

Student Name

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Introduction to Poetry

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In Memoriam: Reading Organic Unity in W.H. Auden

Often in a great work of poetry, the structure of the piece holds as much significance to the meaning of the poem as the words themselves. In his poem “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (1940), W.H. Auden achieves organic unity by breaking the work into three distinct stanzas, each with a different physical form. The first stanza provides an account of Yeats’s death and what happened throughout the world following his death, the second speaks directly to Yeats and details information about his past, and the third stanza is a smaller, self-contained poem within the main framework of the piece.

The first and second stanzas, while separate in form, work together to give the reader insight into Yeats’s life, his death, and the way his poetic craft was influenced by his life. In the first stanza, the narrator says that “He disappeared in the dead of winter” (ll. 1) and “The day of his death was a dark cold day” (ll. 6). The author goes on to describe how the world went on without Yeats, and how the author’s poetry will likely be misinterpreted to fit the perspectives of those same people who go on living as if his death were just a minor occurrence. The first stanza is broken into five sections, with a two-line conclusion. The first two sections describe the effect Yeats’ death had on the rest of the world, the third section portrays the physical and mental state of Yeats himself at the time, and the last two sections continue to convey what happened to the rest of the world when Yeats died. By placing the section about Yeats in the middle of the poem, Auden draws attention to the man himself; it is as if, by placing information about the rest of the

world around him, Auden puts him in the center of it. The last two lines repeat lines five and six, and serve to magnify the magnitude of Yeats' death.

The second stanza, while in an entirely different format than the first, continues the story of Yeats and gives background into the influence on his poetry. It is composed of ten lines, and can almost be considered a small biography of Yeats' life; the narrator says, "...your gift survived it all: / The parish of rich women, physical decay, / Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry" (ll. 32-34). The second half of the stanza talks about how poetry "...makes nothing happen" (ll. 36), yet is "...a way of happening, a mouth" (ll. 41). Just as Yeats' poetry survived his death and is transported to people all over the world, as described in the first stanza, the narrator says in stanza two that poetry "...survives...flows on south / From ranches of isolation . . . it survives" (ll. 36-40).

The third stanza continues the themes of the first and second, but is written in the form of a "miniature" poem within the frame of the central work. It is written in trochaic form, with an *abab* rhyme scheme. It is as if the author is honoring Yeats by writing the last stanza of his own poem in the same type of meter which characterizes Yeats' own work. The narrator relates how . . .