Epitaph on a Tyrant

SUMMARY

The tyrant was trying to create a sort of ideal society. The propaganda literature he came up with was very straightforward. He instinctively understood people's foolishness and flaws, and he was fascinated by soldiers and warfare. When he was in high spirits, the distinguished officials around him loudly mimicked his mood. When he was unhappy, small children suffered.

THEMES

TYRANNY AND VIOLENCE

W. H. Auden's "Epitaph on a Tyrant" is a satirical elegy for a dictator. Written in 1939, when fascism was overtaking Europe, the poem describes an unnamed dictator as a kind of deranged and narcissistic artist, determined to impose his cruel, simplistic vision of "Perfection" on all of society. Through its depiction of this one "Tyrant," the poem identifies features common to many dictators: skill at manipulating others, obsession with war, and a megalomania that forces their people to share—and suffer from—their private moods. In just a few vivid lines, the poem illustrates the danger and cruelty of tyrannical power.

The poem portrays dictators as ruthlessly ambitious perfectionists, bent on shaping all of society to their will. According to the speaker, the goal of the "Tyrant" was "Perfection, of a kind." He sought a society (or world) that perfectly mirrored his own personality and wishes. This isn't an ideal society from *others'* point of view, of course, but the tyrant is interested only in his own wants and needs.

The speaker adds that "the poetry he invented was easy to understand," both because it reflected the tyrant's crude ambition and because it was designed to appeal to a mass audience. Here, "poetry" implies not just literal verse but all the propaganda—literature, flags, films, anthems, etc.—that tyrants create or commission to glorify themselves. Such propaganda thrives on superficial ideas and images; it has none of the nuance or irony found in real poetry (like this poem). Its simplicity makes it "easy" for people of all ages and education levels to grasp, but it has no meaning or purpose beyond boosting the leader's power.

In general, the poem suggests, dictators pursue power through manipulation and violence. The tyrant "knew human folly like the back of his hand": in other words, dictators aren't stupid, despite the crudeness of their ideas and ambitions. They're highly effective manipulators who know how to turn others' flaws and mistakes to their own advantage. At the same time, the phrase "back of his hand" hints at the tyrant's willingness to subdue others by force (metaphorically, smack people down). This tyrant was also "greatly interested in armies and fleets." The implication is that dictators love war—and often *need* war in order to secure their power. They subjugate their own people with the help of soldiers, state police, etc., and try to subjugate other countries through invasion and war. They're fascinated by "armies and fleets" because these are the tools of their trade, so to speak.

The net result is a deeply sick and violent culture, in which everyone but the dictator is hostage to the dictator's moods and whims. "When [the tyrant] laughed," according to the speaker, "respectable senators burst with laughter." In other words, the mood of a dictator's subjects depends on the dictator's own mood. Others around the leader feel immense pressure to mimic the leader's behavior—even if they're dignified officials for whom such behavior is humiliating. (It's implied that if they don't "burst with laughter," no matter how fake, they may fall out of favor and endanger themselves.) Similarly, "when [the tyrant] cried the little children died in the streets." When dictators feel unhappy, they make their people suffer. They take out their own pain on others, and even innocent "little children" suffer the consequences of their anger.

In short, the kind of "Perfection" dictators seek is a nightmare for the people they rule. It's a fantasy of absolute control, pursued through manipulation and force. The resulting society may seem like utopia for the narcissistic leader, but it's a dystopia to everyone else.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Perfection, of a ...
... easy to understand;

The poem is framed as an "Epitaph on a Tyrant": a summary of the personality and legacy of an unnamed dictator. The dictator is most likely dead, but there are other possibilities, too. For example, he might be deposed, and this might be an "Epitaph" on his political career.

The speaker and dictator are unidentified, and the setting is unnamed. As a result, the poem makes a political statement

that transcends any particular place or time. It was written during the rise of fascism in 1930s Europe, but it could apply to any of countless dictators throughout history: it's a comment on the nature of tyrants and tyranny in general.

The speaker first says that the tyrant's goal was "Perfection, of a kind." This is a dryly ironic statement, and the caesuras after "Perfection" and "kind" add to its carefully hedged tone. The tyrant's goal was "Perfection" *as he defined it*, but his definition wasn't one most people would associate with the word. It's implied that "what he was after" was an ideal society: *his* ideal society, not anyone else's. He wanted total control over his country, the way perfectionist artists want total control over their work. He worked to shape his whole culture around his own power and ego—and get rid of anything that hindered that fantasy.

In service of his dark goal, he "invented" a kind of "poetry" that "was easy to understand." The word "poetry" here might be partly literal, but it's mostly figurative. It seems to be a metaphor (or synecdoche) for all the propagandistic art and literature with which the tyrant flooded his country. Dictatorial regimes typically use very simplistic ("easy to understand") anthems, logos, chants, works of art, etc. to push the leader's narrative, flatter the leader's vanity, and secure the leader's power. Together, these efforts amount to a kind of popular art or "poetry," lacking in the complexity, nuance, and humanity of *real* poetry. Its popularity may be organic, enforced, or both: in any case, it's "easy to understand" both for those who support the regime and those who oppose it. Its message is blunt: obey and glorify the leader.

Again, the poem imagines the tyrant as a kind of evil version of an artist or writer: one who bullies and manipulates all of society into following his narcissistic vision. (Some dictators have even started out as literal artists or writers; for example, Hitler was a painter as a young man, Stalin a poet.)

LINES 3-4

He knew human ...
... armies and fleets;

Lines 3-4 offer a glimpse of the tyrant's personality. Both lines appear simple at first but, on closer inspection, reveal a lot about the tyrant.

First, the speaker says that the tyrant "knew human folly like the back of his hand." Like the previous statement ("the poetry he invented was easy to understand"), this is a pretty, well, backhanded compliment! It suggests that the tyrant understood other people, but not in an empathetic way. Rather, he understood their weaknesses and flaws and knew how to manipulate them to his own advantage. Presumably, exploiting other people's "folly" is how he gained and maintained power.

The idiom "knew [it] like the back of his hand" means "knew it thoroughly," but in this context, the phrase could suggest other meanings, too. It might suggest the way the tyrant abused his people, as if smacking them with the back of his hand. The fact that he knew *others'* folly like the back of his *own* hand might imply, too, that he *shared* their folly on some level. He knew what made them foolish, corrupt, weak, etc. because he was all these things himself.

The speaker then adds that the tyrant "was greatly interested in armies and fleets." In other words, he loved war and military power. With ironic understatement, the speaker makes it sound as if armies, navies, etc. were simply a strong "interest[]" of the tyrant's. In reality, military power is always a crucial tool of tyranny: dictators typically use their militaries to subjugate their own countries and often try to invade and wage war against other countries as well. Without an army supporting them, moreover, dictators can't consolidate power or remain in power long. Many dictators are also sadists who enjoy harming others, using the military as a weapon. So a more literal version of this line might read: "[He] loved violence and depended on his military."

Notice that line 4, like line 2, begins with "And." Line 6 will begin with "And" as well. This repetition has a layering effect: the poet adds detail on detail to paint a miniature, yet vivid portrait of the tyrant. (He wanted X, *and* he did Y, *and* he was interested in Z, etc.)

LINES 5-6

When he laughed, ...
... in the streets.

The closing lines illustrate the tyrant's impact on others and on his country as a whole. The lines are set in parallel ("When he [...] when he"), juxtaposing his good moods with his bad:

> When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
> And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

The first of these lines describes high-ranking officials obsequiously mimicking the tyrant's mood. These might be "senators" in the Senate of ancient Rome—more of an advisory council than a legislature—or lawmakers in a modern nation posing as a democracy. The verb "bursts" hints at the forced, phony quality of the "laughter": these officials are making a show of their loyalty to the tyrant, not actually sharing his amusement.

Assonance stresses the phrase "respectable senators," drawing out the irony embedded in it. These senators' high offices may make them outwardly "respectable"—in fact, they may have deserved that adjective before the tyrant came to power—but their sycophantic deference to the tyrant has cost them all their self-respect. In a sense, it's even cost them their identity, because they simply align their moods and opinions with the

tyrant's. Their character is now as hollow as their power. Symbolically, they reflect the way tyrants hollow out the legitimacy and authority of institutions around them, such as legislatures that once held meaningful power in the government.

As for the tyrant's bad moods, they cause only disaster for others: "when he cried the little children died in the streets." That is, when the tyrant felt unhappy, he took it out on the people. Unable to channel his sadness, anger, etc. properly, he instead killed (directly and/or through his policies) his own and/or other countries' citizens—including innocent "little children." He translated his violent emotions into violent policy, likely with the help of the "armies and fleets" that fascinated him. The internal rhyme between "cried" and "died" reinforces the close connection between the tyrant's mood and the fate of his people. In general, this ending suggests that dictators trap their nations in warped personality cults, and in large-scale abusive environments where their volatility poses a constant threat.

The closing line also inverts a phrase from *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1856), by John Lothrop Motley, a once-popular 19th-century historian. Recounting the death of the Dutch prince William the Silent, Motley claims: "As long as he lived, he was the guiding-star of a whole brave nation, and when he died the little children cried in the streets." (Motley is arguing, then, that William was the *opposite* of a tyrant: a beloved leader. Yet the description still illustrates an outsized emotional connection between leader and citizens—a problem that extends beyond dictatorships, perhaps.) This allusion would have been fairly obscure even in Auden's time, so the reader isn't expected to know it offhand. But since Motley's original phrase sounds more natural—*leader dies, children cry* is a more predictable sequence of events than *leader cries, children die*—the reader may suspect the ironic reversal without knowing the source.

SYMBOLS

ARMIES AND FLEETS

"Armies and fleets" are large military units. "Fleets" can be groups of ships, land vehicles, or aircraft. (Notice how, once again, Auden uses language that blurs the ancient and the modern: long-ago empires had fleets, and so does a modern air force, for example.)

Here, the "armies and fleets" symbolize war, violence, and military power in general. The tyrant's deep "interest[]" in them reflects his murderous violence, as well as his desire to dominate both other countries and his own.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses repetition to paint a portrait of the tyrant, layer by layer. Every other line in the poem (lines 2, 4, and 6) begins with "And," as the speaker keeps adding further details about the tyrant's psyche and career. This steady accumulation of detail turns the poem into a rich, compressed character study.

Line 5 also contains a repetition, with a slight variation: "When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter." The pairing of "laugh" and "laughter," an example of the device polyptoton, illustrates how the senators *echoed* the tyrant—how closely their behavior mimicked his. More broadly, this device suggests the way the whole country's mood depended on (or conformed to) the tyrannical leader's.

Finally, the last two lines feature a parallel structure:

> When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
> And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

The repetition of "When he" allows the speaker to present an antithesis, or juxtaposition of opposites, with powerful clarity. Parallelism makes these lines sound as logical and balanced as an equation: when the tyrant was in a *good* mood, X happened; when he was in a *bad* mood, Y happened.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "When he," "laughed," "laughter"
- **Line 6:** "And," "when he"

ALLUSION

The poem never specifies which country or time period it's set in, though it's often read in connection with the rise of fascism in 1930s Europe. In this reading, the entire poem is alluding to the actions of men like Hitler and Mussolini, who used propaganda and violence to create their vision of "perfect" societies. The poetry of line 2, for example, could be a nod to the antisemitic propaganda the Nazis disseminated to dehumanize Jews. The poem reflects to the realities of Auden's time while also keeping things nonspecific in order to comment on dictatorship and tyranny in general.

Line 5 of the poem can be read as a historical allusion, although a very subtle one. The word "senators," however, could point to an ancient *or* modern setting. For example, the ancient Roman Empire featured the original Senate, though this was more a high-ranking advisory council than a legislature. Many modern

democracies (and autocracies disguised as democracies) also have "senates," or equivalent legislative bodies. This is because modern Western democracies, at the time of their founding, tended to look back to ancient Rome and Greece as models.

Auden is playing a kind of game, then: he's cleverly conflating ancient and modern times, suggesting that the poem could apply equally well to either. In other words, he's implying that tyranny hasn't changed much over the past couple thousand years.

The final line contains a more specific, obscure allusion. The phrase "when he cried the little children died in the streets" ironically flips expectations, even though it won't ring any bells in most contemporary readers' minds. That's because it would sound more natural to say, of a powerful leader, that "when he died the little children cried in the streets." And, in fact, the once-popular historian John Lothrop Motley *did* say this in his 1856 book *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*. Motley was describing the Dutch people's response to the death of prince William the Silent in 1584. It's an image of florid tribute to a beloved leader, so by reversing it, Auden subtly reinforces the idea that this tyrant is the *opposite* of lovable. Instead, the tyrant is petty and cruel, and his bad moods translate into pain and death for the innocent.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,"
- **Line 6:** "And when he cried the little children died in the streets."

ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance and internal rhyme for emphasis at a few key moments.

First, the long /oo/ sounds in "knew human" (line 3) slightly accentuate both words. The hint of extra emphasis suggests both how well the tyrant *knew* people's flaws—as a master manipulator, this was presumably his main area of knowledge—and how very *human* folly is. Throughout world history, people have fallen under the sway of tyrants, partly due to the kinds of weaknesses tyrants manipulate (greed, shortsightedness, conformity, etc.).

Similarly, the short /e/ sounds in "respectable senators" (line 5) make this phrase stand out a little. The effect is subtly ironic: by emphasizing how very *respectable* these senators were, the speaker emphasizes how much self-respect they *lost* in flattering the tyrant.

Finally, the internal rhyme between "cried" and "died" in line 6 reinforces the cause-effect relationship between these actions. When the tyrant "cried" (felt unhappy), even the young and innocent "died" from the violence he unleashed—as surely as one rhyme follows another.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "knew human"
- **Line 5:** "respectable senators"
- **Line 6:** "cried," "died"

CAESURA

The poem contains three caesuras, all of which contribute in small but significant ways to its meaning. The first two caesuras occur right off the bat:

> Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,

A comma follows the very first word of the poem, forcing the reader to pause over "Perfection" for a moment. The second comma falls just three words later, forcing the reader to linger over the phrase "of a kind." These effects create a hesitant rhythm, as the poem establishes a theme, then immediately qualifies it. The poem *will* in some way be about "Perfection," but the tyrant's "kind" of perfection isn't the kind normally associated with the word—in fact, it's brutally ironic. His ideal society is ideal for him alone.

Later, the caesura in line 5 sets up a subtle contrast with line 6:

> When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
> And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

There's a comma after "When he laughed," but none after the parallel phrase "when he cried." The contrast seems to make the cause-effect relationship all the more immediate in the second case. The tyrant's "cr[ying]" (his depression, frustration, etc.) and the murder of his people (even "little children") are part of one terrible, seemingly inevitable process.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Perfection, of," "kind, was"
- **Line 5:** "laughed, respectable"

VOCABULARY

Poetry (Line 2) - Here used as a metaphor (or synecdoche) for all the propagandistic literature, art, and iconography of the tyrant's regime. Together, these things add up to a very crude kind of popular art.

Folly (Line 3) - Foolishness; extreme misjudgment or error.

Fleets (Line 4) - A group of warships, warplanes, or other

military vehicles.

Senators (Line 5) - Members of a senate, meaning a legislature or government assembly. (The title "Senator" originated in the ancient Roman Republic and is still used in many modern democracies—as well as some dictatorships pretending to be democracies.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of a single six-line stanza, or sestet. It rhymes ABBCAC and uses a loose accentual meter, with four or five strong stresses per line.

These qualities add up to a brief and witty (though very bleak) "Epitaph." The kinds of epitaphs found in graveyards or on monuments have to be short enough to carve on a headstone, pedestal, etc. As a literary form, therefore, epitaphs tend to be pithy, like this one. The concise stanza and exact rhymes neatly clinch the poem's ideas, driving its point home in a forceful and memorable fashion.

METER

Auden was a master of metrical poetry, proficient in a vast array of poetic forms and techniques. In this poem, he chooses to keep his meter a little on the loose side. It's basically accentual verse: each line contains about the same number of stresses (either four or five), but the placement of stresses and the syllable count vary from line to line. Listen to lines 1-4, for example:

> Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
> And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
> He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
> And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;

Lines 1-3 each contain five strong beats; line 4 contains four. Otherwise, the rhythmic pattern is loose, more like prose than song. This slightly prose-like quality adds to the poem's flat, dry tone, which evokes a tragic political situation through understatement and irony.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's single stanza has an ABBCAC rhyme scheme.

Rhyme helps make this "Epitaph" sharp, witty, and memorable. It adds punch to the poem's observations about dictatorship; chilling as it is, the ending could even be compared to a grim punchline. (Interestingly, in Auden's collection *Another Time*, he listed "Epitaph on a Tyrant" under a section titled "Lighter Poems," so it could be considered extremely dark "light verse"!)

SPEAKER

The poem has an unnamed third-person speaker, presumably a stand-in for the poet. It's framed as an "Epitaph," so it mimics the impersonal or "objective" quality that many conventional epitaphs have.

Despite its seeming detachment, however, it's also a kind of elegy, expressing a quiet pity for "the little children" and other victims of the "Tyrant." The speaker also conveys an undertone of judgment: for example, in phrases like "Perfection, of a kind" (which suggests that the tyrant's definition of "Perfection" is far from the speaker's) and "He knew human folly like the back of his hand" (which suggests that tyrants gain power in part by duping their supporters and enablers).

SETTING

Although "Epitaph on a Tyrant" is a political poem, it doesn't identify a particular geographical or historical setting. This is a very deliberate choice on Auden's part. He wrote the poem practically on the eve of World War II, so it had clear topical relevance for its first readers: they might have seen the "Tyrant" as a portrait of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Joseph Stalin, or one of the other totalitarian leaders of that era. But by leaving its setting vague, the poem becomes more generally applicable to dictators and dictatorships throughout history. (Its reference to "senators" could even suggest an ancient Roman setting—though, of course, many modern governments have "senators" or a close equivalent as well.) Ultimately, the "Epitaph" could apply to just about any "Tyrant," so it comments on how tyranny works in human society more broadly.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) published "Epitaph on a Tyrant" in one of his most celebrated collections, *Another Time* (1940). Written in the period preceding, and just following, the outbreak of World War II, the book features some of Auden's best-known political poems, including "September 1, 1939," "Refugee Blues," and "The Unknown Citizen." It also contains such frequently anthologized and quoted classics as "Funeral Blues" and "Musée des Beaux Arts." The book groups "Epitaph on a Tyrant" under the heading "Lighter Poems"—a surprising categorization, since the poem has generally been read as a chilling, accurate portrait of dictatorship.

Auden is considered one of the masters of English-language poetry. He was a modernist who helped to define that early 20th-century movement, with its groundbreaking formal and stylistic experimentation. At the same time, he is highly

regarded for his facility with traditional verse forms. The wit, craftsmanship, and restless variety of his work gained him wide acclaim as both a poet and critic.

His early poetry was deeply political, and often explicitly socialist and anti-fascist. For a time, critics viewed him as the head of a so-called "Auden Group" of left-wing UK poets, which also included Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, and Cecil Day-Lewis. As his career went on, however, Auden grew skeptical of poetry's ability to effect social change. (Another poem from *Another Time*, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," famously claims that "poetry makes nothing happen"—though it's a qualified claim.) Even as Auden's work became increasingly personal and spiritual, it remained at the forefront of English-language literary culture.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Epitaph on a Tyrant" was written on the cusp of World War II, just eight months before the Nazi invasion of Poland. Although the invasion itself was shocking, flying in the face of the 1938 Munich Agreement that had sought to contain Hitler and Germany's territorial expansion, the war itself was not particularly surprising to many observers of the time. The conflict between fascist and left-wing/democratic forces had already sparked the Spanish Civil War (1937-1939), and the aggression of fascist dictators, particularly Germany's Adolf Hitler, had already embroiled Europe in an intense diplomatic crisis.

Hitler's rise to power in 1933 was part of an era of European history marked by the rise of fascist and totalitarian governments, from Benito Mussolini's Italy to Francisco Franco's Spain. A political philosophy defined by dictatorial power, political violence, the regimentation of society (e.g., the repression of speech), and intense nationalism, fascism led to rampant militarism and Germany's conquest of surrounding countries, including Austria and Czechoslovakia. Initially, other European powers, like France and England, sought to control the Nazis' violent expansion through policies of appeasement rather than confrontation. Hitler's invasion of Poland marked the end of that approach. Ultimately, World War II became a global conflict spanning multiple continents; by the war's conclusion, 40 to 60 million people had died.

"Epitaph on a Tyrant" was written against the backdrop of this violent period. It doesn't name a specific tyrant, and its reference to corrupt "senators" could apply to ancient Rome as well as modern republics. (Auden often used this strategy of conflating ancient and modern times; "The Fall of Rome" is another famous example.) Still, the poem seems to sum up a period of European history defined by dictators and their personality cults. The line about dictators' "poetry"—or crude propaganda—points to the deterioration of public language under totalitarian regimes. (One dictator of the era, Russia's Joseph Stalin, was actually a poet in his youth.) The ominous references to "armies and fleets," as well as "human folly," reflect an era of political breakdown and world war. Finally, the mention of "little children d[ying] in the streets" offers a kind of epitaph for the victims of that era.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "Epitaph on a Tyrant." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp6MbTxnZuI)
- About the Poet — Read a short biography of Auden at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/w-h-auden)
- An Auden Documentary — Watch a short film about Auden's life and career. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvezOvM_VgQ)
- Auden at the Poetry Foundation — An exhibit on Auden's life and poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- Auden and Political Poetry — Background on Auden's opposition to the fascism of the 1930s and 1940s and his conflicted relationship with his own political poems. (https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-wh-auden-hated-his-most-famous-political-poems)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- As I Walked Out One Evening
- Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)
- Musée des Beaux Arts
- Partition
- Refugee Blues
- September 1, 1939
- The More Loving One
- The Shield of Achilles
- The Unknown Citizen

HOW TO CITE

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