

Samantha Akridge: A New Type of Elegy

W.B. Yeats was an Irish poet and playwright whose work was imbued with ambiguity. In "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", W.H. Auden writes an elegy to the death and work of Yeats. Auden is particularly concerned with the relationship between humans and the impersonal realm of nature. Throughout "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" Auden personifies nature and weather, juxtaposing it with the man-made world, and humanizing Yeats' poetry. This personification serves to elegize Yeats while simultaneously ushering in a new poet who can transform society.

Auden anthropomorphizes the poetry of W.B. Yeats in "In Memory of W.B. Yeats". Auden writes, "By mourning tongues the death of the poet was kept from his poems." (Auden.10) He speaks as if the poems need to be shielded from the death of their creator. In the second part of "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" the poetry seems to become mobile as it "survives" (36) and "flows" (38). After the poet's death his poetry lives on "in the valley of its saying" (37) and spreads "south from ranches of isolation and the busy griefs." (38-39) However, as Auden makes clear the poems do not move far. Yeats' poetry is not the type to make people think or even be remembered for very long. Auden humanizes the poetry, but he does not make them substantial things. The personification of Yeats' poetry immortalizes him, even if he is only remembered, as one would recall a "slightly unusual" (29) day. A few will remember Yeats, his thoughts and feelings, because of his poems. However they are not Yeats' poems alone now; they are "modified in the guts of the living" (23) and left to the interpretation of the audience.

The poet soon claims the action of "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" as Auden calls on a new type of poet to "sing" (72) and "persuade" (69). Auden believes that poetry has the power to free man from the cell that he has created and the poet has an "unconstraining voice" (68), which can "teach the free man how to praise." (77) Auden lays the "Irish vessel" (44) down in order to make room for new poets who may produce significant changes to the world. In the mind of the poet words are a "vineyard" (71) with the capability to make life fruitful and joyous. They have the potential to change and create, inspire and rouse man. Auden does not believe that Yeats' poetry stimulated this change. After his death Ireland was no different than the day Yeats was born; his poetry is lost "in the importance and noise of tomorrow." (24) Auden is heralding a new age of poetry that has the capability to move "mad Ireland." (34)

Throughout "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" inanimate objects are acting on nature, poetry and the poet, or other inanimate objects. The personification of the weather and water is especially prevalent in this poem: "snow disfigured the public statues" (3), "brooks" (2), "the peasant river." (9) By metonymy the water is meant to symbolize all of nature. Elegies typically declare a poet's death and have nature mourn the man and his work, but Auden merely lists the weather on the day of his death:

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.

O all the instruments agree

The day of his death was a dark cold day. (1-6)

The first part of the poem follows the form of a typical elegy, but it lacks the traditional importance and solemnity of past elegiac poems. Nature does not mourn the poet, rather it goes on without interruption: the snow still falls, the water is still frozen, and the day is still cold. Surprisingly, not even Yeats' admirers stop at his death. Auden is remarking that though Yeats' poetry survived it does not possess the power to change anything. Earlier, Auden claimed that his 'poetry makes nothing happen.' (36) Ireland has changed Yeats and has made him into the poet that he is. However, Yeats has not changed Ireland: 'Now Ireland has her madness and weather still.' (35) Yeats and his poems are 'scattered'(18) now and Yeats must be content with the course they may take. His country remains constant while he is laid to rest and it seems that he has not left an impact. In this elegy the poet is laid to rest, his poems though still living are only remembered by a few admirers, and it is a new form of poetry that triumphs.

With the personification of W.B. Yeats' poems, nature, and the weather Auden examines the effect that Yeats had on human beings. Through the poetry and the death of the poet Auden implies that he was just an ordinary man: 'silly like us.' (32) Yeats did not change Ireland and Auden states that few would remember him, but a new poet will inspire nature and man.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

W. H. Auden [2]

Author:

Samantha Akridge [3]

Poem:

In Memory of W. B. Yeats [4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/samantha-akridge-new-type-elegy>

Links

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/w-h-auden>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/samantha-akridge>

[4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/memory-w-b-yeats>