In Memory of W. B. Yeats

SUMMARY

W. B. Yeats died in the middle of winter. Streams were iced over, airports were nearly empty, and snowfall made public monuments look distorted. The temperature dropped in mercury thermometers as night fell. By any measurement we can make, the day Yeats died was chilly and grim.

Far away from his sickbed, wolves kept racing through woods full of evergreen trees, and the humble river flowed past fancy waterfronts as if refusing their temptations. All the people mourning Yeats ensured that his poems lived even as he died.

For Yeats, however, it was his final day as Yeats, a day filled with hospital workers and spreading news (about his failing health). Parts of his body turned against him. His conscious mind went blank, like vacant city squares, and adjacent parts of his mind fell quiet. His nerves and bloodstream stopped working. He died physically but lived on through his readers.

Now his legacy can be found in cities worldwide. His work belongs entirely to the feelings of strangers. Their appreciation will be a happy afterlife, different than the enchanted forests he wrote about (or the metaphorical woods we journey through in life), but he'll also be judged harshly by standards he wouldn't have understood. When an author dies, living people process his words and alter their meaning.

Still, during tomorrow's self-important hubbub, when stockbrokers yell in the stock exchange like animals, and poor people struggle in the ways they're pretty used to, and unfree people mostly believe they're free, several thousand Yeats admirers will look back on his death-day as a fairly notable event.

By any measurement we can make, the day Yeats died was chilly and grim.

You shared our follies, but your talent outlasted all of it—the charity of wealthy ladies, bodily decline, your own personality. The chaos of Ireland spurred you to write poems. Despite all you wrote, Ireland is still full of chaos and bad weather, since poetry doesn't actually change anything. It lives on in the metaphorical region (of the mind or culture) where it comes from, a fertile area where the powerful would never want to meddle. It flows down like a river from the pasturelands of loneliness and the hubs of sorrow, from painful inner places (and/or fierce communities) that we devote our lives to. It flows on, a process, like speech or the mouth of a river.

Earth, take in a very special person: W. B. Yeats is now buried. May this overflowing source of Irish poetry lie empty at last.

In the terrible darkness of our times, all the aggressors of Europe threaten each other like angry dogs. Every nation on earth waits tensely, isolated by its loathing of others.

Everyone's expression reflects shameful ways of thinking, and tears of compassion freeze over in everyone's eyes.

Poet, get to the bottom of (or pursue virtue throughout) this dark time. Convince us, with your uninhibited voice, to celebrate in spite of everything.

Carefully cultivate your language, turning the curse that hangs over humanity into something fruitful. Sing about humanity's failures with passionate sorrow.

Wherever emotion has dried up, let it flow and heal again. Show free minds how to rejoice within the bounds of time and fate.

THEMES

ART, FAME, AND POSTERITY

"In Memory of W. B. Yeats" memorializes the Irish writer William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), one of the most celebrated poets in the English language. By the time he died, Yeats was what he called a "public man": a Nobel Prize winner who had been an outspoken Irish nationalist, senator, theater manager, and more. Auden's elegy wrestles with Yeats's legacy as a public figure, and by extension, with the public role of famous writers. It stresses that the death of a great poet doesn't dominate the headlines, nor does the life of a great poet alter history in any obvious way. And while great poets live on in subtler ways in the public imagination, they forfeit control over their legacies when they die. It's the living, Auden's poem suggests, who ultimately get to decide what an artist's life and work meant.

Despite Yeats's fame, Auden claims that only "A few thousand" people will remember the day of his death. He won't be as widely and publicly mourned as a celebrity or political leader (though Yeats did enter politics for a time). Indeed, Auden shows the world going on much as it did before Yeats's death. The poet hasn't even radically reshaped his own country: "Mad Ireland" originally "hurt [him] into poetry," but after he dies, "Ireland has her madness and her weather still." Yeats couldn't politically or socially transform Ireland in the way he hoped.

Still, "The death of the poet was kept from his poems": that is, the poems endure as if their writer hadn't died. They've taken on an independent life, thanks to the "mourning tongues" of admirers reciting them. Great art, Auden's poem implies, outlives its maker. Yet Auden also emphasizes that, when great poets like Yeats die, they can no longer revise or refashion their own image: they belong to the public they courted.

Building on this idea, Auden's poem metaphorically compares

Yeats's dying body to a country in crisis: "The provinces of his body revolted, / The squares of his mind were empty," and so on. These images imply that Yeats had evolved from an individual into a public institution and that his death completed this transformation: he was no longer "himself," just the part of himself he poured into literature.

Auden adds that Yeats "became his admirers" at the moment of his death, and that "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living." In other words, writers live on through their readers, in ways they can't fully anticipate or control. They are "given over to unfamiliar affections" and "punished under a foreign code of conscience"—that is, loved in unexpected ways and judged harshly by unexpected standards. The way "snow disfigured the public statues" on Yeats's death-day reinforces the idea that public figures, such as Yeats, can't control their images after death. Time will transfigure and sometimes "disfigure" their legacies.

Though it's mainly about Yeats as an artist, the poem also subtly acknowledges Yeats's checkered political legacy. Yeats's politics were complex but often anti-democratic, and late in life, he flirted with fascist sympathies. Auden hints at these failings with the claim that Yeats will "be punished under a foreign code of conscience." (The poem also originally contained several stanzas, which Auden later deleted, suggesting that posterity would have to forgive Yeats's politics.) Yet Auden insists that Yeats's "gift" has "survived" his "silly" personal and political foibles—the ones he shares with "us," his readers.

Finally, Auden assigns Yeats, or the "poet" generally, various tasks on behalf of his people, again suggesting that great poets outlive their deaths. Even after formally "la[ying]" Yeats "to rest," Auden addresses the "poet" as if he were alive and had work to do, thus awarding him a kind of literary immortality. Auden urges the poet to "persuade," "Sing" to, "heal[]," and "Teach" readers, both in a particular historical crisis (the eve of World War II) and throughout the whole human drama. To Auden, a great poet like Yeats never truly dies; even if his fame or reputation fluctuates, he endures forever in the public mind.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-31
- Lines 32-41
- Lines 42-65

THE POWER AND LIMITS OF POETRY

While summing up Yeats's legacy as a public poet, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" reflects on the power and limitations of poetry in general. It does so partly through its most famous claim: "poetry makes nothing happen." But Auden's poem also qualifies this claim, imagining poetry as its own, surreptitious "way of happening" apart from the visible events of politics and history. By expressing "Raw" private emotions, this poem suggests, poetry voices the inner truth of public life—and makes that life more bearable.

Auden's poem admits that the short-term impact of poetry is limited. In fact, it contends that poetry has no historical impact at all. "A few thousand will think of" Yeats's death day, the poem remarks, "As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual." For everyone else, including the suffering "poor" and the busy financial "brokers," the poet's death will get lost—at least initially—"in the importance and noise of tomorrow." The life and death of a poet, even a public one, will always get buried under more outwardly "importan[t]" events. "In Memory" further claims that Yeats's poetry didn't materially change Ireland's history or politics—and that, in general, "poetry makes nothing happen."

Yet Auden's poem credits poetry with a different kind of power than the political kind: the power to voice private truths, creating a parallel or underground record of human experience. He repeatedly adds that poetry "survives" despite its seeming ineffectuality. He imagines it as a river "flow[ing]" through a place "where executives / Would never want to tamper"—a *psychological* region that powerful history-makers want nothing to do with. (Presumably, it would discomfort them or even challenge their claim to power.) By taking on the burden of "isolation," "griefs," and profound "belie[fs]," poetry becomes "A way of happening, a mouth." It doesn't *make* anything happen, historically speaking, but it's another *way* history plays out in human life. Implicitly, it creates a different and truer narrative than the one defined by the powerful.

Finally, Auden suggests that poetry can help people *cope* with history, including tragedies and political crises. Gesturing toward the gathering "nightmare" of World War II, he instructs the poet (and, by extension, poetry) to fulfill an important mission. He suggests that poetry might counteract the "Intellectual disgrace" of the times and thaw the "pity" that lies "frozen in each eye" (i.e., move people to empathetic tears). Though poetry can't lift the "curse" that seems to hang over humanity, he implies that it can make that curse artistically fruitful and our shared suffering tolerable. In calling on the poet to "persuade us to rejoice," "Sing of human unsuccess / In a rapture of distress," and "Teach the free man how to praise" within "the prison of his days," Auden argues that poets hold a timeless social role. They transform suffering into song and find redemptive meaning—even a kind of joy—in the endless human struggle.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 24-29
- Lines 34-41
- Lines 46-65

HUMAN TRAGEDY AND SUFFERING

"In Memory of W. B. Yeats" places Yeats's death in a much larger context: both a precarious historical moment and the overall history of human suffering. Yeats died early in 1939, the year World War II broke out after years of violence in Europe. Auden regrets his loss at a "dark" hour of human history, but he has no illusions that Yeats was any kind of savior-figure, and he portrays the human experience itself as irrevocably tragic. (Or a mix of tragic and farcical, due to the "sill[iness]" of human nature, which Yeats shared with the rest of "us.") In the poem's view, art can mitigate human sorrow and failure, but it can't erase them—and neither can anything else.

The poem positions Yeats's death as one more ominous tragedy in the menacing pre-war period. The "dark cold day" of his death seems to sum up the mood of the times. "In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark" describes the run-up to WWII (which began with smaller conflicts and invasions). As dictatorships like Hitler's consolidate and wage violence, "the living nations wait"—seemingly for catastrophe—in isolation and "hate." The poem also gestures toward Yeats's own controversial politics, which could be undemocratic, quasi-fascist, or just plain "silly." In short, Yeats was a great poet who spoke meaningfully to his troubled era, but he was far from perfect himself, and now he's gone.

Yet Auden doesn't limit his commentary to his particular period: he stresses that suffering endures in spite of *anything* art (or politics) accomplishes. It's an unalterable part of the human experience, not just a fact of one nation or era. Auden notes, for example, that Yeats was born into an Ireland whose political "madness" preceded him and will survive him. Yeats's death also occurs in a world where, for example, "the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed / And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom." Human life, for Auden, is determined by fate, and pain and injustice are part of that fate. He returns to this theme in the poem's final lines: "In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise." (In other words, we can reconcile ourselves to our fate, but not escape it.) Most broadly of all, humanity belongs to a natural world full of unalterable danger and cruelty, where predators like "wolves" forever "[run] on through the evergreen forests."

Fundamentally, then, the poem views human life as a never-ending tragedy—a story of "unsuccess," which art can beautify but cannot change.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 24-31
- Line 32
- Lines 34-36
- Lines 46-65

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

He disappeared in ...
... dark cold day.

Auden's elegy for "W. B. Yeats," the famous Irish poet, begins by describing the weather on the day Yeats died. This first section of the poem is written in free verse; its long, detailed lines sound a little like prose reportage, though they contain more figurative language than journalism.

As the first line reports, Yeats died "in the dead of winter": January 28, 1939. (Notice that Auden says "He **disappeared**," a more eerie and ghostly verb than "died" or "passed away.") The imagery of the following lines conjures up a chilly scene:

> The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
> And snow disfigured the public statues;
> The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.

The idiom "the dead of winter" makes the season itself seem morbid—a symbolically appropriate setting for the death of a great poet. (After all, poets work with symbolism and natural imagery all the time.) Indeed, as Yeats died, the "day" itself was metaphorically "dying" along with him. Auden personifies the day here, imagining it as a sick patient with a "mercury" thermometer in its "mouth," its temperature dropping as it expired (i.e., as night fell). The whole atmosphere of this "dark cold day" seems to reflect the fate of a single person.

At the same time, nothing in the scene acknowledges Yeats's death in any literal way. There's very little human presence here: "the airports [are] almost deserted." The "frozen" water makes the *mood* of the scene feel icy and repressed. Meanwhile, the "snow disfigur[ing] the public statues" seems both realistic and symbolic. It's a reminder that public figures, like Yeats, lose control of their images after they die; their reputations can be distorted in all sorts of ways. It's also a sign that nature doesn't respect or care about human fame.

Given all this context, "He disappeared" seems to indicate that Yeats slipped away unnoticed. The poem will go on to suggest that this is partly true and partly untrue. The whole elegy will wrestle with the question of poets' influence (or lack thereof). Do great poets change the world, or does their work simply vanish into an indifferent culture? For Auden, who was deeply influenced by Yeats, this question has powerful relevance to his own work. He asserts that Yeats's death-day was grim according to "What instruments we have"—not just thermometers, but metaphorical instruments like literary judgement. As far as critics can judge, in other words, the loss of this poet is a terrible loss for the world. But the assertion is tentative, suggesting that "What instruments we have" are

limited. Only time will tell what Yeats's death—and life—might mean to the wider culture.

LINES 7-11

Far from his ...
... from his poems.

The second stanza continues to juxtapose Yeats's death with other events going on at the same time. These events may initially seem random and unrelated, but they're heavily symbolic.

The descriptions of the running wolves and the "peasant river" both imply that nature continued to take its course despite Yeats's "illness"—in fact, despite anything that was happening in human culture. When we grow ill and die, the poem suggests, the world goes on without us, no matter how important we may be in human terms. As symbols of nature's permanence, the "evergreen" forests and the perpetually flowing "river" contrast with the transience of human life, fame, and culture. The predatory "wolves" might also represent nature's callousness and harshness (unlike dogs, their domesticated relatives, *wolves* don't care what happens to people).

Meanwhile, Auden compares the river to a humble "peasant" gliding past "fashionable quays"—fancy waterfronts—without being "[]tempted" by their offerings. This metaphor has a complicated relationship to Yeats's work, and to Auden's opinion of that work:

- According to Auden, Yeats "extolled the virtues of the peasant," but this celebration was rather hypocritical since Yeats preferred the company of his rich patrons.
- So, in the metaphor, the river seems to represent the virtues Yeats praised while suggesting that, *unlike* Yeats, both nature and the actual working classes remain "untempted" by wealth and fashion. (See the Symbols section of this guide for more.)
- The French loan word "quays" might also be a subtle reminder that Yeats died in France, not his native Ireland.

The stanza adds one more detail about the events surrounding Yeats's death: "By mourning tongues / The death of the poet was kept from his poems." This twisty sentence boils down to a simple idea: when Yeats died, mourners praised him and recited his work, ensuring that the *poems* lived on even though the poet didn't. It's as if the poems remained so vibrant that they didn't even receive the news of Yeats's death. They had attained their own, independent life, which went on without him just as nature did.

LINES 12-17

But for him ...
... became his admirers.

Lines 12-17 depict the actual scene of Yeats's death. The first two stanzas have described surrounding and simultaneous events, affording a wider perspective on the tragedy. Now Auden narrates what Yeats's death-day was like *for the dying*: "for him it was his last afternoon as himself, / An afternoon of nurses and rumours." In other words, January 28, 1939, was the last date when Yeats was conscious and self-aware. As he lay ill (in a French hotel), "nurses" and "rumours" surrounded him—presumably, rumors of his deteriorating condition and imminent death.

Next, Auden deploys a powerful extended metaphor, comparing Yeats's deteriorating body to a country in crisis:

- "The provinces of his body" would be its extremities as opposed to its central hubs (brain, heart, etc.). They began to "revolt[]," or turn against him, as though a civil war were brewing in his body.
- Next, his brain shut down. His conscious "mind" grew "empty" as city "squares" during a dangerous crisis, and its "Suburbs" (perhaps his unconscious mind) fell eerily "Silen[t]" as well.
- Then his body lost sensation altogether: "The current of his feeling failed," like a country's public utilities going dark. On the literal level, this image suggests that his nerves stopped working and his blood stopped flowing (i.e., his heart stopped).
- Finally, at the moment of his death, "he became his admirers." In other words, the poet survived only in the minds and hearts of his readers; he lived on through the work they kept alive.

Besides vividly portraying the dying process, Auden's extended metaphor contains other important overtones:

- First, it gestures toward the crises that beset Yeats's Ireland during his lifetime—for example, the Easter Rebellion of 1916, which Yeats recounted in a famous poem. After a lifetime of experiencing upheaval in his country, Auden suggests, Yeats felt the upheaval come home to his own body.
- The metaphor also suggests that Yeats, through his literary celebrity and political activity, had become a kind of Irish public institution. At least to "his admirers," his individual death seemed as significant as the collapse of a nation.

Notice that this stanza is dense with assonance ("last afternoon," "provinces"/"body") and alliteration ("squares"/"Silence"/"suburbs," "feeling failed"). Repetition, including anaphora ("The provinces [...] The squares [...] The current"), builds a sense of dramatic urgency around Yeats's death scene. These effects give the free verse an emphatic, percussive quality, evoking the patient's distress—and perhaps the rhythmic power of Yeats's poetry.

LINES 18-23

Now he is ...
... of the living.

The fourth stanza continues to imagine Yeats's literary afterlife. Line 17 claimed that Yeats "became his admirers," or lived on through his readers, after he died. Now Auden elaborates on this idea, contemplating the famous poet's legacy—and possibly imagining his own future legacy as well!

According to Auden, Yeats is "Now [...] scattered among a hundred cities / And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections." That is, he's read around the world, and he's now completely at the mercy of strangers' feelings. (He was *partly* at their mercy while he was alive, the poem implies, but he can no longer *change* anyone's feelings about his work.) He's a global icon now, no longer a private, living individual.

In this strange afterlife, Auden's poem declares, he will "find his happiness in another kind of wood"—perhaps meaning a different kind of woods than Yeats wrote about. For example, in one of his last poems, "Cuchulain Comforted," Yeats imagined a hero who dies and finds himself in a forest, surrounded by ghosts who turn to birds. Auden may be alluding to this or other Yeats works, or perhaps to Dante's famous metaphor comparing middle age to a dark wood (the *Inferno*, Canto I). Regardless, he's implying that Yeats has departed his earthly writing life for a "happ[y]" immortality as a legendary writer.

Yet he adds that Yeats will also be "punished under a foreign code of conscience." In other words, Yeats's literary afterlife won't be all heavenly: he'll also face the judgement, not of God, but of unknown readers. His work will be held to standards he wouldn't have understood, and will at times be found wanting under this "foreign code of conscience." Like line 9, this phrase seems to be a subtle swipe at Yeats's politics. As much as Auden admired Yeats's poetry, he disapproved of the older writer's worldview, which had become increasingly reactionary and even fascist toward the end of his life. Writing on the cusp of World War II, Auden predicts that the "conscience[s]" of some readers, including those in "foreign" countries, will judge Yeats harshly on political and moral grounds.

In short, Auden stresses that writers lose control of their legacies after they die. Once the individual disappears, the body of work remains, to be praised or denounced in different times and places. In another metaphor, Auden imagines such work being *processed* or *digested* by the world: "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living." Living readers adapt the language of the dead to new and unforeseen contexts, altering its meaning in the process.

LINES 24-29

But in the ...
... something slightly unusual.

The fifth stanza once again puts Yeats's fame and legacy in a larger perspective. As a poet himself, Auden understands that the death of a poet—even a very famous one—seldom rocks the world. He concedes that, as much as Yeats meant to "his admirers," his death will largely get lost "in the importance and noise of to-morrow." (Notice the ironic undertone here: the world's sense of what's "importan[t]" and worth making "noise" over doesn't necessarily align with Auden's.)

In fact, whole sectors of society pay little attention to a death like Yeats's. As examples, Auden mentions "brokers" (stockbrokers) "roaring like beasts on the floor of the bourse" (the floor of a stock exchange like the old Paris Bourse). These finance professionals are focused on money and on making the rich richer; they don't care much for poetry. Auden's simile makes them sound primitive and aggressive, perhaps by contrast with the poet's gentler work.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, "the poor," enduring "the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed," don't have much time for poetry, either. (But the grimly ironic phrase "fairly accustomed" suggests they aren't *happy* with their situation; more might care about the literary life if afforded the opportunity.)

Finally, Auden generalizes about society as a whole: "each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom." People aren't truly free, this metaphor implies; their lives are determined by chance and social circumstance. Still, individuals can just about persuade themselves otherwise—especially if they retreat inward and ignore the system they're part of.

Within this broader social context, Auden estimates that "A few thousand" people "will think of" Yeats's death-day "As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual." Those people might include some of the rich, the poor, or the classes in between—but there won't be very many of them. (Lots of people vividly remember the day a leader or celebrity died, but few can say the same about a poet.) All in all, then, the immediate impact of a poet's death is relatively muted: some readers will care deeply, but society as a whole won't exactly screech to a halt. Auden is suggesting that poets have a slower, subtler impact; they don't change history in any obvious way.

LINES 30-31

What instruments we ...
... dark cold day.

Lines 30-31 close out the first section of the poem by repeating the closing lines of the first stanza. This repetition encourages the reader to consider these lines more closely:

> What instruments we have agree
> The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Thanks to the intervening stanzas, the statement has gained greater resonance. The haunting images in the third stanza have cast Yeats's death as both a private horror and a public

tragedy. Lines 10-11, 17, and 22-23 have all paid tribute to Yeats's lasting impact on his readers and "admirers." Auden has conceded that Yeats's actual death-day may get lost in the historical shuffle for all but "A few thousand" fans. Meanwhile, nature doesn't care about *any* human death. Still, from Auden's point of view, something depressing and chilling—metaphorically "dark" and "cold"—has happened here.

The repetition also encourages a closer reading of the phrase "What instruments we have." The first time around, this phrase referred, at least partly, to literal instruments like thermometers. Now it's clear that Auden is also talking about metaphorical instruments, such as emotion, judgement, and taste. Writing in the immediate wake of Yeats's death, Auden knows these instruments are fallible, and their "readings" of Yeats's legacy may be revised by later generations. Still, he's doing his best to apply them in this poem.

LINES 32-34

You were silly ...
... Yourself.

Part II of the poem brings a shift in style, tone, and perspective. Throughout Part I, Auden narrated Yeats's death in the third person, in prose-like free verse that sounded like a cross between a news report and an essay. Now, the verse becomes a bit more formal: Auden takes up a loose accentual meter (with about five beats per line) and introduces slant rhymes ("all"/"still," "decay"/"poetry," etc.).

At the same time, the tone becomes more familiar. Auden addresses Yeats in the second person (via apostrophe), with a mix of respect and chiding:

> You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
> The parish of rich women, physical decay,
> Yourself.

In Auden's view, Yeats achieved the heights of literary success in spite of himself. He wasn't some saintly, unapproachable figure. Instead, he was "silly like us"; he had many of the same flaws as his readers and fellow writers. Auden's prose criticism names some specific aspects of Yeats's thinking that he found ridiculous, including Yeats's reactionary politics and belief in the supernatural. For example, here's a mock-prosecutorial passage from "The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats," which Auden wrote around the same time as the poem:

> What are we to say of a man whose earliest writings attempted to revive a belief in fairies and whose favourite themes were legends of barbaric heroes with unpronounceable names [...] ? But you may say, [Yeats] was young; youth is always romantic; its silliness is part of its charm. Perhaps it is. Let us forgive the youth, then, and consider the mature man, from whom we have a right to expect wisdom and common sense. Gentlemen, it is hard to be charitable when we find that the deceased, far from outgrowing his folly, has plunged even deeper.

In lines 33-34, Auden also claims that Yeats succeeded despite "The parish of rich women" (the patronage of his aristocratic supporters, such as the Lady Augusta Gregory); despite his "physical decay" (what Yeats called his "Bodily decrepitude"); and even despite "[Him]self"! In other words, Yeats's flawed politics and personality threatened to undermine his achievement. Nevertheless, his poetic "gift survived it all."

If this sounds like an ambivalent tribute, it is. In real life, Auden didn't know Yeats well and had extremely mixed feelings about him. He even claimed: "I have only once encountered pure evil in a person, and that was when I met Yeats." At a time when fascist politics were on the rise, he found Yeats's reactionary worldview (especially outside his poems) alarming and disgraceful. Still, he never denied the high quality of Yeats's poetry—and always admitted that it had shaped his own work.

LINES 34-36

Mad Ireland hurt ...
... makes nothing happen:

Still apostrophizing Yeats, Auden claims: "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry." In other words, the political turmoil of Yeats's country wounded him emotionally. This wound, in turn, drove him to become a poet, one who embraced Irish culture and wrote scores of political poems. (A keen Irish nationalist, Yeats even served as a Senator in the Irish Free State after Ireland gained a measure of independence from Britain.)

Despite all his impassioned writing, however, "Ireland has her madness and her weather still." In other words, Yeats's poetry never fundamentally altered his homeland. He witnessed some momentous political changes in Ireland, but they occurred independent of his writing. And to Auden (an English observer with his own biases), Ireland looks as "Mad" and tumultuous now as it ever was.

This reflection prompts the poem's most famous statement: "poetry makes nothing happen." Often quoted out of context, this statement does *not* imply that poetry is trivial or meaningless. Rather, it implies that poetry has no direct social, political, or historical impact. Poems aren't a consequential form of activism, for example, no matter how much writers like Yeats might wish otherwise. Auden expands on this claim in "The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats":

> For art is a product of history, not a cause. Unlike some other products, technical inventions for example, it does not re-enter history as an effective agent, so that the question whether art should or should not be propaganda is unreal. The case [against

> Yeats] rests on the fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen, whereas the honest truth, gentlemen, is that, if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged.

LINES 36-41

it survives ...
... happening, a mouth.

Having argued that "poetry makes nothing happen," Auden now tries to clarify what poetry is and does.

For one thing, "it survives." Auden uses this phrase twice in the long passage following the colon in line 36. The repetition stresses that, if nothing else, poetry is resilient. Even if it doesn't change history, it endures as a permanent feature of human life.

For another thing, poetry "flows" (the other main verb in this passage). Through an extended metaphor, Auden imagines poetry as a kind of river running through a secluded landscape:

> [...] 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,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth.

This landscape might be psychological, cultural, or both. That is, the source of poetry—the "valley of its making"—might be a mental region (one's private emotions, the unconscious, etc.) and/or an area outside the cultural mainstream. Regardless, Auden stresses that "executives / Would never want to tamper" there. However inconsequential it may seem, poetry comes from a place that unnerves the powerful (society's "executives") and deters them from meddling in its "making." (Auden may be implying that the powerful are scared of their deepest feelings and/or the cultural margins—both potential threats to their power.)

Like a river, poetry "flows" from difficult emotions, such as "isolation" (compared here to lonely "ranches") and "griefs" (compared to "busy" hubs, suggesting that grief is hard work and demands a lot of mental activity). It springs from "Raw towns that we believe and die in": vulnerable, hardscrabble places on the frontiers of the mind and culture. In other words, the sources of poetry aren't always pretty—they may include "Raw" emotions or psychological wounds—but poets devote their lives to them. They're willing to live vulnerably in order to make authentic art.

And so, Auden concludes, poetry "survives" as "A way of happening, a mouth." It doesn't *make* anything happen in a political sense, but it endures as its own *way* of happening, a process unto itself. It might be imagined as a separate record of human life—the private, interior life—playing out in parallel with the official historical record. And it goes on perpetually, like a "mouth" that never stops speaking, or the "mouth" of a river that never stops flowing. (Yes, "mouth" is a pun here; Auden once wrote that "Good poets have a weakness for bad puns.")

LINES 42-45

Earth, receive an ...
... of its poetry.

Part III of the poem brings another formal transition. Rather than the free verse of Part I or the slant-rhymed accentual verse of Part II, this final section plays out in strict, AABB-rhymed quatrains (four-line stanzas). Its heavy, dirge-like trochaic meter (DUM-da, DUM-da rhythm) establishes a solemn mood.

These shifts signal that Part III is the most formal section of the elegy: the part where Auden "la[ys]" his fellow poet "to rest" and reflects on the ultimate meaning of his work. The form of this section also imitates one of Yeats's last poems, "Under Ben Bulben," which he wrote as an epitaph for himself.

This first quatrain (lines 42-45) apostrophizes the "Earth," asking Mother Nature to "receive" Yeats and let him rest in peace. It praises Yeats as an "honoured guest" among the dead, again recognizing his literary greatness. At the same time, it acknowledges that Yeats's career is over: "the Irish vessel" that was Yeats's body and mind now lies "Emptied of its poetry." (The "vessel" metaphor probably suggests that Yeats was a *container* for poetry, like a cup or vase whose contents have spilled out. But it might also be comparing Yeats to a *ship*, whose cargo has been unloaded and whose voyage is done.)

Apart from the title, this stanza contains the only mention of Yeats's name. The poem continues to toggle between the personal and the general, simultaneously reflecting on Yeats's individual legacy and the function of poetry as a whole.

LINES 46-49

In the nightmare ...
... in its hate;

After the personal focus on Yeats in the previous stanza, lines 46-49 zoom out again. Suddenly, Auden juxtaposes Yeats's death with the broader political climate of 1939. Grim metaphors conjure up a sinister atmosphere:

> In the nightmare of the dark
> All the dogs of Europe bark,
> And the living nations wait,
> Each sequestered in its hate;

Auden wrote the poem during the run-up to World War II, when the mood in "Europe" was very "dark" indeed. Dictators

like Hitler and Mussolini had been consolidating power and threatening neighbors, and many Europeans understood that another world war was imminent. (A preview had been raging for the previous two years in the form of the Spanish Civil War.)

Here, Auden depicts aggressive European leaders as "dogs" madly "bark[ing]" at one another, while the "nations" of the continent (or globe) remain "sequestered" (isolated) in "hate." These nations are still "living," by contrast with the recently deceased Yeats, but death seems to hang ominously in the air. All in all, the political climate is a "nightmare."

The political breakdown of Europe provides a second dramatic occasion for the poem, along with the death of Yeats. The juxtaposition of these two events—one private and personal, the other public and global—might suggest that a whole era is dying along with Ireland's foremost poet. It also sets up Auden's reflections on the poet's role in a chaotic modern world.

LINES 50-53

Intellectual disgrace ...
... in each eye.

Lines 50-53 continue to describe the climate of pre-WWII Europe. Sounding like a cross between a man-on-the-street reporter and a prophet of disaster, Auden declares that "Intellectual disgrace / Stares from every human face." In other words, everyone wears an expression that reflects shameful thoughts and beliefs (or an unwillingness to stand *against* such thoughts and beliefs). People look hateful, arrogant, cowardly, or some combination of the above.

Auden adds that "the seas of pity lie / Locked and frozen in each eye." This image suggests that people are repressing their compassion. As millions suffer and die, they may *want* to weep tears of "pity," but they either cannot or will not give in to that impulse. It's as if their tears have "frozen" over. The age has become callous and ruthless—as emotionally arrested as it is "Intellectual[ly] disgrace[ful]."

Auden's language here probably alludes to an often-quoted statement by the writer Franz Kafka (1883-1924): "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us." Kafka meant that good literature can thaw and release our repressed emotions. In the following stanzas, Auden will urge poets to write poetry that does just that.

Auden might also be alluding to Dante's *Inferno* (Cantos XXXII-XXXIV), in which the lowest circle of hell, reserved for traitors and betrayers, is an icy lake. The damned souls in this lake cry tears that freeze over in their eye sockets, preventing them from seeing or weeping further. If Auden has Dante in mind here, he's implying that Europe has descended into its own kind of hell. He may also be implying that the refusal of compassion is a form of betrayal.

LINES 54-57

Follow, poet, follow ...
... us to rejoice;

In lines 54-57, Auden begins another apostrophe, this time to an unnamed "poet." As in Part II, he may be addressing the spirit of Yeats, implying that the poet has gained literary immortality. Alternatively, Auden could be addressing the "poet" as a generic figure, or any particular poet who happens to be reading this poem. Finally, Auden could be addressing himself—giving himself a pep talk of sorts.

Regardless, Auden has an assignment for the "poet," both in general and during this bleak period. He issues a series of emphatic directions, underscored by repetition:

> Follow, poet, follow right
> To the bottom of the night,
> With your unconstraining voice
> Still persuade us to rejoice;

Metaphorically, seeking out "the bottom of the night" means exploring evil, suffering, and despair to their fullest. (If the previous lines were a Dante reference, Auden may be continuing that allusion here; in the *Inferno*, the poet Dante follows the poet Virgil to the bottom of hell.) The phrase "follow right / to the bottom" could mean two things: *follow directly* or *pursue virtue* (i.e., what is "right"). Even though Auden believes that "poetry makes nothing happen," he's carving out a virtuous and potentially even heroic role for the modern poet.

Next, Auden urges the poet to lift "your unconstraining voice" and "Still persuade us to rejoice," despite the evils of the world. Here, "unconstraining" means uninhibited or unsparing; it suggests that the poet should not hold back or treat anything as taboo. In fact, the poet should bring some form of joy to "us"—readers or society as a whole—at a time when joy seems all but blasphemous.

LINES 58-61

With the farming ...
... rapture of distress;

Auden's instructions to the "poet" continue, almost as if he's issuing orders in a time of war. "With the farming of a verse," he instructs, "Make a vineyard of the curse." In other words, through the careful cultivation ("farming") of language, turn the "curse" that seems to hang over humanity into a metaphorical "vineyard." Make it somehow fruitful and rewarding.

Auden doesn't specify what humanity's "curse" is, but he's likely alluding to the biblical Fall of Man, including the curse God lays on Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:13-19). Among other things, God sentences mankind to "eat bread" by "the sweat of thy face," or toil at farming in order to survive. Auden is implying, then, that poets must labor to turn human evil into beautiful art. He's also

echoing Yeats's poem "Adam's Curse," which stresses the hard work poetry requires:

> I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
> Better go down upon your marrow-bones
> And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
> Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
> For to articulate sweet sounds together
> Is to work harder than all these [...]

Auden is suggesting that, as difficult as it is, the poet's task may be partially redemptive in the end.

Similarly, Auden urges the poet to "Sing of human unsuccess / In a rapture of distress." The word "unsuccess," of course, is an ironically understated synonym for "failure." Part of the poet's task, then, is to elevate the tragedy of the human experience. Poets must find ways to convert human failure into musical language, "Sing[ing]" our sad fate with appropriate "distress"—but also "raptur[ous]" passion.

LINES 62-65

In the deserts ...
... how to praise.

The poem closes with two more instructions to the "poet." Anaphora and parallelism make this quatrain especially rhythmic and emphatic:

> In the deserts of the heart
> Let the healing fountain start,
> In the prison of his days
> Teach the free man how to praise.

According to Auden's poem, poets must find ways to "heal[]" and comfort readers—or perhaps their entire culture. They must do so by putting readers back in touch with their emotions, as if irrigating "the deserts of the heart" with "fountains" of feeling. For example, they must help readers feel the "pity" they've been repressing (lines 52-53). The idea that poetry should have this cathartic, healing effect traces back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the earliest surviving work of literary theory in Western culture.

Finally, Auden urges poets to help readers accept and even celebrate their fate. For humanity, "days" are a metaphorical "prison"; we can't reverse time or alter our own mortality, and political repression and violence often confine our lives even further. But poetry, according to Auden, can help "the free man" find happiness within this prison. In this context, "free" might imply free-thinking, free-spirited, and so on; or it might imply that humans have free will despite their external circumstances.

Though the poem's final word is "praise," Auden's outlook isn't exactly rosy. Learning how to *praise* a prison isn't the same thing as learning how to *escape* it. Auden is assigning the poet a lofty task, but also a realistic one. He isn't retracting his earlier claim that "poetry makes nothing happen," just affirming that poets have an honorable role to play within a troubled culture. They can't be movers and shakers, but they can be "heal[ers]" and "Teach[ers]." It's a bittersweet ending to an elegy written in a very dark time.

SYMBOLS

WINTER/COLD

The poem reports the literal truth that W. B. Yeats died on a "dark cold day" in "winter." But the poem also plays with the symbolism attached to the cold and darkness of winter. The season is traditionally associated with death and dying, and sometimes with emotional coldness as well. Thus, the wintry atmosphere of Part I seems to reflect the somber event of Yeats's death, as well as the indifference with which much of the world responds (from the wolves in the forests to the brokers in the stock exchanges).

The word "dark" pops up again in Part III: "In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark." Here, the darkness of night symbolizes the *cultural* darkness that has descended on Europe: the ominous pre-WWII atmosphere of violence, ignorance, and so on.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "He disappeared in the dead of winter: / The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted, / And snow disfigured the public statues; / The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day. / What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day."
- **Lines 30-31:** "What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day."
- **Line 46:** "In the nightmare of the dark"

WOLVES/FORESTS

"Far from [Yeats's] illness," Auden reports, "The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests." Symbolically, these wolves evoke the inhuman wildness, violence, and permanence of nature. The lines suggest that nature goes on as it always has, despite anything that happens in the human world. Nature is indifferent to even the most tragic human events—from the death of a great artist to the death of a whole civilization. It can also be just as cruel as humanity is, the presence of these wolves suggests, since humans are ultimately part of nature.

In other words, Auden uses this symbolism to place Yeats's death in a much larger context. He uses a similar technique in "The Fall of Rome," which describes a civilizational collapse, then jump-cuts to a remote natural scene:

> Altogether elsewhere, vast
> Herds of reindeer move across
> Miles and miles of golden moss,
> Silently and very fast.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,"

THE PEASANT RIVER

The poem also describes another scene occurring "Far from [Yeats's] illness" and death: "The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays."

Quays—a loan word from French—means *wharves* or landing places along a body of water. That these quays are "fashionable" suggests that they belong to ritzy towns, tourist destinations, and so on. But the river flows past them like a metaphorical "peasant," humble and "untempted" by these glittery places. Symbolically, then, the river is associated with nature, as well as with average working people—neither of whom (the line implies) care for the fashions of the upper classes.

This line comments indirectly on Yeats's poetry. On the one hand, it gestures toward Yeats's deep interest in folklore and myth (literature produced by ordinary people), as well as his tendency to ignore literary fashions (as if racing past them). On the other hand, it subtly critiques what Auden saw as Yeats's unhealthy love of aristocrats and sentimental, hypocritical view of the "peasant" classes. Auden elaborates on this at length in "The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats":

> [Yeats] extolled the virtues of the peasant. Excellent. But should that peasant learn to read and write, should he save enough money to buy a shop, attempt by honest trading to raise himself above the level of the beasts, and O, what a sorry change is there. [...] For there was another world which seemed to him not only equally admirable, but a deal more agreeable to live in, the world of noble houses, of large drawing rooms inhabited by the rich and the decorative, most of them of the female sex. [...] The deceased had the feudal mentality. He was prepared to admire the poor just as long as they remained poor and deferential [...]

As such, this mini-allegory about the humble river and the rich towns cuts both ways. It acknowledges Yeats's celebration of "peasant" virtues, but also hints at his attraction to the rich and "fashionable" and implies that actual poor people (and/or nature itself) would not be impressed by it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;"
- **Lines 36-41:** "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, / Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth."

STATUES

The "public statues" in line 3 represent public figures in general: "great," powerful, and/or celebrated people. Yeats himself was such a figure, as he famously acknowledged in his poem "Among School Children," describing himself as "A sixty-year-old smiling public man." By that point in his career, he had won the Nobel Prize in Literature and gained readers around the world.

Auden describes "snow disfigur[ing]" the statues—distorting or defacing the sculpted images. Symbolically, this detail implies that public figures lose control of their images, particularly after they die. Their reputations can be distorted or undermined in all sorts of ways with the passage of time.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "And snow disfigured the public statues;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"In Memory of W. B. Yeats" alludes, indirectly, to Yeats's poetry as well as his life.

For example, "The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays" evokes Yeats's love of Irish folklore and folk culture. His poetry often celebrates what Auden called "the virtues of the peasant," and he once edited an anthology called *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888). However, Auden believed Yeats's love of the "peasant" was in some ways hypocritical and patronizing, since Yeats also courted the favor of the aristocracy. Thus, the symbolism of this line is ambiguous: *both* the humble "river" and the "fashionable quays" could represent aspects of Yeats's work and life. (See the Symbols section of this guide for more.)

"To find his happiness in another kind of wood" (line 20) also echoes various moments in Yeats's work, as well as in older literature. The line refers to Yeats's literary *afterlife*, the way his work will endure in the hearts of posterity. Yeats himself imagined the afterlife as a supernatural wood in works like "Cuchulain Comforted," one of his last poems. In "Sailing to Byzantium," one of his best-known poems, he imagines spending his own afterlife as a golden bird on a "golden bough." So Auden may be implying, here, that Yeats's afterlife will be different than those he imagined, yet still "happ[y]" in its way. Moreover, the Italian poet Dante (1265-1321) famously imagined *life* as a journey through dark woods (the opening line of Dante's *Inferno* places its author in the middle of the journey). This literary echo, too, suggests that Yeats has departed one kind of life for another.

Lines 58-59 ("With the farming of a verse / Make a vineyard of the curse") probably allude to Yeats's poem "Adam's Curse," which in turn alludes to the biblical Fall of Man (see Genesis 3:13-19). Yeats's poem stresses the hard work that goes into writing poetry; Auden suggests that this work can be redemptive.

Finally, lines 52-53 ("And the seas of pity lie / Locked and frozen in each eye") seem to allude to the fiction writer Franz Kafka (1883-1924), who famously wrote: "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us." In other words, literature should make us *feel* something! Auden echoes this idea in the following stanzas, as he urges the "poet" to move the stubborn "heart[s]" of readers.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;"
- **Line 20:** "To find his happiness in another kind of wood"
- **Lines 34-35:** "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry. / Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,"
- **Lines 42-45:** "Earth, receive an honoured guest: / William Yeats is laid to rest. / Let the Irish vessel lie / Emptied of its poetry."
- **Lines 52-53:** "And the seas of pity lie / Locked and frozen in each eye."
- **Lines 58-59:** "With the farming of a verse / Make a vineyard of the curse,"

REPETITION

The poem uses a great deal of repetition for dramatic and rhythmic effect. Some of this repetition includes anaphora and/or parallelism, as in the extended metaphor about Yeats's dying body:

> The provinces of his body revolted,
> The squares of his mind were empty, [...]
> The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

These repetitions create a sense of mounting dramatic urgency as Yeats's "body" and "mind" shut down in rapid succession.

Toward the end of the poem, anaphora and parallelism have the effect of raising the stakes for the "poet," who must fulfill a series of tasks under trying conditions:

> Follow, poet, follow right
> To the bottom of the night,
> [...]
> In a rapture of distress;
> In the deserts of the heart
> [...]
> In the prison of his days

Together, the parallel phrases "the bottom of the night," "the deserts of the heart," and "the prison of his days" map out a challenging work environment! The point is clear: poetry thrives on, and can partially redeem, darkness and suffering.

The poem repeats some key lines and phrases as well. In Part I, for example, the same lines conclude the first stanza and the section as a whole: "What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day." This statement gains new meaning the second time around. It makes Yeats's death sound especially ominous (*symbolically* "dark" and "cold") while emphasizing that the poet can only judge the moment with "What instruments we have." (The future, perhaps, can assess Yeats's legacy more fully.) In Part II, repetition highlights the political chaos of Yeats's home country ("Mad Ireland [...] Ireland has her madness"), as well as the fact that poetry endures—"it survives"—despite its lack of political impact.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dead"
- **Line 2:** "The," "frozen," "the"
- **Line 4:** "The," "dying," "day"
- **Lines 5-6:** "What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day."
- **Line 8:** "The"
- **Line 9:** "The"
- **Line 11:** "death," "poet"
- **Line 14:** "The," "of his"
- **Line 15:** "The," "of his"
- **Line 17:** "The," "of his"
- **Line 19:** "And"
- **Line 21:** "And"
- **Line 22:** "dead"
- **Line 26:** "And"
- **Line 27:** "And"
- **Line 28:** "think of," "day"

- **Line 29:** "thinks of," "day"
- **Lines 30-31:** "What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day."
- **Line 34:** "Mad," "Ireland," "poetry"
- **Line 35:** "Ireland," "madness"
- **Line 36:** "poetry," "makes," "happen," "it survives"
- **Line 37:** "making"
- **Line 40:** "it survives"
- **Line 41:** "happening"
- **Line 44:** "Let the"
- **Line 45:** "poetry"
- **Line 46:** "In the," "dark"
- **Line 48:** "And the"
- **Line 52:** "And the"
- **Line 53:** "frozen"
- **Line 54:** "Follow," "poet," "follow"
- **Line 55:** "the," "of the"
- **Line 56:** "With"
- **Line 58:** "With," "the," "of"
- **Line 59:** "of the"
- **Line 61:** "In"
- **Line 62:** "In the," "of the"
- **Line 63:** "Let the"
- **Line 64:** "In the," "of"

METAPHOR

The language of the poem is deeply figurative, full of metaphors and similes. That style fits the poem's subject: "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is one great poet's tribute to another, and metaphor is the bread and butter of poetry!

Some of Auden's metaphors are mixed with personification, as in line 4:

> The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.

This refers to mercury sinking in an old-fashioned thermometer, which Auden imagines stuck in the "mouth" of a personified, "dying" day. In other words, the weather got colder as the day ended. The image also calls to mind the sick and dying Yeats—and suggests that the grim weather was appropriate to his death-day.

Other metaphors in the poem evoke the way readers process the works of dead authors ("The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living"), the constraints of human society and fate ("each in the cell of himself / is almost convinced of his freedom"), and the violent, ominous atmosphere of pre-WWII Europe ("In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark"). Various metaphors toward the end of the poem cast the poet as a force of renewal and redemption (e.g., "With the farming of a verse / Make a vineyard of the curse"—as in the curse humanity seems to struggle under).

The poem also contains two important extended metaphors, in lines 14-17 and lines 36-41. The first of these compares Yeats's dying body to a collapsing country, suggesting that Yeats—through his writing and political activity—had become a kind of public institution or Irish national symbol. The second likens poetry to a river "flow[ing]" through a remote psychological (or cultural) landscape, far from the "tamper[ing]" of powerful people. This metaphor imagines poetry not as a force that makes history—at least, official history—but as a separate "way of happening," a parallel record of people's inner lives.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day."
- **Line 9:** "The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;"
- **Lines 14-17:** "The provinces of his body revolted, / The squares of his mind were empty, / Silence invaded the suburbs, / The current of his feeling failed;"
- **Lines 20-21:** "To find his happiness in another kind of wood / And be punished under a foreign code of conscience."
- **Lines 22-23:** "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living."
- **Line 25:** "When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the bourse,"
- **Line 27:** "And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom"
- **Lines 36-41:** "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, / Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth."
- **Line 42:** "Earth, receive an honoured guest:"
- **Lines 44-45:** "Let the Irish vessel lie / Emptied of its poetry."
- **Lines 46-47:** "In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark,"
- **Line 49:** "Each sequestered in its hate;"
- **Lines 52-53:** "And the seas of pity lie / Locked and frozen in each eye."
- **Lines 54-55:** "Follow, poet, follow right / To the bottom of the night,"
- **Lines 58-59:** "With the farming of a verse / Make a vineyard of the curse,"
- **Lines 62-65:** "In the deserts of the heart / Let the healing fountain start, / In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise."

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem contains a number of striking juxtapositions, which place Yeats's life and death in a larger social, political, and

philosophical context.

In Part I, Auden juxtaposes Yeats's death scene with several other things:

- Nature, as represented by the "wolves [in] the evergreen forests" and the "peasant river." The natural world seems indifferent not only to Yeats's death but to humanity as a whole. It's also more permanent ("evergreen") than anything human.
- Yeats's literary afterlife, which has "scattered" his legacy "among a hundred cities" and subjected him to the "affections" and judgement of people he'll never meet.
- The worlds of high finance ("brokers" at "the bourse") and the suffering "poor." Both of these communities, Auden implies, are unaware of or indifferent to Yeats's death. Poetry's reach, or at least its direct social impact, is limited.

Parts II and III contain important juxtapositions as well. In Part II, Auden juxtaposes the origins of Yeats's writing career with his ultimate impact (or lack thereof): "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry. / Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still." In other words, Ireland is basically the same now as when Yeats began writing, despite his passionate desire to change the country. "Poetry makes nothing happen" in a political or historical sense.

Part III juxtaposes Yeats's burial with the approach of World War II (as "the living nations wait, / Each sequestered in its hate"). This juxtaposition has several effects. It drives home the point that Yeats's poetry, for all its brilliance, hasn't reformed the world. It casts Yeats's death as one more sad event in a sad and ominous time. Finally, it spurs Auden to suggest what the "poet"—whether it's Yeats, himself, or the poet in the abstract—*can* do for readers in a troubled age.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-29
- Lines 34-35
- Lines 42-53

APOSTROPHE

The poem uses apostrophe at several different moments.

At the beginning of Part II, Auden turns from describing Yeats in the third person to addressing him in the second person:

> You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
> The parish of rich women, physical decay,
> Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.

The deceased Yeats can't read or hear these words, of course, so this is an example of apostrophe. The device creates a sense of familiarity between Auden and Yeats, as one poet addresses the other with a mix of praise and chiding. In real life, Auden hardly knew Yeats, but his writing was deeply influenced by the older poet. This apostrophe brings them together into an artificial but powerful closeness, exemplifying what Auden meant when he wrote, "Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead."

Later, in Part III, Auden addresses the "Earth" itself, asking it to "receive an honoured guest" (the body of "William Yeats"). The tone of this apostrophe is respectful and ceremonious, and the communication between poet and "Earth" suggests a certain intimacy between humanity and nature (in contrast with Part I, where the two seemed at odds). Finally, Auden addresses a figure he calls "poet," which might refer to the deceased Yeats or to the abstract figure of the poet (i.e., poets in general). This apostrophe opens the poem outward, so that Auden is no longer just discussing Yeats's legacy but musing on the function of poetry as a whole.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 32-34:** "You were silly like us; your gift survived it all: / The parish of rich women, physical decay, / Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry."
- **Lines 42-45:** "Earth, receive an honoured guest: / William Yeats is laid to rest. / Let the Irish vessel lie / Emptied of its poetry."
- **Lines 54-65:** "Follow, poet, follow right / To the bottom of the night, / With your unconstraining voice / Still persuade us to rejoice; / With the farming of a verse / Make a vineyard of the curse, / Sing of human unsuccess / In a rapture of distress; / In the deserts of the heart / Let the healing fountain start, / In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise."

VOCABULARY

The dead of winter (Line 1) - An idiom meaning the middle or coldest part of winter. Auden is playing on the phrase's morbid connotations. (Yeats died on January 28, 1939.)

Disfigured (Line 3) - Distorted or marred (here with the implication that the snow distorts the human *figures* of the statues).

Mercury (Line 4) - The liquid that filled old-fashioned thermometers. (Mercury thermometers have mostly been phased out because mercury is poisonous.)

Mouth of the dying day (Line 4) - Part of a metaphor evoking a mercury thermometer being placed in the mouth (to take a temperature reading). Auden means that the "day" is getting colder as it ends.

The peasant river (Line 9) - A metaphor suggesting that the

river is humble and close to the earth, unlike the "fashionable" places it runs past.

Quays (Line 9) - Docks or wharves built along the shore of a body of water.

Provinces (Line 14) - Territories, especially those far from urban centers. (Part of an extended metaphor imagining Yeats's dying body as a country in crisis.)

Revolted (Line 14) - Violently rebelled. (As part of the extended metaphor, this suggests that Yeats's dying body is turning against him.)

Current of his feeling (Line 17) - A metaphor suggesting the nerves and/or bloodstream, which "fail[]" as the body dies.

Affections (Line 19) - Sentiments or fond feelings (here meaning those of Yeats's readers).

Code of conscience (Line 21) - Morality; a system of moral standards.

Brokers (Line 25) - Stockbrokers; financial professionals who buy and sell stocks for clients.

Bourse (Line 25) - A stock exchange, especially the one in Paris, France (formerly the Paris Bourse, now known as Euronext Paris).

Your gift (Line 32) - Yeats's talent as a writer.

Parish (Line 33) - Here meaning charity or patronage. Yeats received financial support from several aristocratic women, particularly Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932).

Mad Ireland (Line 34) - Yeats's home country, described here as "Mad" due to its history of political turmoil (particularly under British rule).

Executives (Lines 37-38) - Heads of state, business leaders, etc.; here suggesting powerful people in general.

Tamper (Lines 37-38) - Meddle.

Ranches (Line 39) - Large, open lands used for raising livestock. Here used metaphorically to suggest lonely or "isolat[ed]" regions of the mind.

Mouth (Line 41) - A pun suggesting both the human "mouth," which recites poetry, and the "mouth" of a river (see "flows on south" in line 38).

Vessel (Lines 44-45) - Can mean a ship or container—here probably means the second, since it's easier for a container to "lie" still. Either way, it's a metaphor for Yeats himself, an "Irish" man who poured "poetry" into the world.

Dogs of Europe (Line 47) - A metaphor for aggressive European leaders or nations. (The poem was written just before the outbreak of World War II.)

Sequestered (Line 49) - Isolated.

Unconstraining (Line 56) - Refusing to constrain or hold back; uninhibited.

Vineyard (Line 59) - Land for growing grapes, especially wine grapes. Here, a metaphor for a fruitful outcome.

Unsuccess (Line 60) - An understated synonym for failure.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem has an unusual and complex structure. It's broken into three parts, each of which features a separate form. Part I has six stanzas, Part II has one, and Part III has six, but the stanzas are constructed differently in each section.

- Part I is written in free verse.
- Part II uses a loose accentual meter and subtle rhymes.
- Part III uses AABB-rhymed quatrains of trochaic tetrameter (four-beat lines that follow a DUM-da, DUM-da rhythm).

As a result, the elegy moves toward greater strictness and formality. It begins with almost prose-like reportage and ends up formally "la[ying]" its subject "to rest."

The three sections have other key differences, too:

- Part I recounts Yeats's death in the third person, while Part II addresses him in the second person, through apostrophe. Part III begins by addressing the "Earth" in which Yeats is buried, then turns to addressing a figure it calls "poet." This might refer to Yeats, to Auden himself, or to the figure of the poet in general. (Or some combination of the three.)
- Midway through Part II, the poem's language switches from past to present tense, as Auden turns from Yeats's past to the urgency of current events. (The transitional Part II didn't appear in the very first publication of the poem; Auden added it for a second printing weeks later.)

Finally, the form of the third section is a subtle homage to Yeats. Its rhymed trochaic tetrameter mimics the form of one of Yeats's last poems, "Under Ben Bulben," the final lines of which are his literal epitaph.

METER

The three sections of the poem differ metrically. Part I contains prose-like free verse, which adds to its narrative or journalistic quality. Part II uses a rough accentual meter, with approximately five beats per line. Take lines 32-33:

> You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
> The parish of rich women, physical decay,

A handful of lines in this section might contain more or fewer than five stresses (the shorter line 41 clearly contains fewer). Meter isn't an exact science, and the pattern in this section is especially loose. Still, the lines are *generally* even in terms of length and number of stresses, so that the slant-rhymed verse sounds controlled and musical rather than awkward. (Rhymed poetry without any kind of meter usually falls flat.)

Part III is written in quatrains of trochaic tetrameter, meaning that its lines contain four stresses and follow a stressed-unstressed (DUM-da, DUM-da) rhythm. Here's how that pattern sounds in the first quatrain:

> Earth, receive an honoured guest:
> William Yeats is laid to rest.
> Let the Irish vessel lie
> Emptied of its poetry.

This meter imitates that of "Under Ben Bulben," one of Yeats's last poems, which is shadowed by thoughts of mortality and intended as an epitaph for himself. It has a heavy, dirge-like quality appropriate to a funereal elegy—and appropriate to the solemn instructions Part III issues to the "poet." In general, the poem grows more strictly formal as it goes along.

RHYME SCHEME

Part I of the poem is written in free verse, so it has no rhyme scheme. Part II contains a single stanza, which is rhymed (or slant-rhymed) ABBACCDCCD:

> [...] all: A
> [...] decay, B
> [...] poetry. B
> [...] still, A
> [...] survives C
> [...] executives C
> [...] south D
> [...] griefs, C
> [...] survives, C
> [...] mouth. D

Part III is written in quatrains that rhyme AABB (i.e., in the section's first quatrain: "guest"/"rest"/"lie"/"poetry").

As with the poem's meter(s), there's a trend toward greater formal strictness over the course of the three sections. Not only does the third section rhyme more predictably, it rhymes more *exactly*. There's only one exact rhyme ("south"/"mouth"), plus one identical rhyme ("survives"/survives"), in Part II; the rest are slant rhymes. By contrast, there's only one slant rhyme ("lie"/"poetry") in Part III; the rest are exact. The poem transitions from an experimental, modernist meditation into a more conventional, formal elegy (the kind Yeats wrote for himself in "Under Ben Bulben").

This mix of styles could itself be seen as a tribute to Yeats, who's seen as a transitional figure between the formal traditionalism of 19th-century poetry and the experimentation of early 20th-century modernism. Yeats never wrote verse quite as free as the kind found in Part I, but he *did* sometimes work with the kind of loose rhythms and slant rhymes found in Part II.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem uses first-person plural pronouns: "What instruments we have agree," "You were silly like us," etc. He speaks in a collective voice of mourning, perhaps on behalf of Yeats's "admirers" (line 17), or "the living" who must process his achievement (lines 22-23). It's implied, however, that the speaker is also W. H. Auden himself: one prominent poet assessing the legacy of another.

By 1939, Auden was widely recognized as the most talented UK poet of his generation (though he was soon to move to America). In some ways, he was a successor to Yeats: a poet of outstanding technical gifts, a flair for political poetry, and a strong public presence outside of his writing. Both men found early literary success, wrote for the stage as well as the page, and were deeply engaged with the politics of their time. (Yeats served a stint as Senator in the Irish Free State, for example, while Auden had visited Spain during the Spanish Civil War, hoping to drive an ambulance for the republican side. He did some minor propaganda work instead.) Auden was influenced by Yeats's vast literary achievements; however, Auden's politics were well to the left of Yeats's, especially during this period.

All of this background informs Auden's tribute. He lays Yeats to rest with "honour[s]" and praises Yeats's poetic "gift," but suggests that this gift "survived" *despite* Yeats's politics and personality. For example, his gift survived "the parish of rich women"—the patronage of the wealthy aristocrats whose favor Yeats sought—and "Yourself," meaning Yeats's own character. Auden also comments on the "nightmar[ish]" historical moment he's witnessing (the pre-WWII period), which Yeats no longer shares as a living person, but which he can still speak to as a "poet."

In the same year that he wrote "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Auden wrote an essay, "The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats," which works through some of the same ideas as the poem. For example, the essay states, "The case [against Yeats] rests on the fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen," echoing the poem's claim that "poetry makes nothing happen."

SETTING

The poem ranges over a number of settings, both real and

metaphorical. First it reports on the day of Yeats's death "in the dead of winter" (January 28, 1939). Yeats died at the Hôtel Idéal Séjour in Menton, France, so the snowy scene Auden depicts probably refers to that location, though it might also describe Auden's own surroundings when he heard the news. In any case, he describes it as a "dark cold day," marked by "frozen" waterways, "almost deserted" airports, and "snow [on] the public statues." The grim weather seems to mirror the poet's mood of mourning.

Auden also imagines settings "Far from" the poet's death: "wolves" in "evergreen forests," a "peasant river" passing "fashionable quays" (i.e., a humble river flowing past fancy waterfronts), and "the bourse" (stock exchange; most likely the Paris Bourse) where "brokers" buy and sell stocks. All of these details have symbolic overtones; the wolves and river represent primitive nature (as opposed to humanity), while the bourse represents the world of finance and commerce (as opposed to art). More broadly, they represent the world that goes on without Yeats—especially the part of the world that goes on without *caring* about him. Yet Auden also describes Yeats's legacy as "scattered among a hundred cities," suggesting that the poet has had some global influence after all.

In part II, Auden invokes "Ireland," Yeats's home country. Yeats was a committed Irish nationalist (that is, he favored Ireland's independence from Britain) and served a stint as an Irish politician. Auden suggests that the political "madness" of Ireland—a somewhat snarky way of describing its conflicts and economic struggles under British rule—"hurt" Yeats "into poetry," or caused a psychological wound that moved him to launch a literary career.

In Part III, Auden widens the poem's scope again, describing all of Europe during the run-up to World War II: "All the dogs of Europe bark, / And the living nations wait, / Each sequestered in its hate" (lines 47-49). This geopolitical turmoil forms a crucial backdrop to the poem. Auden registers Yeats's death as one more tragedy during a tragic and ominous time, while remaining mindful of flaws in Yeats's own politics.

Auden also describes places and settings that are purely metaphorical, as when he compares Yeats's dying body to a collapsing country (with "provinces" that "revolted," etc.) in lines 14-17. Another important example occurs in lines 36-41, when he imagines poetry as a kind of river flowing through a psychological landscape full of "isolation," "griefs," etc. Likewise, the "vineyard," "deserts," and "prison" in Part III refer to elements of the psyche or human condition, not literal places.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) wrote "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" in February 1939—the month after William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) died—and published it in his collection *Another Time* (1940).

Composed in the period preceding and following the outbreak of World War II, *Another Time* features some of Auden's best-known political poems, including "September 1, 1939," "Epitaph on a Tyrant," "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 "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" under the heading "Occasional Poems," meaning poems written for a particular occasion.

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. (With its mix of free verse and meter, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" exemplifies the range of his craft.) The wit, technical skill, and restless variety of his work gained him wide acclaim as both a poet and critic.

Auden's 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. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" arguably signals that shift with its claim that "poetry makes nothing happen"—though the claim is qualified. Even as Auden's work became increasingly personal and spiritual, it remained at the forefront of English-language literary culture, much as Yeats's had been throughout the previous generation.

For his part, Yeats is generally considered the most influential Irish poet in modern history. He was the central figure of the Irish Literary Revival, a.k.a. the Celtic Twilight, a movement that brought renewed attention to Ireland's literature, culture, and Gaelic heritage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was also an essayist, political writer, and playwright who co-founded Ireland's popular Abbey Theatre. As the poem reports, he died "in the dead of winter," on January 28, 1939. Auden didn't know him well in real life, but he acknowledged Yeats's deep influence on his work—even if he was ambivalent about it. "I've come to the conclusion Yeats had a bad influence on me," he said in his later years. "Not his fault, poor dear, mine."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Auden wrote "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" on the cusp of World War II, about seven 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 ascent to power in 1933 was part of an era of European history marked by the rise of fascist governments. 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.

"In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is set against the backdrop of this violent period. It makes its historical context clear in lines 46-49:

> In the nightmare of the dark
> All the dogs of Europe bark,
> And the living nations wait,
> Each sequestered in its hate;

These metaphorical "dogs" are warmongers, dictators, and other political aggressors. The poet feels the "hate" among "nations" intensely and senses that Europe—or the world—is just "wait[ing]" for war to break out. In contemplating Yeats's impact and legacy, Auden is also thinking about his own, and about the role of the poet in a time of mass upheaval.

The poem also points toward Ireland's then-recent history, and toward Yeats's role in it. Yeats was an Irish nationalist who, in his later years, served as a senator in the quasi-independent Irish Free State. Many of his poems comment on Irish political figures and historical events, often in anguished or ambivalent ways ("Easter, 1916" and "To a Shade" are two examples among many). Though he supported the nationalist cause, he often condemned the fanaticism and bigotry of its leaders. During the 1920s and 1930s, Yeats's politics drifted toward authoritarianism and fascism (though here, too, he was ambivalent). In the line "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry," Auden implies that Ireland's political turmoil motivated Yeats to start writing in the first place. In calling Yeats "silly like us" and warning that he will be judged by a "foreign code of conscience," Auden voices skepticism of Yeats's views and character.

In three stanzas that Auden originally published but later cut from the poem, he judges that "Time" has pardoned Yeats's "cowardice, conceit," and bad politics because he was a great writer. In "The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats," an essay written the same year as the poem, Auden argues *both* sides of the political case against Yeats. In the role of "Public Prosecutor," he declares: "For the great struggle of our time to create a juster social order, [Yeats] felt nothing but the hatred which is born of fear." As "Counsel for the Defence," he argues:

> However false or undemocratic his ideas, [Yeats's] diction shows a continuous evolution towards what one might call the true democratic style. [...] The diction of [his later poetry] is the diction of a just man, and it is for this reason that just men will always recognize its author as a master.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Auden Documentary — Watch a short film about Auden's life, poetry, and historical period. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujTrdBASvHI)
- The Poet's Life — An introduction to Auden's life and work, courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- Auden and Political Poetry — Read about Auden's complex relationship to his own political poems. (https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-wh-auden-hated-his-most-famous-political-poems)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to W. H. Auden read "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73nEk_75jRE)
- Auden's "Trial" of Yeats — Read Auden's 1939 essay "The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats," in which he subjects Yeats's legacy to a mock trial. (http://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/s7272.pdf)
- Who Was W. B. Yeats? — An introduction to the subject of Auden's elegy. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- As I Walked Out One Evening
- Epitaph on a Tyrant
- 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

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