

## **W. H. Auden's *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* as an Elegy**

Elegy, a poetic form traditionally associated with mourning and commemoration, serves as a reflection on the death of an individual while also exploring broader themes of mortality, legacy, and the role of art. W. H. Auden's *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* (1939) is a modern elegy that honours the passing of the Irish poet W. B. Yeats while simultaneously contemplating the nature of poetry in a world marked by political instability. Unlike classical elegies, which often idealize their subject, Auden's approach is more complex—he acknowledges Yeats's flaws, questions the influence of poetry, and ultimately affirms its enduring power.

Written in three distinct sections, the poem moves through different elegiac stages: acknowledgment of death, reflection on the poet's work and its significance, and a concluding affirmation of poetry's lasting value. Through this structure, Auden modernizes the elegy, blending personal tribute with intellectual inquiry, making *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* a unique and thought-provoking meditation on death, poetry, and the human condition.

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### 1. Announcement of Death and Its Indifference

Auden begins the elegy by directly addressing the death of Yeats, setting a sombre and reflective tone. He emphasizes the cold, indifferent world on the day of Yeats's passing:

➤ He disappeared in the dead of winter:

The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,

And snow disfigured the public statues;

The imagery of a frozen landscape mirrors the stillness of death, reinforcing the idea that Yeats's departure is final. Unlike traditional elegies that depict death as a moment of cosmic significance, Auden presents it as an ordinary event in a world that remains largely unaffected. The phrase "snow disfigured the public statues" symbolizes how time and nature eventually erode even the most celebrated figures, hinting at the transient nature of human life.

Auden repeats the line:

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

This refrain underscores the inescapable reality of death while also creating a sense of inevitability. The use of simple, declarative statements contributes to the starkness of the moment, aligning with modernist tendencies that reject overly sentimental expressions of grief.

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## 2. The Poet's Legacy and the Power of Poetry

A key element of elegy is the reflection on the deceased's work and its significance. Auden does not romanticize Yeats; rather, he acknowledges both his greatness and his limitations:

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

This line humanizes Yeats, portraying him as flawed but ultimately redeemed by his poetry. Unlike traditional elegies that idealize their subjects, Auden insists that Yeats was not above human folly. However, his art endured beyond his personal weaknesses, reinforcing the idea that a poet's legacy is not in their individual perfection but in their work.

Auden then introduces one of the most debated lines in the poem:

➤ For poetry makes nothing happen:

On the surface, this appears to diminish poetry's influence, suggesting that it does not directly shape history or alter political realities. However, Auden continues:

➤ 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, he clarifies that poetry's power lies not in immediate political action but in its ability to endure and influence individuals over time. Unlike political leaders who govern through direct action, poets shape emotions, thoughts, and cultural memory in subtle yet profound ways. This notion aligns with the elegiac tradition of affirming the lasting significance of the deceased's work.

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### 3. The Role of Poetry in a Chaotic World

Auden wrote *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* in 1939, a time of great political uncertainty with World War II on the horizon. He does not ignore this context, incorporating it into his meditation on poetry's role in an unstable world. He describes Europe's turmoil with haunting imagery:

➤ In the nightmare of the dark

All the dogs of Europe bark,

This evokes a sense of impending disaster, contrasting sharply with Yeats's poetic vision. The phrase "the dogs of Europe" suggests political aggression and the spread of war, highlighting how poetry exists in a world often dominated by violence and fear.

Despite this bleak outlook, Auden ultimately suggests that poetry still has a role to play:

➤ Follow, poet, follow right

To the bottom of the night,

This call to poets emphasizes their duty to engage with the darkness of their time rather than retreat into escapism. While poetry may not prevent war or solve crises, it remains a vital force for understanding, expression, and endurance.

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#### 4. Immortality Through Art

A central function of an elegy is to ensure the continued remembrance of the deceased. Auden does this by affirming that, while Yeats is physically gone, his poetry will outlive him. He states:

- Earth, receive an honoured guest:

William Yeats is laid to rest.

Here, Auden symbolically grants Yeats a place among the literary immortals. The phrase “honoured guest” suggests that, although Yeats has left the world, his poetry remains present and influential.

Auden then shifts from mourning to a more celebratory tone, addressing the transformative power of poetry:

- With the farming of a verse

Make a vineyard of the curse,

This suggests that poetry can turn suffering into something meaningful and lasting. Even in a world marked by suffering, poets have the ability to reshape sorrow into beauty, ensuring that human experiences are not lost to time.

The elegy concludes with a directive:

- Teach the free man how to praise.

This final line serves as both a tribute to Yeats and a statement on poetry's purpose. Poetry, according to Auden, teaches people how to appreciate life even in the face of suffering. It does not change history, but it shapes how individuals perceive and respond to it.

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### Conclusion: A Modern Elegy

Auden's *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* is a modern reinterpretation of the elegy, one that combines traditional elements of mourning with a critical and philosophical examination of poetry's role in the world. Unlike classical elegies that idealize their subjects, Auden presents Yeats as a flawed human whose poetry, rather than his personal character, grants him immortality.

The poem also challenges conventional ideas about poetry's influence, famously stating that "poetry makes nothing happen" while simultaneously affirming its lasting impact. Auden acknowledges the harsh realities of war and political instability but insists that poetry survives beyond these crises, continuing to inspire and shape future generations.

Ultimately, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* is both a tribute and a meditation on the function of poetry in a chaotic world. It fulfills the elegiac tradition by ensuring Yeats's remembrance while also offering a broader reflection on the endurance of art. In doing so, Auden crafts not only a personal homage to Yeats but also a timeless meditation on the power of poetry itself.