

# **The Hour Glass**

W.B. Yeats

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# The Hour Glass

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Produced by Nichole Apostola

THE HOUR-GLASS  
A MORALITY  
BY W. B. YEATS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

A WISE MAN  
A FOOL  
SOME PUPILS  
AN ANGEL  
THE WISE MAN'S WIFE AND TWO CHILDREN

**SCENE:** A large room with a door at the back and another at the side opening to an inner room. A desk and a chair in the middle. An hour-glass on a bracket near the door. A creepy stool near it. Some benches. The WISE MAN sitting at his desk.

**WISE MAN** [turning over the pages of a book]. Where is that passage I am to explain to my pupils to-day? Here it is, and the book says that it was written by a beggar on the walls of Babylon: There are two living countries, the one visible and the one invisible; and when it is winter with us it is summer in that country; and when the November winds are up among us it is lambing-time there. I wish that my pupils had asked me to explain any other passage, for this is a hard passage. [The FOOL comes in and stands at the door, holding out his hat. He has a pair of shears in the other hand.] It sounds to me like foolishness; and yet that cannot be, for the writer of this book, where I have found so much knowledge, would not have set it by itself on this page, and surrounded it with so many images and so many deep colors and so much fine gilding, if it had been foolishness.

**FOOL.** Give me a penny.

**WISE MAN.** [Turns to another page.] Here he has written: The learned in old times forgot the visible country. That I understand, but I have taught my learners better.

**FOOL.** Won't you give me a penny?

**WISE MAN.** What do you want? The words of the wise Saracen will not teach you much.

**FOOL.** Such a great wise teacher as you are will not refuse a penny to a Fool.

**WISE MAN.** What do you know about wisdom?

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**FOOL.** Oh, I know! I know what I have seen.

**WISE MAN.** What is it you have seen?

**FOOL.** When I went by Kilcluan where the bells used to be ringing at the break of every day, I could hear nothing but the people snoring in their houses. When I went by Tubbervanach where the young men used to be climbing the hill to the blessed well, they were sitting at the crossroads playing cards. When I went by Carrigoras where the friars used to be fasting and serving the poor, I saw them drinking wine and obeying their wives. And when I asked what misfortune had brought all these changes, they said it was no misfortune, but it was the wisdom they had learned from your teaching.

**WISE MAN.** Run round to the kitchen, and my wife will give you something to eat.

**FOOL.** That is foolish advice for a wise man to give.

**WISE MAN.** Why, Fool?

**FOOL.** What is eaten is gone. I want pennies for my bag. I must buy bacon in the shops, and nuts in the market, and strong drink for the time when the sun is weak. And I want snhere the friars used to be fasting and serving the poor, I saw them drinking wine and obeying their wives. And when I asked what misfortune had brought all these changes, they said it was no misfortune, but it was the wisdom they had learned from your teaching.

**WISE MAN.** Run round to the kitchen, and my wife will give you something to eat.

**FOOL.** That is foolish advice for a wise man to give.

**WISE MAN.** Why, Fool?

**FOOL.** What is eaten is gone. I want pennies for my bag. I must buy bacon in the shops, and nuts in the market, and strong drink for the time when the sun is weak. And I want snares to catch the rabbits and the squirrels and the bares, and a pot to cook them in.

**WISE MAN.** Go away. I have other things to think of now than giving you pennies.

**FOOL.** Give me a penny and I will bring you luck. Bresal the Fisherman lets me sleep among the nets in his loft in the winter–time because he says I bring him luck; and in the summer–time the wild creatures let me sleep near their nests and their holes. It is lucky even to look at me or to touch me, but it is much more lucky to give me a penny. [Holds out his hand.] If I wasn't lucky, I'd starve.

**WISE MAN.** What have you got the shears for?

**FOOL.** I won't tell you. If I told you, you would drive them away.

**WISE MAN.** Whom would I drive away?

**FOOL.** I won't tell you.

**WISE MAN.** Not if I give you a penny?

**FOOL.** No.

**WISE MAN.** Not if I give you two pennies.

**FOOL.** You will be very lucky if you give me two pennies, but I won't tell you.

**WISE MAN.** Three pennies?

**FOOL.** Four, and I will tell you!

**WISE MAN.** Very well, four. But I will not call you Teigue the Fool any longer.

**FOOL.** Let me come close to you where nobody will hear me. But first you must promise you will not drive them away. [WISE MAN nods.] Every day men go out dressed in black and spread great black nets over the hill, great black nets.

**WISE MAN.** Why do they do that?

**FOOL.** That they may catch the feet of the angels. But every morning, just before the dawn, I go out and cut the nets with my shears, and the angels fly away.

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**WISE MAN.** Ah, now I know that you are Teigue the Fool. You have told me that I am wise, and I have never seen an angel.

**FOOL.** I have seen plenty of angels.

**WISE MAN.** Do you bring luck to the angels too.

**FOOL.** Oh, no, no! No one could do that. But they are always there if one looks about one; they are like the blades of grass.

**WISE MAN.** When do you see them?

**FOOL.** When one gets quiet; then something wakes up inside one, something happy and quiet like the stars—not like the seven that move, but like the fixed stars. [He points upward.]

**WISE MAN.** And what happens then?

**FOOL.** Then all in a minute one smells summer flowers, and tall people go by, happy and laughing, and their clothes are the color of burning sods.

**WISE MAN.** Is it long since you have seen them, Teigue the Fool?

**FOOL.** Not long, glory be to God! I saw one coming behind me just now. It was not laughing, but it had clothes the color of burning sods, and there was something shining about its head.

**WISE MAN.** Well, there are your four pennies. You, a fool, say “Glory be to God,” but before I came the wise men said it. Run away now. I must ring the bell for my scholars.

**FOOL.** Four pennies! That means a great deal of luck. Great teacher, I have brought you plenty of luck! [He goes out shaking the bag.]

**WISE MAN.** Though they call him Teigue the Fool, he is not more foolish than everybody used to be, with their dreams and their preachings and their three worlds; but I have overthrown their three worlds with the seven sciences. [He touches the books with his hands.] With Philosophy that was made for the lonely star, I have taught them to forget Theology; with Architecture, I have hidden the ramparts of their cloudy heaven; with Music, the fierce planets' daughter whose hair is always on fire, and with Grammar that is the moon's daughter, I have shut their ears to the imaginary harpings and speech of the angels; and I have made formations of battle with Arithmetic that have put the hosts of heaven to the rout. But, Rhetoric and Dialectic, that have been born out of the light star and out of the amorous star, you have been my spearman and my catapult! Oh! my swift horseman! Oh! my keen darting arguments, it is because of you that I have overthrown the hosts of foolishness! [An ANGEL, in a dress the color of embers, and carrying a blossoming apple bough in his hand and with a gilded halo about his head, stands upon the threshold.] Before I came, men's minds were stuffed with folly about a heaven where birds sang the hours, and about angels that came and stood upon men's thresholds. But I have locked the visions into heaven and turned the key upon them. Well, I must consider this passage about the two countries. My mother used to say something of the kind. She would say that when our bodies sleep our souls awake, and that whatever withers here ripens yonder, and that harvests are snatched from us that they may feed invisible people. But the meaning of the book must be different, for only fools and women have thoughts like that; their thoughts were never written upon the walls of Babylon. [He sees the ANGEL.] What are you? Who are you? I think I saw some that were like you in my dreams when I was a child—that bright thing, that dress that is the color of embers! But I have done with dreams, I have done with dreams.

**ANGEL.** I am the Angel of the Most High God.

**WISE MAN.** Why have you come to me?

**ANGEL.** I have brought you a message.

**WISE MAN.** What message have you got for me?

**ANGEL.** You will die within the hour. You will die when the last grains have fallen in this glass. [He turns the hour-glass.]

**WISE MAN.** My time to die has not come. I have my pupils. I have a young wife and children that I cannot leave. Why must I die?

**ANGEL.** You must die because no souls have passed over the threshold of heaven since you came into this country. The threshold is grassy, and the gates are rusty, and the angels that keep watch there are lonely.

**WISE MAN.** Where will death bring me to?

**ANGEL.** The doors of heaven will not open to you, for you have denied the existence of heaven; and the doors of purgatory will not open to you, for you have denied the existence of purgatory.

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**WISE MAN.** But I have also denied the existence of hell!

**ANGEL.** Hell is the place of those who deny.

**WISE MAN** [kneeling]. I have indeed denied everything and have taught others to deny. I have believed in nothing but what my senses told me. But, oh! beautiful Angel, forgive me, forgive me!

**ANGEL.** You should have asked forgiveness long ago.

**WISE MAN.** Had I seen your face as I see it now, oh! beautiful Angel, I would have believed, I would have asked forgiveness. Maybe you do not know how easy it is to doubt. Storm, death, the grass rotting, many sicknesses, those are the messengers that came to me. Oh! why are you silent? You carry the pardon of the Most High; give it to me! I would kiss your hands if I were not afraid— no, no, the hem of your dress!

**ANGEL.** You let go undying hands too ago to take hold of them now.

**WISE MAN.** You cannot understand. You live in that country people only see in their dreams. You live in a country that we can only dream about. Maybe it is as hard for you to understand why we disbelieve as it is for us to believe. Oh! what have I said! You know everything! Give me time to undo what I have done. Give me a year—a month—a day—an hour! Give me this hour's end, that I may undo what I have done!

**ANGEL.** You cannot undo what you have done. Yet I have this power with my message. If you can find one that believes before the hour's end, you shall come to heaven after the years of purgatory. For, from one fiery seed, watched over by those that sent me, the harvest can come again to heap the golden threshing-floor. But now farewell, for I am weary of the weight of time.

**WISE MAN.** Blessed be the Father, blessed be the Son, blessed be the Spirit, blessed be the Messenger They have sent!

**ANGEL** [at the door and pointing at the hour-glass]. In a little while the uppermost glass will be empty. [Goes out.]

**WISE MAN.** Everything will be well with me. I will call my pupils; they only say they doubt. [Pulls the bell.] They will be here in a moment. I hear their feet outside on the path. They want to please me; they pretend that they disbelieve. Belief is too old to be overcome all in a minute. Besides, I can prove what I once disproved. [Another pull at the bell.] They are coming now. I will go to my desk. I will speak quietly, as if nothing had happened.

[He stands at the desk with a fixed look in his eyes.]

[Enter PUPILS and the FOOL.]

**FOOL.** Leave me alone. Leave me alone. Who is that pulling at my bag? King's son, do not pull at my bag.

**A YOUNG MAN.** Did your friends the angels give you that bag? Why don't they fill your bag for you?

**FOOL.** Give me pennies! Give me some pennies!

**A YOUNG MAN.** Let go his cloak, it is coming to pieces. What do you want pennies for, with that great bag at your waist?

**FOOL.** I want to buy bacon in the shops, and nuts in the market, and strong drink for the time when the sun is weak, and snares to catch rabbits and the squirrels that steal the nuts, and hares, and a great pot to cook them in.

**A YOUNG MAN.** Why don't your friends tell you where buried treasures are?

**ANOTHER.** Why don't they make you dream about treasures? If one dreams three times, there is always treasure.

**FOOL** [holding out his hat]. Give me pennies! Give me pennies!

[They throw pennies into his hat. He is standing close to the door, that he may hold out his hat to each newcomer.]

**A YOUNG MAN.** Master, will you have Teigue the Fool for a scholar?

**ANOTHER YOUNG MAN.** Teigue, will you give us pennies if we teach you lessons? No, he goes to school for nothing on the mountains. Tell us what you learn on the mountains, Teigue?

**WISE MAN.** Be silent all. [He has been standing silent, looking away.] Stand still in your places, for there is something I would have you tell me.

[A moment's pause. They all stand round in their places. TEIGUE still stands at the door.]

**WISE MAN.** Is there any one amongst you who believes in God? In heaven? Or in purgatory? Or in hell?

**ALL THE YOUNG MEN.** No one; Master! No one!

**WISE MAN.** I knew you would all say that; but do not be afraid. I will not be angry. Tell me the truth. Do

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you not believe?

**A YOUNG MAN.** We once did, but you have taught us to know better.

**WISE MAN.** Oh! teaching, teaching does not go very deep! The heart remains unchanged under it all. You believe just as you always did, and you are afraid to tell me.

**A YOUNG MAN.** No, no, master.

**WISE MAN.** If you tell me that you believe I shall be glad and not angry.

**A YOUNG MAN.** [To his neighbor.] He wants somebody to dispute with.

**HIS NEIGHBOR.** I knew that from the beginning.

**A YOUNG MAN.** That is not the subject for to-day; you were going to talk about the words the beggar wrote upon the walls of Babylon.

**WISE MAN.** If there is one amongst you that believes, he will be my best friend. Surely there is one amongst you. [They are all silent.] Surely what you learned at your mother's knees has not been so soon forgotten.

**A YOUNG MAN.** Master, till you came, no teacher in this land was able to get rid of foolishness and ignorance. But every one has listened to you, every one has learned the truth. You have had your last disputation.

**ANOTHER.** What a fool you made of that monk in the market-place! He had not a word to say.

**WISE MAN.** [Comes from his desk and stands among them in the middle of the room.] Pupils, dear friends, I have deceived you all this time. It was I myself who was ignorant. There is a God. There is a heaven. There is fire that passes, and there is fire that lasts for ever.

[TEIGUE, through all this, is sitting on a stool by the door, reckoning on his fingers what he will buy with his money.]

**A YOUNG MAN** [to another]. He will not be satisfied till we dispute with him. [To the WISE MAN.] Prove it, master. Have you seen them?

**WISE MAN** [in a low, solemn voice]. Just now, before you came in, some one came to the door, and when I looked up I saw an angel standing there.

**A YOUNG MAN.** You were in a dream. Anybody can see an angel in his dreams.

**WISE MAN.** Oh, my God! it was not a dream. I was awake, waking as I am now. I tell you I was awake as I am now.

**A YOUNG MAN.** Some dream when they are awake, but they are the crazy, and who would believe what they say? Forgive me, master, but that is what you taught me to say. That is what you said to the monk when he spoke of the visions of the saints and the martyrs.

**ANOTHER YOUNG MAN.** You see how well we remember your teaching.

**WISE MAN.** Out, out from my sight! I want some one with belief. I must find that grain the Angel spoke of before I die. I tell you I must find it, and you answer me with arguments. Out with you, or I will beat you with my stick! [The young men laugh.]

**A YOUNG MAN.** How well he plays at faith! He is like the monk when he had nothing more to say.

**WISE MAN.** Out, out, or I will lay this stick about your shoulders! Out with you, though you are a king's son! [They begin to hurry out.]

**A YOUNG MAN.** Come, come; he wants us to find some one who will dispute with him. [All go out.]

**WISE MAN** [alone. He goes to the door at the side]. I will call my wife. She will believe; women always believe. [He opens the door and calls.] Bridget! Bridget! [BRIDGET comes in wearing her apron, her sleeves turned up from her floury arms.] Bridget, tell me the truth; do not say what you think will please me. Do you sometimes say your prayers?

**BRIDGET.** Prayers! No, you taught me to leave them off long ago. At first I was sorry, but I am glad now, for I am sleepy in the evenings.

**WISE MAN.** But do you not believe in God?

**BRIDGET.** Oh, a good wife only believes what her husband tells her!

**WISE MAN.** But sometimes when you are alone, when I am in the school and the children asleep, do you not think about the saints, about the things you used to believe in? What do you think of when you are alone?

**BRIDGET** [considering]. I think about nothing. Sometimes I wonder if the pig is fattening well, or I go out to see if the crows are picking up the chickens' food.

**WISE MAN.** Oh, what can I do! Is there nobody who believes? I must go and find somebody! [He goes

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toward the door but with his eyes fixed on the hour-glass.] I cannot go out; I cannot leave that!

**BRIDGET.** You want somebody to get up argument with.

**WISE MAN.** Oh, look out of the door and tell me if there is anybody there in the street. I cannot leave this glass; somebody might shake it! Then the sand would fall quickly.

**BRIDGET.** I don't understand what you saying. [Looks out.] There is a great of people talking to your pupils.

**WISE MAN.** Oh, run out, Bridget, and see if they have found somebody that believes!

**BRIDGET** [wiping her arms in her apron and pulling down her sleeves]. It's a hard thing to be married to a man of learning that must be always having arguments. [Goes out and shouts through the kitchen door.] Don't be meddling with the bread, children, while I'm out.

**WISE MAN.** [Kneels down.] "Salvum me fac, Deus—salvum—salvum. ..." I have forgotten it all. It is thirty years since I said a prayer. I must pray in the common tongue, like a clown begging in the market like Teigue the Fool! [He prays.] Help me, Father, Son, and Spirit!

[BRIDGET enters, followed by the FOOL, who is holding out his hat to her.]

**FOOL.** Give me something; give me a penny to buy bacon in the shops, and nuts in the market, and strong drink for the time when the sun grows weak.

**BRIDGET.** I have no pennies. [To the WISE MAN.] Your pupils cannot find anybody to argue with you. There is nobody in the whole country who had enough belief to fill a pipe with since you put down the monk. Can't you be quiet now and not always be wanting to have arguments? It must be terrible to have a mind like that.

**WISE MAN.** I am lost! I am lost!

**BRIDGET.** Leave me alone now; I have to make the bread for you and the children.

**WISE MAN.** Out of this, woman, out of this, I say! [BRIDGET goes through the kitchen door.] Will nobody find a way to help me! But she spoke of my children. I had forgotten them. They will believe. It is only those who have reason that doubt; the young are full of faith. Bridget, Bridget, send my children to me!

**BRIDGET** [inside]. Your father wants you, run to him now.

[The two children came in. They stand together a little way from the threshold of the kitchen door, looking timidly at their father.]

**WISE MAN.** Children, what do you believe? Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? Is there a purgatory?

**FIRST CHILD.** We haven't forgotten, father.

**THE OTHER CHILD.** Oh, no, father. [They both speak together as if in school.] There is no heaven; there is no hell; there is nothing we cannot see.

**FIRST CHILD.** Foolish people used to think that there were, but you are very learned and you have taught us better.

**WISE MAN.** You are just as bad as the others, just as bad as the others! Out of the room with you, out of the room! [The children begin to cry and run away.] Go away, go away! I will teach you better—no, I will never teach you again. Go to your mother—no, she will not be able to teach them. ... Help them, O God! [Alone.] The grains are going very quickly. There is very little sand in the uppermost glass. Somebody will come for me in a moment; perhaps he is at the door now! All creatures that have reason doubt. O that the grass and the planets could speak! Somebody has said that they would wither if they doubted. O speak to me, O grass blades! O fingers of God's certainty, speak to me. You are millions and you will not speak. I dare not know the moment the messenger will come for me. I will cover the glass. [He covers it and brings it to the desk, and the FOOL, is sitting by the door fiddling with some flowers which he has stuck in his hat. He has begun to blow a dandelion head.] What are you doing?

**FOOL.** Wait a moment. [He blows.] Four, five, six.

**WISE MAN.** What are you doing that for?

**FOOL.** I am blowing at the dandelion to find out what time it is.

**WISE MAN.** You have heard everything! That is why you want to find out what hour it is! You are waiting to see them coming through the door to carry me away. [FOOL goes on blowing.] Out through the door with you! I will have no one here when they come. [He seizes the FOOL by the shoulders, and begins to force him out through the door, then suddenly changes his mind.] No, I have something to ask you. [He drags him back into the room.] Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? Is there a purgatory?

**FOOL.** So you ask me now. I thought when you were asking your pupils, I said to myself, if he would ask



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Teigue the Fool, Teigue could tell him all about it, for Teigue has learned all about it when he has been cutting the nets.

**WISE MAN.** Tell me; tell me!

**FOOL.** I said, Teigue knows everything. Not even the owls and the hares that milk the cows have Teigue's wisdom. But Teigue will not speak; he says nothing.

**WISE MAN.** Tell me, tell me! For under the cover the grains are falling, and when they are all fallen I shall die; and my soul will be lost if I have not found somebody that believes! Speak, speak!

**FOOL** [looking wise]. No, no, I won't tell you what is in my mind, and I won't tell you what is in my bag. You might steal away my thoughts. I met a bodach on the road yesterday, and he said, "Teigue, tell me how many pennies are in your bag. I will wager three pennies that there are not twenty pennies in your bag; let me put in my hand and count them." But I pulled the strings tighter, like this; and when I go to sleep every night I hide the bag where no one knows.

**WISE MAN.** [Goes toward the hour-glass as if to uncover it.] No, no, I have not the courage! [He kneels.] Have pity upon me, Fool, and tell me!

**FOOL.** Ah! Now, that is different. I am not afraid of you now. But I must come near you; somebody in there might hear what the Angel said.

**WISE MAN.** Oh, what did the Angel tell you?

**FOOL.** Once I was alone on the hills, and an Angel came by and he said, "Teigue the Fool, do not forget the Three Fires: the Fire that punishes, the Fire that purifies, and the Fire wherein the soul rejoices for ever!"

**WISE MAN.** He believes! I am saved! Help me. The sand has run out. I am dying. ... [FOOL helps him to his chair.] I am going from the country of the seven wandering stars, and I am going to the country of the fixed stars! Ring the bell. [FOOL rings the bell.] Are they coming? Ah! now I hear their feet. ... I will speak to them. I understand it all now. One sinks in on God: we do not see the truth; God sees the truth in us. I cannot speak, I am too weak. Tell them, Fool, that when the life and the mind are broken, the truth comes through them like peas through a broken peascod. But no, I will pray—yet I cannot pray. Pray Fool, that they may be given a sign and save their souls alive. Your prayers are better than mine.

[FOOL bows his head. WISE MAN'S head sinks on his arm on the books. PUPILS enter.]

**A YOUNG MAN.** Look at the Fool turned bell-ringer!

**ANOTHER.** What have you called us in for, Teigue? What are you going to tell us?

**ANOTHER.** No wonder he has had dreams! See, he is fast asleep now. [Goes over and touches the WISE MAN.] Oh, he is dead!

**FOOL.** Do not stir! He asked for a sign that you might be saved. [All are silent for a moment.] Look what has come from his mouth. ... a little winged thing ... a little shining thing. It has gone to the door. [The ANGEL appears in the doorway, stretches out her hands and closes them again.] The Angel has taken it in her hands... she will open her hands in the Garden of Paradise.

[They all kneel.]