

## Themes in W. H. Auden's *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*

W. H. Auden's *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* is a profound elegy that not only commemorates the life and work of the Irish poet W. B. Yeats but also reflects on the nature of poetry, death, and the turbulent political landscape of the late 1930s. Written in 1939, the year of Yeats's death and on the eve of World War II, the poem is both a tribute and a meditation on the role of poetry in an unstable world. The poem is structured in three sections, each exploring different facets of Yeats's legacy, and it presents a nuanced reflection on the power and limitations of poetry. Through the themes of mortality, the persistence of art, the tension between politics and poetry, and the role of the poet, Auden crafts a complex and thought-provoking elegy.

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### 1. Death and the Transience of Life

Auden begins his elegy with a stark acknowledgment of Yeats's death. The opening lines depict the day Yeats died as an ordinary winter day, emphasizing the indifference of the natural world to human mortality:

➤ He disappeared in the dead of winter:

The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,

And snow disfigured the public statues;

This imagery of a frozen, lifeless landscape mirrors the finality of death, highlighting its inevitability. Auden does not present Yeats's passing as a grand, cosmic event but rather as a quiet moment in the midst of daily life. The use of the word "disfigured" suggests a world that continues but is subtly altered by loss.

Auden further reinforces the idea that death is an absolute separation from life:

- The day of his death was a dark cold day.

The repetition of this line later in the poem underscores the permanence of death. Yeats, like all humans, is subject to the limitations of mortality, and no poetic genius can escape this fundamental truth.

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## 2. The Power and Limitations of Poetry

One of the most famous lines in the poem—perhaps in all of modern poetry—is Auden’s assertion:

- For poetry makes nothing happen:

This line has been widely debated. On the surface, it appears to diminish the power of poetry, suggesting that it has no direct influence on political or historical events. However, Auden follows this statement with:

- It survives

In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,

Here, Auden suggests that while poetry may not change history in an immediate sense, it has a different kind of power—it survives, shaping human thought and emotion in subtle but enduring ways. Poetry exists outside the realms of political decision-making and warfare, yet it continues to influence and inspire individuals.

This theme is especially relevant given the historical context of the poem. In 1939, the world was on the brink of war, and political turmoil overshadowed artistic concerns. Auden acknowledges that poetry cannot prevent conflict or bring about peace, but he also suggests that it holds a unique and lasting significance.

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### 3. The Role of the Poet

Auden does not romanticize Yeats as a flawless literary figure. Instead, he acknowledges the poet's imperfections:

➤ You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:

This line humanizes Yeats, emphasizing that, despite his mistakes, his poetic genius endured. Auden recognizes that poets, like all people, are flawed, yet their art transcends their personal failings.

Moreover, Auden describes Yeats's poetry as something independent of the poet himself:

➤ Now he is scattered among a hundred cities

And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,

This suggests that once a poet dies, their words take on a life of their own, influencing readers in ways the poet could not have predicted. The phrase “unfamiliar affections” implies that Yeats’s poetry will be interpreted and appreciated by future generations, detached from his original intentions.

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#### 4. The Modern World and Political Chaos

Auden does not shy away from the harsh realities of the contemporary world. He directly references the political instability of Europe in the late 1930s:

➤ In the nightmare of the dark

All the dogs of Europe bark,

This evokes a sense of looming catastrophe, a direct allusion to the rising threat of war. The phrase “dogs of Europe” suggests both the aggression of nations preparing for conflict and the general anxiety that pervaded the time.

Auden contrasts the world of poetry with this chaotic political landscape, emphasizing that poetry exists in a different realm—one that does not prevent suffering but continues to provide meaning amid disorder. He acknowledges the limitations of art in shaping history but also affirms its role in helping individuals navigate dark times.

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## 5. Immortality Through Art

Despite acknowledging the limits of poetry's influence, Auden ultimately affirms that Yeats's work will endure. The final section of the poem adopts a more hopeful and uplifting tone, moving from mourning to celebration. Auden encourages poetry to continue speaking to future generations:

- Earth, receive an honoured guest:

William Yeats is laid to rest.

This formal, almost ceremonial language grants Yeats a place of honour among the great poets of history. Auden then directly addresses Yeats's poetry, urging it to move forward and find new audiences:

- Follow, poet, follow right

To the bottom of the night,

This line suggests that poetry has a role to play even in the darkest times. While Yeats himself is gone, his words remain, continuing to provide insight and solace.

Auden closes the poem with an imperative that reads as both a challenge and an encouragement:

- Teach the free man how to praise.

This final line reinforces the idea that poetry, while not an agent of direct change, has the power to shape how people think and feel. It can inspire, comfort, and guide, even in turbulent times.

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## Conclusion

W. H. Auden's *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* is an intricate and thought-provoking elegy that explores the complexities of poetry's role in the world. Auden acknowledges the inevitability of death, the limitations of poetry in shaping political events, and the imperfections of poets themselves. Yet, he also affirms the enduring power of poetry to survive, inspire, and teach future generations.

Through striking imagery, memorable lines, and a mix of lament and praise, Auden crafts a tribute that goes beyond Yeats as an individual. He positions poetry as an eternal force—one that does not make history happen but still holds immense value. In doing so, Auden not only commemorates Yeats but also offers a meditation on the enduring relationship between art and life.

Ultimately, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* is more than just an elegy for a single poet; it is a reflection on the purpose of poetry itself, making it one of Auden's most profound and lasting works.