

In Memory of W. B. Yeats

W. H. Auden - 1907-1973

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.

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untampted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
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.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,
A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.

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

II

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

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
 For poetry makes nothing happen: 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.

III

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

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

Intellectual disgrace
 Stares from every human face,
 And the seas of pity lie
 Locked and frozen in each eye.

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.

In Memory of W. B. Yeats" Introduction

- "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is W. H. Auden's complicated tribute to William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), considered the foremost Irish poet of his age and one of the finest writers in the English language. Throughout the poem, Auden weighs the complexities of Yeats's legacy, including his tremendous literary "gift" and his sometimes "silly" or foolish ideas. More broadly,

he contemplates the poet's role in society, particularly during "nightmar[ish]" periods of history—like the eve of World War II, when Auden wrote the poem. Though Auden insists that "poetry makes nothing happen" from a historical standpoint, he suggests that poets can turn unrelieved human suffering into wise and even joyful art. The poem dates to February 1939, the month after Yeats's death, and appears in Auden's collection *Another Time* (1940). It remains one of the most famous poetic elegies of the 20th century.

- **“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.

Theme of 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.