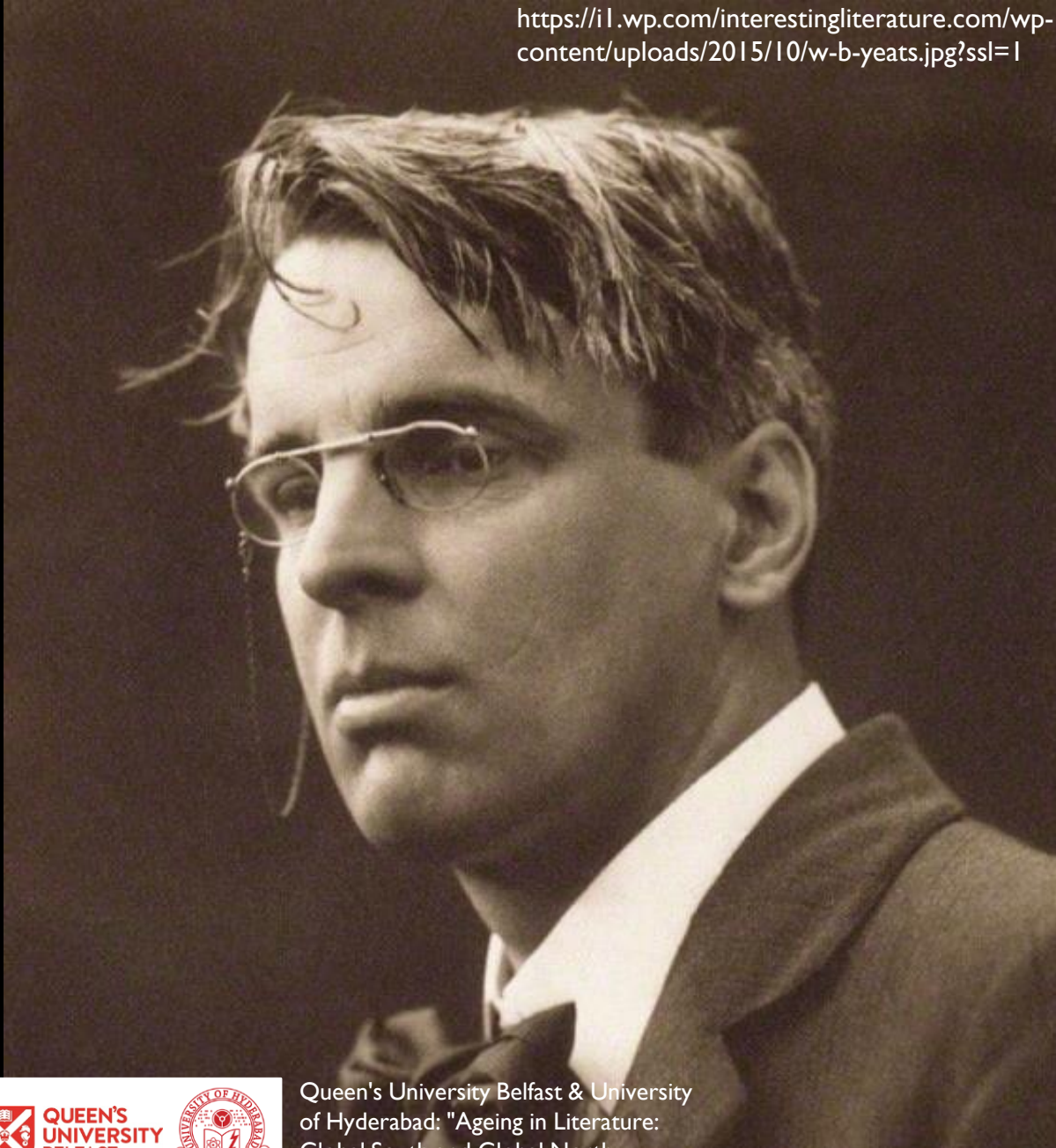


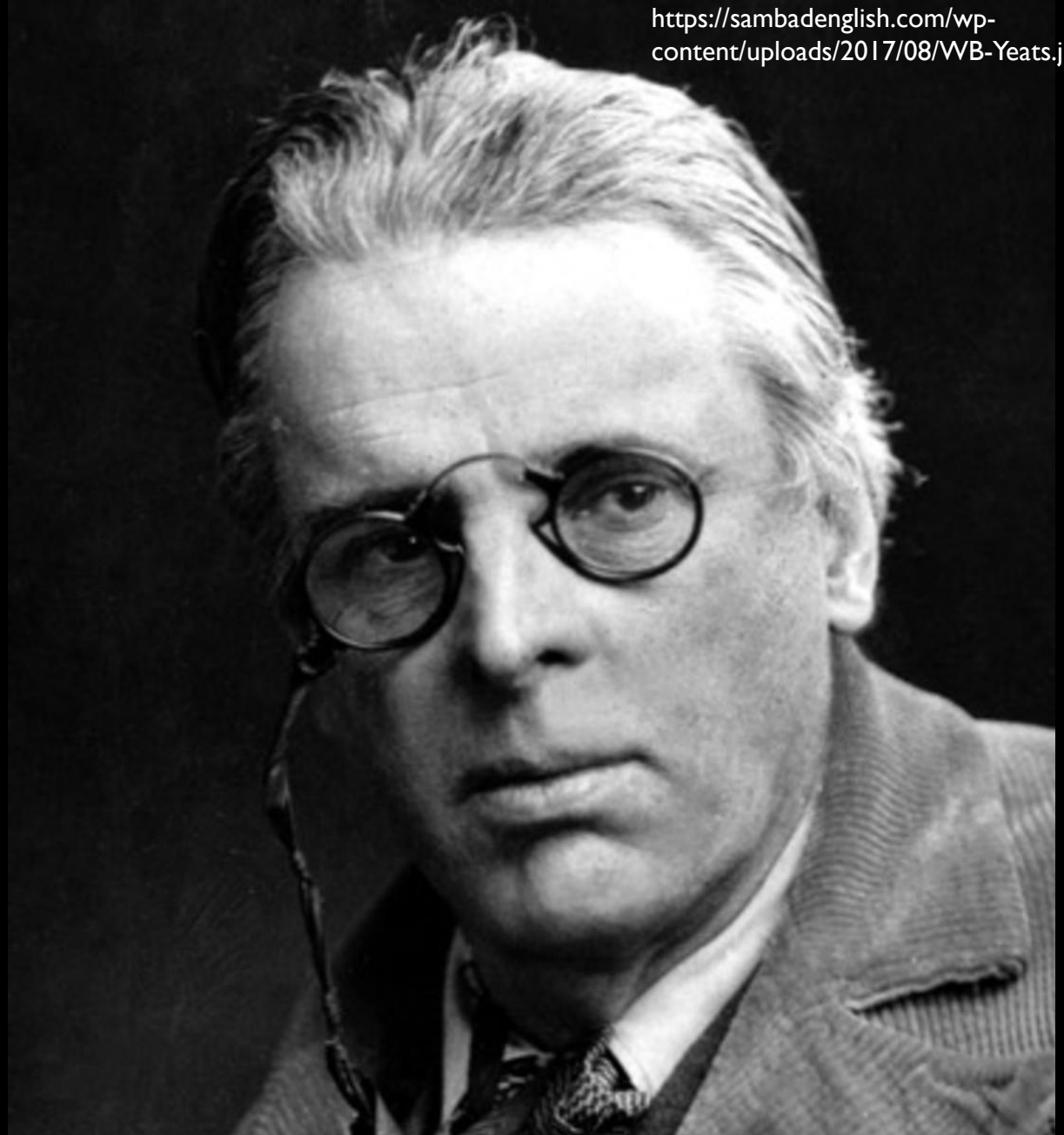
WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, 'AN ACRE OF GRASS'

Professor Tess Maginess

Picture source:
<https://i1.wp.com/interestingliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/w-b-years.jpg?ssl=1>



Picture source:
<https://sambadenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/WB-Years.jpg>



Queen's University Belfast & University of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives"

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- William Butler Yeats published his first works in the mid-1880s while a student at Dublin's Metropolitan School of Art. His early accomplishments include *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889) and such plays as *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) and *Deirdre* (1907). In 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He went on to pen more influential works, including *The Tower* (1928) and *Words for Music Perhaps and Other Poems* (1932). Yeats, who died in 1939, is remembered as one of the leading Western poets of the 20th century.

Source: [William Butler Yeats - Poems, Books & Facts \(biography.com\)](https://www.biography.com/people/william-butler-yeats-9777664)

‘AN ACRE OF GRASS’

- “**An Acre of Grass**” was written in **1936** when Yeats was 71 years old; the poem was included in *Last Poems and Two Plays*, a collection of Yeats’s work published in Dublin in 1939 after his death earlier that year.
- A description of **growing old and nearing the end of life**, the poem expresses Yeats’s own feelings through an unnamed speaker.
- “An Acre of Grass” offers insight into **Yeats’s personal experience with ageing**, as a man and as a literary artist.

Source: [An Acre of Grass Full Text and Analysis - Owl Eyes](#)

A CLOSER LOOK

- In the first few lines, what do we learn of **what is left** to the ageing poet, or what he would wish to be left?
- The first two items are from the **world of the arts**. We have the visual, picture, and the verbal, book. So, these, perhaps, have value because they outlive the body.
- What of that **acre**? An acre is quite a lot of ground, so the speaker must intend fairly vigorous exercise, or at least a pleasant view, or perhaps he might plant some beans.
- In both cases, **money** is needed. In the time of Yeats, the poor would not have had the spare money to buy books or pictures and any acre of grass would have been used for subsistence farming.

- The next lines seem to invoke a 'decline narrative'.
- To add to the **loss of physical strength**, we learn that night surrounds the speaker, the **dying of light** in the speaker, mirrored in nature.
- But **midnight** strikes a dramatic note.
- But this, in turn, is juxtaposed with **stillness**, a lack of drama.

- The **second stanza** begins with a challenge to the decline narrative, through the use of the very **corporeal notion of temptation** but the speaker closes down that vitality by telling us that, at life's end, temptation is quiet.
- And, he shifts from the association of temptation with physical pleasures to the **aesthetic world**.
- What does this imply? That his imagination has been now disciplined as a poet, or, harking back to the previous lines, that he does not even seem to be affected by imagining or fantasizing about physical delights?

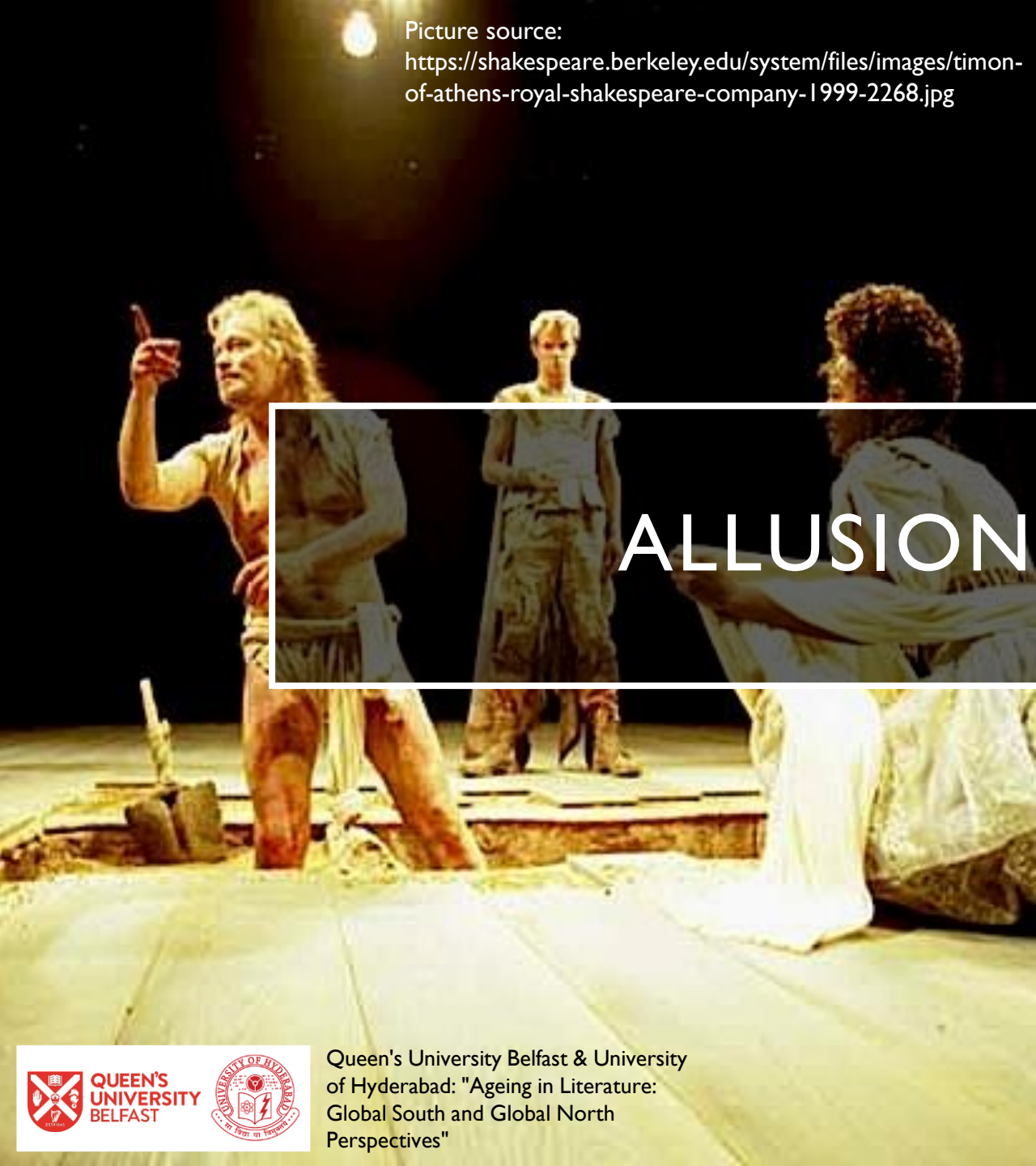
- What of that **metaphor** where the mind is conceived of as a mill?
- Does this conjure up **Milton's 'dark Satanic mills'**, especially as filtered through William Blake (who appears in the next stanza in another context)?
- The **mellifluousness** of the phrase counterpoints the constraining and repetitive connotations of a **mind grinding** relentlessly.
- The mill consumes the tatters or rags of the mind and also, somehow, its bone. This sounds good, but does it make any sense?

- ‘The meaning is not entirely clear, but it would seem also as if Yeats is alluding to the rag and bone men of olden days who used to collect the detritus of human and animal life. This may also, for Yeats, symbolize **commerce**, a **debased material world**.
- And, so he may be suggesting that **truth cannot be discovered through a focus on loose imagination** (with its double meanings) **or in the tatters of materialism**.

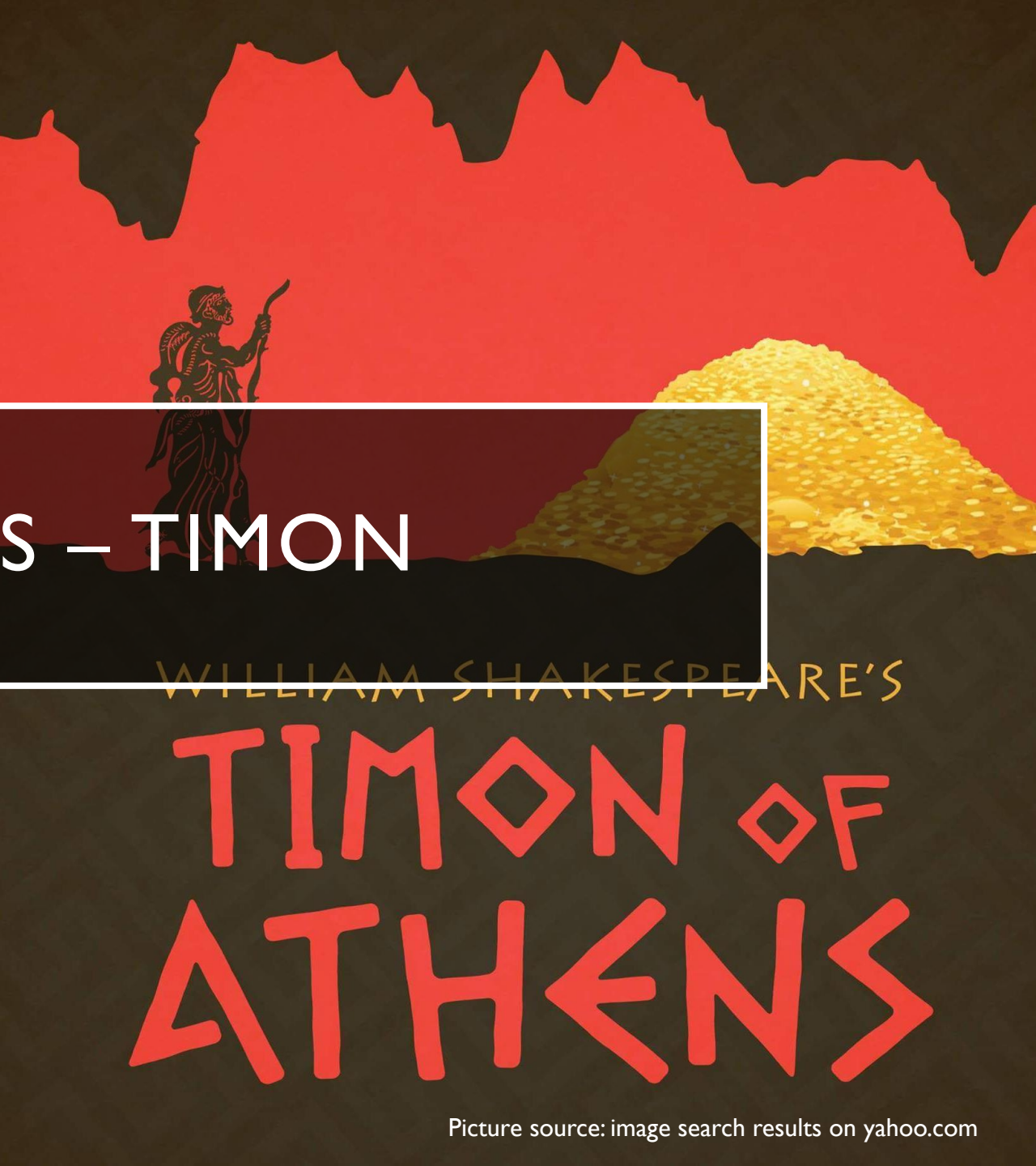
- In the next stanza, the poem turns from this decline narrative and also the sense of contempt for the material and for false imagination or sensual temptation, towards suggesting **a new set of possibilities for the old**.
- This entails abandoning the rational and embracing **madness or frenzy**.
- For Yeats, 'frenzy', madness are viewed as **positive state** rather than the negative representations we are so accustomed to – with old age, in particular, we may associate frenzy as a dimension of dementia.

- And, intriguingly, Yeats offers the potential for **old people to ‘remake’ themselves**, to shape their identity and being **in an agentic way**, rather than being passive or decrepit.
- This might involve an imaginative ‘re-fashioning’, where the individual can see himself related to great figures of myth or literature.
- And, contingently, that remaking could elevate the status of older people, allowing them a far more **heroic status**.

Picture source:
<https://shakespeare.berkeley.edu/system/files/images/timon-of-athens-royal-shakespeare-company-1999-2268.jpg>



ALLUSIONS – TIMON



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S
**TIMON OF
ATHENS**



Queen's University Belfast & University
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Global South and Global North
Perspectives"

Picture source: image search results on yahoo.com

- **Timon** – a man known for his **great and universal generosity**, who spends his fortune and then is spurned when he requires help. He puts on a feast, invites his fair-weather friends, serves them warm water, and throws it in their faces. Leaving Athens filled with hatred, he goes to live in a cave.

[Timon of Athens | Tragedy, Misanthropy, Satire | Britannica](#)

- The real Timon of Athens lived there in the fifth century BCE, making him a **contemporary of Socrates and Pericles**. Shakespeare presents Timon as a figure who suffers such **profound disillusionment** that he becomes a **misanthrope**, or man-hater.

[Timon of Athens | Folger Shakespeare Library](#)

- [King Lear, past and present – in pictures | Stage | The Guardian.](#)
Photo by Jonathan Keenan

- [King Lear, past and present – in pictures | Stage | The Guardian.](#)
Photo by Liu Yang

- [Glenda-Jackson-Kate-Maltby-King-Lear.jpg \(1200×848\)](#)
(katemaltby.com)

LEAR



SUMMARY OF KING LEAR

- King Lear divides his kingdom among the two daughters who flatter him and banishes the third one who loves him. His eldest daughters both then reject him at their homes, so Lear goes mad and wanders through a storm. His banished daughter returns with an army, but they lose the battle and Lear, all his daughters and more, die.

[Summary of King Lear | Shakespeare Birthplace Trust](#)

WILLIAM BLAKE



Picture source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_Blake_003.jpg

Picture source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Blake#/media/File:William_Blake_by_Thomas_Phillips.jpg



Picture source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Blake_in_popular_culture#/media/File:Reddragon.jpg



WILLIAM BLAKE

[William Blake | Biography, Poems, Art, Characteristics, & Facts | Britannica](#)

- Yeats invokes **Timon** because of his **rejection of the material**, and also because of the **ingratitude** he suffered. This brings us to **Lear**, two of whose daughters were cruelly ungrateful and this sent him into madness. Isolated, rejected by his family as a demented old man, he **gains new insights**, remakes himself.
- William **Blake** welcomed his **heightened state of mind** as this opened the door to a **visionary world** – not of loose imaginings, but of a **strict and logical system**. For Yeats, here, Blake's commitment to his visionary reality enabled him to make Truth obey his call. This is an interesting inversion, where an abstract concept, truth, is dramatized as obeyed the call of a frenzied poet.

- In the concluding verse or stanza, Yeats makes reference, in one final allusion, to the Renaissance painter and sculptor, **Michael Angelo**, who painted the ceiling of the famous Sistine Chapel in Rome.
- Yeats refers to him as one who is, like his other heroes, a **visionary**, through this clever image – whose mind, he avers, ‘**can pierce the clouds**’ – apt for the painter of a ceiling.



MICHELANGELO

- The speaker claims that **frenzy** is highly powerful as well as dramatic.
- The concluding couplet returns us to the **figure of the old man, irrelevant and forgotten in the world.**
- But, the speaker seems to argue, the old man is not forgotten because his mind transcends his body and situation – it is like an **eagle.**
- The image suggests **majesty**, the **ability to soar**, but also, of course to **see what others cannot.**
- This, old age, especially in its frenzied states, offers to the old and also to us all, **rare insights.**
- This effectively rejects the common ‘understanding’ that frenzy must be negative and unproductive but also offers a **consolation** for the losses of old age.
- We will see this theme adumbrated also in **Heaney’s ‘A Kite for Aibhín.’**

FORM

- Since Yeats never adopted the free verse of modernism, 'An Acre of Grass' is **conventional** in structure.
- Four sestets or six-line stanzas are written in **iambic trimeter** with some variations.
- The rhyme scheme in each stanza is **ABCBDD** and features both **perfect rhymes and slant rhymes or half rhymes**.
- The poem's few allusions are employed with specific thematic purpose, and as in all of Yeats's poetry, the **imagery is vivid and dynamic** and the symbolism is... subject to **various interpretations**.

[An Acre of Grass Full Text and Analysis - Owl Eyes](#)