

# Deconstructive Reading of W.H. Auden's In Memory of W. B. Yeats

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## Abstract

This research studies W.H. Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' from deconstructive lens. The poem receives a shocking reception because it breaks the traditions of an elegy in glorifying the dead. Yeats, the Irish giant of modern poetry, receives no exalting. Auden not only wastes the opportunity to commemorate Yeats, but he shows the loss of his legacy as a poet. The deconstructive reading of this poem provides another opposite interpretation. The research will present through applying Derrida's approach the centered and decentered interpretations of the poem which can be read as a glorification of Yeats after the separation between the author and the text is achieved. Usually the poem marginalized the role of Yeats, thus the two oppositions confront each other in this research to reveal the hidden glorification of Yeats though the first reading of the poem tells the opposite.

**Key Words:** deconstruction, Derrida, oppositions, self-contractions, glorification, marginalization

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## Introduction

Deconstruction theory creates a revolution in reading a text since it denies the New critical perspective of having only a single interpretation of a text. Giving superiority to a decided thought for the discourse deadens it and absorbs any enjoyment in re-reading it. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), French philosopher, introduces deconstruction to literature in 1960's to spread wildly to reach America in 1970's (Enwald 50). Through this approach, the readers can present different interpretations by re-reading the text. Deconstructionist goes further through denying even the author's control on his text that should be cut from the effect of its author. Though This theory is new to literature, it provides various opportunities to give life to the hidden or marginalized part of the text and encourage readers to re-read the text and dismantle its parts. Destructive theory main focus is to provide other reading of the discourse by revealing that the discourse cannot be deadlock. This theory proves that discourse is alive and can be read differently. It shows the oppositions in thoughts and shedding lights on the spots that contain self-contraction (Norris 19). Deconstruction is defined with various ways Habib sees it as "a way of challenging interpretations of text" (649). Thus deconstruction can be best represented as a way of forcing the text to confront the contraction and question each part.

This research will present a new reading of W.H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" by shedding light of the "binary opposition" (Tyson 100) that are the marginalization as well as the glorification of Yeats. The center thought is the marginalization and hidden is glorification of his role. Auden attempts to be realistic and avoid the conventional ways of exalting the dead in an elegy, but the text reveals something completely different that grant Yeats his actual appreciation.

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) is one of the pillar of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry. His talent is versatile since he writes in poetry, drama, opera and prose.. Being raised up in a physician family, the father is a doctor and the mother is a nurse, his poems probe in mental and physical diseases for people and age. His poems offers remedies. He presents other themes like love, friendship and moral revolution. He falls under the influence of Sigmund Freud whom is glorified in an elegy by the poet. Auden regards poetry as "a game of knowledge" (Ramazani 2003 785). His attraction to the poetic power of T. S Eliot is clear. Though the two adopts different political attitudes, they are associated and encouraged each other. Sometime, Auden has harsh views towards some poets or attitudes. Yeats is one of these poets that Auden stands against some of his views. Yeats "is seen as

being preened .. too much on being poet" ( Ramazani 2003 784). Auden finds some of his views especially that is presented in the prefatory poem to his collection *Nones*, too theatrical and bombastic. Auden shows no high appreciation for Yeats "false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities" (poetry of Mourning 796). Perhaps this will lessen his exalting the poet in the poem that is written as an elegy for Yeats.

"In Memory of W.B" is written in 1939 to commemorate Yeats who is the one of the major 20<sup>th</sup> poets. Elegy is a song that laments the death of an individual to express grief and exalt his greatness to such extent of making the nature as sharer for passing away. As the title of the poem tells, the poem will elegize Yeats as a poet. It is expected to have exalting of the poet or showing more sentimentality for his fate according to the conventions of elegy.

Destruction asserts that "the great joy of textual analysis resides in discovering new interpretation" (Bressler 116). The first step of destruction theory is to determine the central of the privileged part in the text (Derrida 42) which is the indifference toward Yeats` death through various images. Though the trauma of death usually should be reflected on every surrounded milieu, it is reversed in this poem. Auden delineates Yeats` death as a common event for nature as well as people community. Indifference is present when Auden starts the poem presenting cluster of images from nature to prove the indifference for the poet`s death including the playing of wolves in the greenery of the forest and the river softly float as if nor great poet ceased to be . Nature does not pay attention to the passing away of Yeats. While the reaction of the world of human is veiled by the darkness and the coldness of the day. Thus; Yeats in this elegy is denied from attention :

Far from his illness

The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,  
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable  
quays; ( Mendelson 242)

The refrain of the poem continues in reminding the readers that nor nature neither humanity is affected by Yeats` passing away, "O all the instruments agree/The day of his death was a dark cold day" (242).

The poem surpasses the conventions of elegy in magnifying the merits of the dead. Auden goes further

in showing the indifference of human world that goes on its course uncaring for the death of his poet. People return to busy activities and trades which are more important than the passing away of a poet. Life of the poor and the rich continues:

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. (242)

Besides the absence of glorifying of Yeats in this poem, evaluation of his poetry is threatened as well. He refers for the immortality of his poetry at the beginning of the poem since "The death of the poet was kept from his poems" (798) and in another stanza Auden asserts the permanence of poetry when he compares the scattering of his ashes with the spreading of his poms all over the world :

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities  
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections;  
To find happiness in another kind wood. (242)

In spite of above mentioned of the immortality of his poems, he depicts the transformations of his poetry in another stanza. Because of his everlasting absence of the poet, his poetry will be interpreted not according to the poet sense but depends on his readers affection and sensibility. He as a creator of his poems will lose the power of conveying them and his admirers will hold this position after his death; "His feeling will failed: he becomes his admirers" (242), his poetry will fall under the mercy of the appreciation of readers who don`t know him "And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections;" he refers the transformation of his body as well as poetry through his absence ". according to Auden Yeats will :

... be punished under the a foreign code of  
conscience.

The words of a dead man

Are modified in the guts of the living. (242)

After showing the unconcern of nature and humanity for his death and even his poetry will be subjected to readers modification, Auden describes Yeats as an individual to be a common man without any extraordinary feature. Auden makes a revolution in elegiac conventions. He continues in not glorifying Yeats appreciation, though the poem commemorates him to such extent of saying:

You were silly like us: your gift survived it all;"

.....

Your self; mad Irland hurt you into poetry.

Now irland has her madness and her weather still (242)

Poetry is regarded in the poem as related to spirit of his owner " . . . : it survives/ In the valley of its saying where executives" (242), thus it has no role in improving human world since poetry "would never want to tamper; it flows south/ From ranches of isolation and the busy grief's,/ Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives\ A way of happening. A mouth" (242). Auden does not glorify him even in the only thing that he believes to be permanent after death, poetry. He belittles the role of Yeats poetry in correcting Ireland misfortunate. Poetry does only present ideals that can be created though souls and they are not fulfilled in reality. Auden states that though he devotes his poetry for his country but he does not do anything. His country hurts him in urging him to be a great poet.

Even when Auden touches poetry. It is expected to refer to the greatness of Yeats poetry, language or role but he speaks generally about the role of art in softening the hatred that has on horizon in Europe. Only poetry can rebuild the sympathy and between people deaden the blood thirty steps for destruction. about the role of poetry in facing human crises like war. Though the poem in devoted for honoring Yeats:

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in its hate (242)

Auden refers to the power of style rather than the content thus he says time can forgive Kipling for his views and Claudel for his wrong decision in standing

in the wrong side of the Spanish civil war and time can **pardon also Yeats for any nonsense he presented:**

In other elegy, "in memory of Sigmund Freud", Auden shows his realistic style and deserting pastoral elegy but he returns and glorifies the dead showing his role in life. Auden uses his realistic approach to glorifying Freud, and presenting detailed appraisal about him which is logical in any elegy but this doesn't occur with Yeats:

He wasn't clever at all; he merely taught

The unhappy present to recite the past

Like a poetry lesson till sooner

Or later it faltered at the line where

Long ago the accusations had begun,

And suddenly knew by whom it had been judged.

How rich life had been and how silly,

And how life forgiven and more humble... (242)

The conclusion of this poem shows Auden super ability in exalting the Freud; showing his role in understanding human psyche, his investigation in the unconscious:

One rational voice is dumb. Over his grave

The household of impulse mourns one deeply loved.

Sad is Eros, builder of cities,

And weeping anarchic Aphrodite. (242)

We resorts to this poem only to show that the realistic approach and being unconventional elegist don't prevent Auden from over glorifying the dead in other elegies.

The repressed thoughts of this poem is the hidden or the unconscious glorification of Yeats by Auden. Now, we should force the poem to question and confront this ignored part. Though Auden verbally doesn't pay any homage for the role of Yeats as a poet, the deep reading of Auden's words can reveal a hidden exalting. We find some thoughts that are used by Auden to avoid indulgence in glorifying of his

dead refer to deep exalting. Let's start with the caring of surrounded nature. The outset of the poem of hard and dark winter can create a yoke with Yeats death. The cruel coldness which is exaggerated to be the actual January exploited to lament the passing away of Yeats:

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. (242)

Figure of speech are used indirectly to reflect the deep loss of this death. The use of some figures of speech to support the elegiac mood. Alliteration of the words that reflects depression and desolation like "death", "dad", "deserted", "disfigured", "disappeared", "dying", "day" and others. Alliterations shows the pain that is veiled in the poem. In spite of lacking of sympathy in the metaphor that delineates death as a rebel, this metaphor can be read positively. It shows the status of Yeats as a country and emperor who imposes full control on his kingdom until the revolution which is proceeded by rumors of other provinces success, his parts of the body waken him. Though he steps down from life, he was an empire of poetry:

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. (242)

In spite of referring to the transformation of the poetry of Yeats just like the transformation of the body and the decay of his body as a negative point. Modifying of Yeats` poetry can be read as part of Yeats everlasting appraisal because the continuity of analysis of any work and re-reading it from different corners or applying various approaches on it is a sign of everlasting creativity of the work itself. It is the feature of arts regardless of being alive or dead. The use of "mouth" as metaphor for poetry and poet is a great honor for Yeats:

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. (242)

The structure of the poem is not far from the hidden glorifying Yeats. Though Auden adopts blank verse, with inequality of rhymes waving between feminine and half rhyme. The first section is characterized with lack of balance in length while the last section contrasts the other section in adopting the formal form which echoes the grand state of the elegy. The disciplined beats of stress between two major and two minor stress echo the glorified slow and horrible matching of Yeats funeral. The formality adds seriousness and grand style of elegy. Thus; Yeats is granted the dignity that he deserted through this form. Auden whether on purpose or by coincidence adopts Yeats own style of writing especially the style of by making each section separated in tone and structure. Imitating Yeats style the poem specially of "The Tower" is part of Auden appreciation for Yeats`. Another imitation occurs in section three of the poem through the meter and rhyme of Yeats` "Under Ben Bulben" ( Ferguson 1473) . In an extended form of personification, the wintering earth itself seems to mourn the loss of the poet:

Earth, receive an honoured guest:  
William Yeats is laid to rest.  
Let the Irish vessel lie  
Emptied of its poetry (242)

## Conclusion

Deconstruction from Derrida`s views doesn't mean to give superiority to the marginalized part but to show the two parts on the same field and allow them both the right to be read and understood by the readers. Dismantling the text presents another ignored part of the text, since the text is the production of human, it has the ability to represent different interpretation even if they are self- contracted. Thus, this poem can be presented as a glorification of Yeats. Auden tries avoid direct exalting of the dead but accurate re-reading of the text reveals the extent of appreciation he had for Yeats. The poem is read differently in this work and

add new enjoyment in revealing the hidden part that is ignored to depend on a single view.

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