

In Memory of W. B. Yeats

Introduction

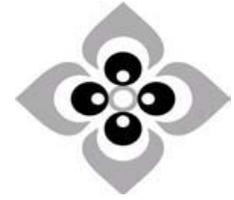
Hello, Learners, today we are going to study W.H. Auden's poem *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*. It was written in 1939 when William Butler Yeats, the famous Irish poet and dramatist died. Before we attempt a detailed analysis of the poem let us discuss the significance of elegy as a poetic genre.

There is a long history of elegiac poetry, that is, poems written on the occasion of someone's death. Poems about death are generally concerned not just with the loss, but also with what remains after a person dies.

An elegy can mourn one specific person, such as Walt Whitman's poem 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' on the death of Abraham Lincoln, or it can mourn humanity in general, as in Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'. In the pastoral elegy, modeled on the ancient Greek poets Theocritus and Bion, the subject and friends are depicted as shepherds living in a pastoral world in classical times. Famous pastoral elegies are Milton's 'Lycidas', on Edward King; Shelley's 'Adonais' on John Keats and Matthew Arnold's 'Thyrsis', on Arthur Hugh Clough. Through elegies poets often take the opportunity to touch upon many important and deeply-felt concerns of society.

Traditionally an elegy includes three stages of loss: the first is an expression of grief; the second is full of praise for the deceased person; the third contains consolation and solace. Auden's poem draws on that traditional form but, makes it clear that while memory deals with the past, it takes place in the present.

Poets die as others do but poetry does not die, and neither does mankind. The title suggests that this poem is an elegy and Auden is mourning Yeats. However the poem as a whole does not focus exclusively on Yeats or seek to praise him. Auden discusses the role of the poet, poetry, temporality, war and delusion. He urges us not to be the



'unknown citizen' who is passive; instead we should think and learn to rejoice in the face of fear. The poem is interesting because it has a universality and relevance. Before attempting a detailed analysis of the poem, let us take a quick look at the background.

Background

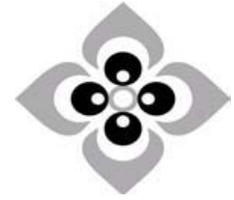
Wystan Hugh Auden (*English-born American poet; Born: February 21, 1907 York, England; Died: September 28, 1973 Vienna, Austria*) was the one of the most active of the group of young English poets who, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, brought new techniques and attitudes to English poetry. The Great Depression that shook America in 1929 hit England soon after. Auden and his contemporaries saw, not a metaphorical *wasteland* of Eliot but a more literal wasteland of poverty, industrial stagnation and mass unemployment.

Nobel Prize winner William Butler Yeats was one of the founders of the Irish Literary Revival and his works draw heavily on Irish mythology and history. A devoted patriot, Yeats found his voice to speak out against the harsh Nationalist policies of the time. His works explore the greater themes of life in contrast to art, and finding beauty in the mundane.

When Auden wrote "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" in February 1939, Europe was on the verge of World War II. War did not actually break out until Germany invaded Poland in September, but the sense of impending catastrophe is present throughout the poem. The failure of Britain and France to resist Hitler's claims on Czechoslovakia in 1938 seemed to define the mood of Europe as Auden wrote. In spite of the sense of expectant foreboding, all the nations seemed paralyzed, incapable of action.

Auden's poem breaks the mold of traditional elegies and chooses to not just lament the death of Yeats or list out cherished memories but covers the vast territory of the great poet's life and work, even venturing to criticize him. We find a sense of urgency in this poem perhaps because the World War is imminent. There is almost something prophetic about Auden's observation that people, too locked in their own daily routines fail to notice what is happening right next to them and will ignore the pain and suffering of the others.

Auden denies the political consequence of poetry but admits that poetry can effectively portray the world and connect people sharing the same problems, fears and anxieties. Auden's poem points out that Yeats' work did not gain prominence by his political



ambitions and socially-oriented intentions but rather by the depth and beauty of his verse.

The Poem -- Section 1

The first line of the poem, "He disappeared in the dead of winter:" introduces a strong image of Yeats walking out alone into the darkness of winter. The desolation of the scene becomes stronger with each successive image. Not only nature, but the cold and mechanical works of man felt the passing of Yeats, and thrust the reader step by step into the cold shock of the described day.

Auden expresses doubts about the adequacy of human tools to measure or reflect upon the actual death of a man. If recording the *death* of the body is hard, it is much more difficult to commemorate the *life* of the mind and soul. Auden deliberately chooses to refer to Yeats as "the poet," making him an anonymous figure rather than a specific man. Even the mourners are abstracted into "mourning tongues," not specific people. In the absence of specific people in these lines, Yeats' poems themselves seem to take on a life of their own. Auden emphasizes Yeats' humanness by taking a glimpse into the world of hospitals and nurses and all the mundane things that we generally don't tend to think about when mourning a national figure.

*"The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,"*

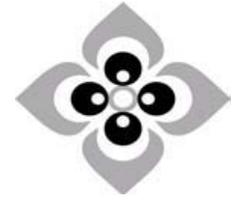
Auden turns to geographic and architectural language to describe human conditions.

Yeats' body is described as a city at war with itself – a war it eventually loses.

In death even Yeats' poems change; they can no longer emerge from the poet's own mouth. Instead they get "modified in the guts of the living." The human world goes on as usual. We wonder whether Yeats' death really outlives the evening news. The last two lines of the first stanza are repeated as the final two lines of the first section. This repetition underscores the fact that we hardly have adequate tools to tackle something as strange and complicated as death.

The Poem -- Section 2

In the second section suddenly the speaker directs his words towards a 'you' who seems to be Yeats. Instead of showing us the honorable and good side of the dead



poet, he makes sure we understand that Yeats' 'gift' emerges in spite of, or perhaps because of, all the complexities of his personality. He says,

"...Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,

For poetry makes nothing happen: ..."

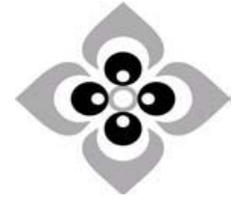
These lines show how deeply involved Yeats was in the Irish independence movement of his time. Some of his most remembered poems like, 'Easter 1916' emerge from his engagement with struggles for independence. He cared passionately about Ireland but his political positions were often complicated. Yeats wrote poetry to cure his country but his country remains sick. The speaker says that Ireland hasn't changed one bit because of Yeats' poetry. However he isn't saying that poetry is worthless. After all, he is speaking in a poem himself. While poetry can't be or do specific things, it allows us to think about things that we may not ordinarily think about. This subtle distinction indicates the delicate opposition between Yeats and Auden. Yeats considered poetry to be a tool whereas Auden believes that it is nothing in itself but its value lies only in how its readers respond to it. Yeats' fault was that he expected too much out of poetry.

Auden clarifies that, poetry is not a force in itself but made dynamic by its interpreters and each one's "foreign code of conscience." Poetry presents a world that's both real and far removed from our own, and it does so on its own terms. When you are done reading a poem you don't have anything tangible to keep from the experience. Poetry is "a way of happening." Auden seems to insist on the mobility and vitality of poetry. Amidst all the freezing isolation of the world, poetry is an active instrument.

Section 3

In the third section for the first time Yeats is referred to by name. Conventionally an elegy explains right at the beginning just who it is that the poet is mourning. Here Auden reverses this practice by mentioning it in the final section. Here Yeats is referred to as an "Irish vessel," a body meant to carry only poetry and not the problems the speaker brought up at the beginning of Section II. Auden also gives some of the specifics of Yeats' death, particularly the time of his death. Yeats died in 1939, just as the world was gearing up for World War II. Yeats and Auden shared the sentiments of many of their fellow artists and intellectuals, who were dismayed at the thought of another world war. The speaker paints the impending war as a sort of nightmarish unreality.

The third stanza of the Section doesn't seem to have anything to do with Yeats, the man. Auden perhaps believes that a good way to pay homage to someone is to spend some time thinking about his views and concerns. He goes on to admire how Yeats



combines realism with rejoicing. The poet is a figure that lives on through Yeats' poetry and isn't necessarily attached to Yeats, the man. Poetry is now channeled into a single image of a healing fountain. The poem holds out hope for the possibility of life and growth.

*"In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,"*

The way Auden crafts these lines is an invocation of Yeats' poetic powers. The last lines of the poem sound depressing because life is described as a prison. However there is hope for the future because the 'free man' can learn 'how to praise.'

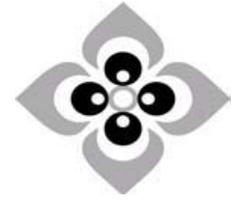
Auden's final approach to this elegy is interesting and thought-provoking. He doesn't want Yeats to live forever or his poems to be immortalized. He wants people to read and think and possibly become better by reading Yeats' poems.

Critical Analysis – Symbols and Images; Rhyme, Form and Meter; Speaker and Setting

Let us now discuss some of the stylistic features and poetic devices employed in the poem. The poem makes effective use of the images of water, frozenness and immobility and impending doom. Moving, flowing and churning things up, water is the quintessential symbolic image for motion and change. Water is personified as a 'peasant' river and a 'fashionable' quay. Art/poetry is imagined as a river snaking through landscapes of concrete and congestion. Water images are also used to depict the negative: the 'seas of pity' 'frozen' inside people become a potent image of failed compassion. Finally poetry is described as 'the healing fountain', the water that nurtures our souls.

Nightmares and barking dogs and hitting the rock bottom are some images of death, destruction and doom, which are all expected in an elegy.

Rhyme, form and meter are the poem's blueprints. Each of the three sections of the poem has unique formal characteristics. Auden uses the traditional elegy form, simple rhyming couplets as well as free form. Yeats himself was a master of form. He played around with everything from traditional Irish limericks and lyrics to epics. Auden's poetic tribute alludes to Yeats' technical skill.



In this poem the speaker is very close to the poet. The setting reflects the tone of the poem. The first section gives the grim details of dying in a hospital. However apart from the setting of Yeats' actual death, the whole landscape of his life including Ireland is depicted. The setting expands to include the world in 1939. Auden paints a vivid picture of a world built of isolationists and the nightmarish oncoming of World War II. The three settings of the poem cover the mundane details of life even as it philosophizes on the state of world affairs and the value of poetry.

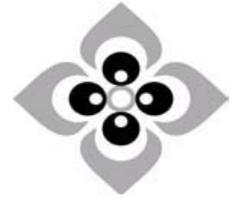
Critical Analysis –Tone and Themes

Now that we have looked at the variations in form, metrical patterns and setting, let us see how Auden conveys a mixture of urgency and hesitation. It is indeed a formidable task to chronicle the life of the most famous poet of his age. That tension gives the poem its sonic variants. Auden maintains a simple, restrained tone throughout the first section. Then the landscape shifts and suddenly Auden is addressing Yeats as a friend. Soon another form takes over almost as if the personal address has become too emotional to the speaker and so he reverts to the traditional forms like rhyme and elegy. The changes are lightning-fast and Auden packs a lot of emotion into those few stanzas. Auden's language in this poem is incredibly sparse almost as if he is determined to depict Yeats' death with a restraint that he himself doesn't feel.

A poem can have more than one theme. Examining the themes of a poem helps us understand it better. *'In Memory of W.B. Yeats'* is about death. Here, death becomes an occasion for Auden to reflect upon the complicated legacy Yeats left behind and the ways in which his work colored the 20th century poetic landscape.

Another major theme is the social validity of art or poetry. The poem presents the view that while art doesn't ever change anything it offers fresh perspectives and makes us feel things about people and places that we might not spend any time thinking about at all.

Unlike traditional elegies, this poem urges us to think about Yeats' failings as well as his achievements. Perhaps the only real way to express admiration is to do so honestly. The theme of isolation is prominent in the poem. Auden suggests that while poetry is not a cure-all, it can certainly help people see the truth of their situation even if it forces them to acknowledge their own loneliness.



The poem certainly makes us realize that poetry is an experience. It is all about freedom and exposing yourself to new ways of looking at the world and people.
