

M.A (English)
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Topic :- "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" as an Elegy

Like 'Petition', 'The Unknown Citizen' and 'The Shield of Achilles', the poem entitled 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' is also one of the most favourite poems of W.H. Auden. Auden is one of the greatest English poets of the 20th century, standing next only to T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. The great critic Richard Hoggart writes about him - "Auden combines an intense interest in the human heart with a desire to reform society and he thinks our psychological ill greater than our political."

"In Memory of W.B. Yeats" was first published in New Republic in 1939. It was written by Auden to mourn the death of the great Irish poet, W.B. Yeats, who was a contemporary of Auden and who passed away in January 1939. The title of the poem indicates that it is an elegy. But in this poem Auden does not follow all the traditions of elegy. Neither is Yeats idealised as a poet nor is his fate sentimentalized. Rather than glorifying Yeats, Auden goes to

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the extent of calling him silly and saying that his poetry could make nothing happen.

"Ireland has her madness and her weather still"

The death of Yeats remains in the focus of the poem only to support the peripheral reflections in the poem. In an elegy, the whole nature mourns with the poet. Here the great poet's death goes unnoticed both by men and nature; life goes on as usual, reversing the tradition of elegy where the dead are glorified and their death is said to be a great loss for mankind.

Auden begins the elegy by describing the day of Yeats' death. It was a dark, cold day in the 'dead of winter' with the mercury falling lower in the barometre. Brooks were frozen and airports deserted. The public statues stood disfigured by snow. But all nature seemed to continue on its course unaffected by Yeats' death. Rivers flowed on their usual course, wolves ran on in the forests unaware of the loss of the great poet. Auden looks at the death of Yeats as an ordinary solitary occurrence which does not alter anything in nature :-

Far from his illness

The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests

The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays...

The description of Yeats' deteriorating condition is presented in a metaphysical conceit. Yeats is called an emperor, and the body his empire. His mind and body revolted against his authority,

with the result that dissolution and disintegration set in. The outskirts of the empire were ruined first i.e his hands and feet went numb and insensitive. Then this numbness spread to the entire body and he was dead.

"The provinces of his body revolted

The squares of his mind were empty

Silence invaded the suburbs

The current of his feeling failed: he became his admirers."

Further, Auden puts his idea that it is only the poet who is dead not his poetry. His poetry is unaffected by his death. The poet as an artist becomes independent of his work. Following the tradition of elegy, Auden consoles himself by telling that even after the death of Yeats his poetry is spread far and wide, like his ashes. Henceforth, he will be read by unknown people in foreign countries who will interpret his words as they wish, thereby modifying him after death.

"The words of a dead man

Are modified in the guts of the living."

Auden's expression becomes charged with psychological overtones when he proceeds to examine the worth of a poet in terms of modern psychology. What lives after the poet is his style, the manner of saying things assumes more importance than the matter or content. It is the uniqueness of style and language that come to dwell in the human psyche, 'where executives would never

want to tamper it.'

it survives.

A way of happening, a mouth.'

In the final section of the poem the poet consoles himself in the true sense of an elegiac poem. Auden compares him with an Irish vessel and as he writes.

Earth receive an honoured guest :

William Yeats is laid to rest :

Let the Irish vessel lie

Emptied of its poetry.

Further Auden writes that Yeats will be forgiven for any non-sense that he would have talked. Time forgives the faults of cowardice, pride, vanity and conceit and worships only language. Further Auden focusses upon the time of Yeats' death when threat of war looms large :-

"In the nightmare of the dark

All the dogs of Europe bark

And the living nations wait

Each sequestered in its hate."

In such a time of crisis, it is the duty of the poet to pursue the hidden truth with his gift of art, he can convey to the troubled man to rejoice even in the face of war. Only a poet can 'heal' with his fountain of poetry as an inspiration

to the desert of the heart: When nations live in isolation and constant ~~the~~ dread of each other, it is great poetry alone that can illumine and transform the human soul.

"In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to pray."

Thus, the poem "In memory of W.B. Yeats" follows some patterns of elegiac tradition. Auden does not exalt Yeats as a hero or genius as Milton does in "Paradise Lost" and "Lycidas". Nature does not mourn with the poet, but a lot of sorrow is shown in this poem. Like a true elegiac poem Auden at first focuses upon his immense sorrow at the death of Yeats but at last consoles himself by saying:-

"worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet."

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