UNIT 13: W.H. AUDEN: "IN MEMORY OF W.B. YEATS"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" as a significant modern poem.
- discuss the life and works of the modern poet W.H. Auden.
- assess the importance of the poet W.B. Yeats in the field of English Literature.
- learn about the traditional elegiac form of poetry that Auden employs in his poem.
- appreciate the poem in its totality.

13.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will study a tributary poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" by W.H. Auden, written on the loss of the great poet William Butler Yeats. Auden wrote the poem, a three section elegy in February1939, shortly after Yeats's death. It first appeared in his 1940 collection *Another Time.*

13.3 W.B. AUDEN: THE POET

Did you come across any poem by the poet W. H. Auden? Have you read, Auden's tributary poem to one of the greatest modern poets and playwrights W.B. Yeats, titled "In Memory of W.B. Yeats? Do not get confused with the names. This unit will introduce you, to both the important poets and help you to appreciate the prescribed poem, which is a tribute offered by the modern poet W.H. Auden to another legendary and foremost figure of English literature W. B. Yeats.

To make you familiar with the poets, W.H. Auden was a 20th century Anglo-American poet who was born in England and became an American citizen. On the other hand, W.B. Yeats, who belonged to the same century, was an Anglo-Irish poet and playwright who was born in Ireland and established himself as a foremost literary figure in both Ireland and England after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* notes that "by the time of Eliot's death in 1965…a convincing case could be made for the assertion that Auden was indeed Eliot's successor, as Eliot had inherited sole claim to supremacy when Yeats died in 1939".

At Oxford, where W.H. Auden studied, he met his poet-friends Cecil Day Lewis, Louis Mac Neice and Stephen Spender and these four were commonly (though misleadingly) identified as the '**Auden Group'**. They did share, left wing or socialist views but they were not necessarily identical in their beliefs. W.H. Auden was a distinguished intellectual and poet in his own right.

13.3.1 His Life

Wystan Hugh Auden (21 Feb 1907-29 Sept 1973) was born in York, England to George Augustus Auden, a physician and Constance Rosalie Bicknell. He was the third of three sons, of whom the eldest George Bernard Auden was a farmer and the second John Bicknell Auden, a geologist. Auden's grandfathers were both

clergyman of the Church of England. He grew up in an Anglo Catholic household which followed a "high" form of Anglicanism with doctrine and rituals similar to those of Roman Catholicism.

In 1908 his family moved to Birmingham, where his father had been appointed the School Medical Officer and lecturer of Public Health. Auden's lifelong interests began in his father's library. From the age of eight he attended boarding schools, returning home during vacations. His first boarding school was St. Edmund's School and here he first met Christopher Isherwood who became a famous novelist later. During 1922, at the age of 13, he went to Gresham's School in Norfolk and it was here, when on being asked by his friend Robert Medley, whether he wrote poetry, he first realised his inclination to be a poet. His first published poems appeared in the school magazine in 1923. Auden later wrote a chapter on Gresham's for the writer Graham Greene's *The Old School: Essays* by *Divers Hand* (1934).

In 1925, Auden went to Christ Church, Oxford with a scholarship in biology, but he changed his subject to English by his second year. Here he met with his poet-friends, Cecil Day Lewis, Louis Mac Neice and Stephen Spender and together they came to be known as the 'Auden Group'. He left Oxford with a third class degree and in the same autumn of 1928, he left Britain and for nine months stayed at Berlin. From the year 1930, he began five years as a much-loved school master in boy's schools, like the Larchfield Academy in Scotland and The Down School in the Malvern Hills. In 1937, he went to Spain with the intention of driving an ambulance for the republic in the Spanish Civil war, although later he was assigned other work. There he visited the war front and his seven-week visit made him understand the complexities of the social and political events.

Between the years 1941-42 he taught English at the University of Michigan and was also awarded a Guggenheum Fellowship for

1942-43. But he chose to teach at Swarthmore College from1942 to 1945. During the years 1956-1961, Auden was Professor of poetry at Oxford University where he was required to give three lectures each year. This gave him enough time for himself and he earned his income mostly by reading and on lecture tours and writing for The *New Yorker* and other magazines. In 1972 he moved his home from New York to Oxford. His old college Christ Church offered him a cottage. He breathed his last in Vienna in 1973.

Throughout his writing career, Auden was very influential and also controversial. He traced his love for language and music, partly to the Church Services he attended as a child. He had a lifelong fascination with Icelandic legends and Old Norse sagas and even believed that he was of Icelandic descent. He had a gift for friendship and throughout his life, performed charitable acts. He was punctual in his habits and obsessive about meeting deadlines and it hampered his health. From his Oxford years onward, his friends described him as funny, extravagant, sympathetic, generous and by his own choice, lonely.

13.3.2 His Works

Auden began writing poetry at the age of 13, mostly in the styles of the 19th century romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth and later with his increase in rural interests, he was inspired by Thomas Hardy. At the age of 18, he discovered T.S. Eliot and adopted an extreme version of his style, until he found his own voice at 20. His first twenty poems of the late 1920s were included in his collected work *Poems* (1928) and these were written in an elusive style that hinted on loss and loneliness. The poems in the book were lyrical and meditative and based on hope for love or unfulfilled love and on themes of personal, social and seasonal renewal.

He wrote his first dramatic work *Paid on Both Sides*: *A Charade*, which was included in the same collection, combined style

and content from Icelandic sagas and this mixture of tragedy and farce, with a dream play-within-a -play, introducing the mixed styles and content of much of his later work. A recurrent theme in these early poems was what Auden termed as the "family ghosts", the powerful, unseen psychological effects of preceding generations on any individual life.

The Orators: An English Study (1932) was written in verse and prose, largely about hero-worship in personal and political life and the "six odes" reflect his new interest in Robert Burns. During these years much of his work expressed left-wing views and he became widely known as a political poet. His verse drama *The Dance of Death* (1933) was more of a political spectacular entertainment. The next two plays, *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935) and *The Ascent of F-6* (1937), written in collaboration with Isherwood, was a quasi-Marxist work and partly an anti-imperialist satire, respectively.

The collection *Look Strangers* included political odes, love poems, comic songs, meditative lyrics and a variety of intellectually and emotionally intense verse. In 1937, he wrote *Letters from Ireland*, a travel book in prose and verse written in collaboration with Louis Mac Neice. In the same year after observing the Spanish Civil War, he wrote a political pamphlet poem "Spain". He wrote a travel work *Journey to a War* (1939), along with Isherwood, with whom he collaborated for the last time on a play titled *On the Frontier*, an anti-war satire.

The collection *Another Time* (1940) saw his famous poems such as "Dover", "As He Is", "Musee des Beaux Arts", written before he moved to America in 1939 and later poems like "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" and "In Memory of W.B.Yeats", written in America. This was followed by works such as *The Double Man* (1941), *For the Time Being* (1944) and *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (1946). The work *Nories* (1951) had a Mediterranean atmosphere with a new theme of the "sacred importance" of the human body in

its ordinary aspects of breathing, eating and sleeping, in continuity with nature. His prose book *The Enchanted Flood: The Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (1950) was based on a series of lectures on the image of the sea in Romantic literature. In 1955 he wrote another work titled *The Shield of Achilles*.

He worked on a sequence of seven Good Friday poems and a group of poems on "history", the term he used to mean the set of unique events made by human choices and these he included in his collection *Homage to Clio* (1960). His prose book *The Dyer's Hand* (1962) were a compilation of the lectures he gave at Oxford as Professor of Poetry along with revised versions of essays and notes written since the mid 1940s. The work *About the House* (1965) included poems reflecting on his lecture tours. This was followed by a poetry collection *City Without Walls* (1969) and also his life long passion for Icelandic Legends, turned into his translation of *The Elder Hedda* (1969).

A Certain World: A Commonplace Book (1970) was a kind of self- portrait made up of favourite quotations. Among his last works were a selection of essays and reviews titled *Forewords and Afterwords* (1973), a book of verse *Epistle to a Godson* (1972) and the unfinished poetry collection *Thank You, Fog* (published posthumously,1974) which included reflective poems about language and about his growing old.

Auden won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1948, Austrian State Prize for European Literature and Struga Poetry Evenings Golden Wreath Laureates in 1971. He also wrote more than four hundred poems and four hundred essays and reviews on literature, history, politics, music, religion and many other subjects.



LET US KNOW

Auden's poem "In Memory of W.B.Yeats" has influences of the traditional elegiac form. An elegy in literature is a poem that expresses mourning and grief, especially as a funeral song or a lament for the dead. The word 'elegy' is derived from the Greek term 'elegeia' and this was originally referred to any verse written in elegiac couplets and covering a wide range of subject matter, including the epitaphs for tombs.

This form is a very ancient literary tradition that began with Theocritus and Moschus, defined by Virgil, developed and enriched by the great Renaissance poets and popularly reinvented by P.B. Shelley and Matthew Arnold in the 19th century.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Mention whether True or False.

a. The first 20 poems of the late 1920s were included in his collected work titled *Poems* (1928) **(True/False)**

b. Auden had a lifelong fascination with Icelandic legends and Old Norse sagas. **(True/False)**

c. Stephen Spender was not part of the Auden Group. **(True/False)**

d. An elegy in literature expresses the lament and grief due to the loss of someone. **(True/ False)**

Q2. Fill up the blanks:

a. "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" was included in the collection……(1940)

b. Auden was Professor of Poetry at……..University.

c. Auden moved to America in the year…….

d. Auden received the ……..Prize for poetry in 1948.

Q3. Name some of the best known works of Auden.

Answer:.....

.....

.....



Dead: the coldest part of winter
Brooks: small stream
Deserted: appearing empty
Disfigure(d): spoil the appearance of
Mercury: liquid metallic element used in thermometers and barometers
Untempted: to be unaffected
Fashionable quays: a stylised platform lying alongside or projecting into the water for loading or unloading ships
Mourn(ing): express deep sorrow following the death or loss of someone
Rumour: a story likely to be false, spread among a number of people
Provinces: areas or parts
Revolt: an act of going against something
Invade(d): to enter or spread in large number; forcibly occupy
Suburbs: outlying residential districts of a city
Current: the flow of a feeling or thought
Scattered: spread across

13.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

You have already read in the introductory section 10.2. that the poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" was penned by Auden in February 1939, after W. B. Yeats's death in Roquebrune (Southern France) on January 29, 1939. This poem follows the traditional elegiac form, which you have already been made familiar with. It is a 63-lines poem that is divided into three sections. Read the poem carefully and try to understand what the poem wants to say.

"In Memory of W. B. Yeats."

I

He disappeared in the **dead** of winter: 1
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. 6

Far from his illness 7
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was **untempted** 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. 17

Now he is **scattered** among a hundred cities 18
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. 31

II

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all; 32
The **parish** of rich women, physical decay.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where **executions**
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. 40

III

Earth, receive an honoured guest: 41
William Yeats is laid to rest.
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry 44



Unfamiliar: not known or encountered; unknown
Conscience: a person's moral sense of right and wrong
Modified: to modify or make partial changes
Guts: the internal parts or essence of something
Brokers: a person who buys and sells goods or shares for others; middlemen
Bourse: a stock-Exchange, especially one in a continental European city
Accustomed: getting used to something or habituated
Unusual: not often done or occurring
Parish: the smallest unit of local government in rural areas
Executions: the way in which something is produced or carried out; actions.
Tamper: interfere without permission so as to cause damage
Ranches: large farms
Isolation: the condition of being left alone, without anyone around.



Nightmare: frightening or unpleasant dream
Sequestered: isolated or hidden away
Intellectual: a person's highly developed mental powers.



Disgrace: a shameful thing

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 the 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

13.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

The learner will do well to first read the text of the poem and interpret it on your own. Having tried interpreting it on your own, you may relate to the given analysis and explanation of the poem.

When Auden wrote the poem, Europe was under the shadow of World War II and so the sense of an impending catastrophe is present throughout the poem. The elegy form may be written to evoke the thought of living after death in religious terms, in terms of cherished memories or by transforming grief into an inner resolution to go on with life. Auden mimics the form to express his lament and

at the same time deviates from the typical use of such a composition. The function of poetry or any work of art is such that its longevity and social presence has the capacity to unite the minds of readers across time and space. The three sections of Auden's elegy begins with a reflection to a final **epitaph** and invocation.



Epitaph: words written in memory of a person who has died

Nostalgia: longing for the happy times of the past

Remnants: a small remaining quantity

Transcended: go beyond the range or limits of

Section I begins with the lines:

"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 1-6)

The poem reflects the cold, dry and barren month of winter, the last phase of the seasonal cycle; just like the final phase of a human being's life. The pronoun "He" refers to William Butler Yeats on whose death, the poem is written. During that cold season the brooks were frozen and it snowed heavily, people deserted the roads, the changing air pressure made the mercury of barometers sink in the deadening cold.

Thus, the day Yeats died is described as a dark cold day, a February afternoon in the year 1939.

"Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems"
(Lines7-11)

Here the contrast is drawn between the urban world as against the wilderness of nature. Faraway from his illness, there was another world amidst the evergreen forests where the river continued to flow on its course, the wolves ran about and everything

was as usual. Life continued ahead irrespective of Yeats's death. Even on the impending death of Yeats, life seemed indifferent. This is because death too is an inevitable part of life.

The image of a quay, that stretches out to the river is compared to the mourning tongues of people. This is to show that, just as the river is indifferent to the quay, so is the river of life to the emotions and reactions of people. The collection of poems is as if kept away from the knowledge of their creator's death, as though on knowing about the loss of Yeats, they would be affected by his absence forever. This is a way of creating a certain sense of nostalgia on such a great loss.

"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."
(Lines 12-17)

Here the poet talks of the last hours of Yeats's life and he imagines him battle with death on that fateful afternoon. The nurses were doing everything that they could do and by then it was the talk of the town. His mental powers to hold on, to the last remnants of his bodily strength, finally gave way and the flowing current of life in him was drained out. These were his last minutes in this world before he breathed his last.

"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."

(Lines 18-23)

Yet, Yeats still continued to be remembered and celebrated after his death. His memory spanned across generations and borders and he was still loved and admired by countless faces across hundreds of cities. It was as though, he transcended to unknown worlds of his admirers, equally subjected to their scrutiny and criticism. Thus, his words received newer insights and perspectives in the lives of the people. Such is the function of a poet and the weight of his words that live on and make their significance felt.

"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."
(Lines 24-31)

The modern world in its fast changing pace and self-importance may lose track of and drown the poet's memory. Auden provides an insight into the socio-economic condition with roaring brokers at the Stock-exchange on one hand and the poor with their suffering to which they are conditioned. Though every modern individual is convinced that he is free in actuality he is only imprisoned and locked in himself. Only a few thousand will perhaps pause and remember this day, as one remembers a day in one's life when one did something different that made the day stand out in their memory. The truth is that except for a specific reading public, who take time

to remember the poet and his contribution, life will carry on.

The lines 30-31, "What instruments we have agree, The day of his death was a dark cold day" are a repetition of lines 5-6 and it emphasises the dark, cold day on which everyone had to accept the death of Yeats.

Part-II

"You were silly like us; your gift survived it all;
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executions
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."
(Lines 32-40)

The longevity and success that poetry receives does not necessarily have to do with the quality of the person behind the poet. The idea that Yeats was "silly like us" does not in any way degrade his work. His poetry survives on its own independent strength, as poetry itself has a certain survival instinct. It is great poetry that creates a world of its own and this is how it survives, "a way of happening, a mouth". Here Auden talks of the eventual course that poetry takes in the world, like an ever flowing river. It is immortal and it survives in time, passed from one generation to another. Poetry is like the voice of the peoples' collective understanding of their own human experience.

Part-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;"
(Lines 41-48)

This stanza is like an invocation to the Earth to receive the mortal remains of the poet. "William Yeats is laid to rest" this is as if the final declaration before his burial. The words "Irish vessel" refers to Yeats as he was originally a citizen of Ireland and on his death he is like an empty ship unable to create poetry anymore.

The approaching shadow of World War II loomed largely over the fate of Europe and this is what Auden refers to as the "nightmare of the dark". This was a time when the nations were waiting to wage war against each other, locked in their hatred and hostility. Auden wrote this poem in February 1939 but war did not break out until September, when Germany invaded Poland. The failure of Britain and France to resist Hitler's claims on Czechoslovakia in 1938 made Europe hostile. This proved again that man alone can be man's enemy.

Prior to this in the year 1929, there was a great economic turn down, known as the Great Depression that shook America and later England too. This had created much industrial stagnation and mass unemployment leading to poverty. This was the background in which Auden had written the poem in.

"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;"
(Lines 49-56)

Not just the civilians but the intellectuals in power are

responsible for the peace of the state. It is on their decision and policies that the welfare of the country depends on. But there is indifference and lack of humanity or fellow-feeling is frozen.

In such a situation Yeats' poetry can be a saving grace with a ray of optimism.

"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"
(Lines 57-64)

The invocation continues and Yeats is evoked to create his verses and relate the condition of the present world just as it is. Vineyards yield grapes that are sour and that is perhaps compared to the curse of inhumanity and the warring worlds. The great poet is requested to sing in a rapture until, healing starts like a gushing fountain in human hearts that are barren like deserts. Please notice that in the earlier lines the given description is of the locked and frozen seas of pity and just as the glaciers have the potential to melt into a sea, so does the feeling of sympathy in human beings. Similarly, the comparison drawn in the above lines are with the deserts of the hearts which can be healed and sensitised with the poet's verses.In a way, man is imprisoned in the limited count of his days and yet is free to count his blessings. A world without war and strife is a blessing as it gives man a sense of freedom. Thus, the poem ends on an optimistic note in which Auden invokes the significance of Yeats's presence through his poems.The three stanzas that followed the lines, "Let the Irish vessel lie, Emptied of its poetry" (Lines 43-44) were excluded and removed by Auden from this poem in his 1966 edition of *Collected Shorter Poems*. These three stanzas were as

follows:

"Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and the innocent
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique,
Worship language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet.
Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views
And will pardon Paul Claudel
Pardons him for writing well"



LET US KNOW

At the Downs School where Auden was a teacher, he experienced what he later described as a "Vision of Agape" in June 1933. This was while he was sitting with three fellow teachers at the school when he suddenly found that he loved them for themselves and that their existence had infinite value for him. This spiritual experience he said later influenced his decision to return to the Anglican Church in 1940.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Choose the correct answer:

a. The poem "In Memory of W.B Yeats" is

1. An eulogy
2. An elegy
3. A villanelle
4. An eclogue

Answer:……..

b. When Auden wrote the poem in 1939, Europe was under the shadow of

1. World War I
2. Civil War
3. World War II

Answer:……

Q5. Discuss briefly what the poem "In Memory of W.B Yeats" is about. (60 words)



Doggerel: roughly written verse which can sometimes be intentional

Ballad: a poem or song telling a popular story, usually an old love story

Limerick: a humorous five lined poem with a rhyme scheme **aabba**

Haiku: a Japanese poem of seventeen syllables

13.5 POETIC STYLE

Like many of his generation, Auden was inspired by the poetic wit and irony of T.S. Eliot, and the metrical and verbal techniques of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Wilfred Owen. His study of English influenced his versifications and made him familiar with the rhythms and long alliterative lines of Anglo-Saxon poetry. He was also inspired by John Skelton's use of the rapid and short-lined **doggerel**. He learned much from the English music and American blues singers. Auden published about 400 poems and 7 long poems of which two were book-length. His poetry ranged from 20th century modernism to the traditional forms such as **ballads** and **limericks**, short **haiku** and **villanelles** to Christmas **oratorio** and a **baroque eclogue** in Anglo-Saxon meters.

The central themes of his poetry are love, politics and citizenship, religion and morals and the relationship between human beings and the world of nature. The style of his poems written in the late 1920s and early 1930s alternated between modern and traditional styles, written in an intense and dramatic tone and this established him as a left-wing political poet. His poems in the 1940s explored religious and ethical themes in a less dramatic manner. In the 1950s and the 1960s many of his poems concentrated on the ways in which words revealed or concealed emotions and he used the form of **opera librettos** which was suited to direct expression of strong feelings. He was admired for his abilities to write in nearly every verse form, draw from a wide range of his intellect, including his interests in socio- political theories. His poetry often literally or symbolically recounts a journey or quest and his experiences of travel itself provided enough material for his verses.



Villanelle: a nineteen lines long poetic form with a complex rhyme scheme.

Oratorio: a large-scale musical work on a religious theme for orchestra and voices.

Baroque -eclogue: very ornate European classical style in which a poem is written on a pastoral subject.

W.H. Auden's 1939 elegy for W.B. Yeats acknowledges the loss of a great poet who also was his contemporary. In step with John Milton's "Lycidas" or Thomas Gray's "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard", the traditional elegiac form serves the commemorative function, in which death is not the only loss treated in the poem. The poem represents a period when Auden began to lose faith in what poetry could accomplish and the loss of faith in the political power of art.



Opera librettos: the words of an opera or other long vocal work.

In a way, the poem also resists convention, as one finds the absence of mourning. Although, a dark and reflective tone is present, a lamentation of a loss does not seem to occur. Auden also asserts that Yeats did not immortalise his art rather he was immortalised by his art. In understanding the poetic afterlife of a poet, his poem is an additional step towards preserving Yeats's memory and works.

The 63-lined poem is divided into three sections and the first two sections are written in the form of free verse. The third section consisting of six paragraphs (lines 41-63) is written in lines of four with the 'a, a, b, b' rhyme scheme.

In much of his poetry, Auden introduced purely private symbols intelligible only to a few friends. He was always the experimenter, especially in bringing together high artifice and a colloquial tone in his poetry. In his

poems he preferred to confront modern problems directly instead of filtering them, as T.S. Eliot did by use of symbolic situations. Around the 1940s Auden showed greater clarity of imagery and he developed a more complex view of the world. His thoughts transformed from his earlier psychological diagnosis of modern ills to a more religious view of personal responsibility and values. The poems written in the last phase of his career were "About the Home" (1965) and "City Without Walls" (1970) which were personal in tone, with an informal touch and remarkable technical skill.

Auden's reputation and his stature as a poet and writer has been disputed with a range of critical opinions. Geoffrey Grigson in an introduction to a 1949 anthology of modern poetry, wrote that Auden "arches over all". His stature was suggested by book titles such as *Auden and After* (1942) by Francis Scarfe and *The Auden Generation* (1972) by Samuel Hynes. In his later collected editions, Auden rewrote or discarded some of his most famous poems like "Spain" or "September 1, 1939". He wrote that he rejected poems that he found boring or dishonest that lacked his sense of conviction and were used only for rhetorical effectiveness. John Ashbery was of the opinion that in the 1940s Auden "was the modern poet". In the 1950s and 1960s writers like Philip Larkin and Randall Jarrell lamented that Auden's work had declined from his earlier promise.

When Auden and Isherwood sailed to New York in January 1939, entering on temporary visas, their departure was seen by many as a betrayal and his reputation had suffered. With some exceptions, British critics treated his early work as best, when he was praised as a progressive voice in contrast to the politically obscure voice of T.S Eliot. The American critics tended to favour his middle and later work. Auden's reputation did not decline after his death and on 2, October 1947 a memorial stone for Auden was unveiled at Poets' corner in Westminster Abbey. Joseph Brodsky wrote that his was "the greatest mind of the twentieth century".

Today, Auden is recognized as one of the masters of the 20th century English poetry and has been compared with Dryden in his combination of intelligence and remarkable craftsmanship.



13.6 LET US SUM UP

You have just finished reading about the poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" by W.H. Auden. The poem is based on the great modern poet W.B. Yeats and is written in a tributary form, with a reflection on the foreshadowing events of World War II.

The poem focuses on the poetic afterlife and also the function of poetry as an art to unify the collective minds of the readers in a world crippled with modern technology and warfare. The lament in the poem is not just directed to the death of Yeats but also towards a world that is threatened by its own destructive potential. The repute and fame of W.B. Yeats was such that for his admirers, it crossed all borders of nations. For Auden while memory was to do with the past, it took place in the present. And the only way a poet could honour the dead, was to write an elegiac poem about the present. You have also gained sufficient knowledge of the elegiac form to understand the essence of the poem.



13.7 FURTHER READING

1) Arana, Victoria R. (2009) *W.H. Auden's Poetry: Mythos, Theory and Practice.* New York Cambria Press

2) Carpenter, Humphrey. (2011) *W.H. Auden: A Biography*. Faber and Faber Limited

3) Smith, Stan. (ed.) (2004) *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Websites:

http://en:wikipedia.org/wiki/w._h._auden



13.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1 a. True.

b. True.

c. False.

d. True.

Ans to Q No 2 a. Poems

b. Oxford

c. 1939

d. Pulitzer

Ans to Q No 3. *Poems, Paid on Both Sides: A Charade, The Orators, The Dance of Death, The Dog Beneath the Skin, The Ascent of F-6, Look Strangers, Letters From Ireland, Journey to a War, On the Frontier, Another Time, The Double Man, For The Time Being, The Age of Anxiety, Nories, The Enchanted Flood, The Shield of Achilles, Homage To Clio, The Dyer's Hand, About The House, City Without Walls, The Elder Hedda, A Certain World, Forewords and Afterwords, Epistle to a Godson*.

Ans to Q No 4 a. An elegy. b. World War II.

Ans to Q No 5. To refer to 13.4.1 subsection of the unit.

13.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Assess the significance of Auden as a modern poet.

Q2. How has Auden employed the traditional elegiac form along with the modern?

Q3. Discuss the poetic style of Auden as reflected in the poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats".

Q4. In what context did Auden write the poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"?

Q5. Discuss the content of the poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats".

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