To a Shade

POEM TEXT

If you have revisited the town, thin Shade,
Whether to look upon your monument
(I wonder if the builder has been paid)
Or happier-thoughted when the day is spent
To drink of that salt breath out of the sea
When grey gulls flit about instead of men,
And the gaunt houses put on majesty:
Let these content you and be gone again;
For they are at their old tricks yet.
A man
Of your own passionate serving kind who had brought
In his full hands what, had they only known,
Had given their children's children loftier thought,
Sweeter emotion, working in their veins
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,
And insult heaped upon him for his pains,
And for his open-handedness, disgrace;
Your enemy, an old foul mouth, had set
The pack upon him.
Go, unquiet wanderer,
And gather the Glasnevin coverlet
About your head till the dust stops your ear,
The time for you to taste of that salt breath
And listen at the corners has not come;
You had enough of sorrow before death—
Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.

SUMMARY

If you've come back to the city of Dublin, lean ghost, to gaze on the statue they've built for you (did they pay the sculptor?), or else, in a better mood at day's end, to inhale the sea air when seagulls instead of people are out and about, and the meager homes look grand—be happy with these and get going, since the city residents are up to their old tricks.

A man as intensely public-spirited as you were—who generously tried to give them something which, if they'd only appreciated it, would have ennobled the minds and sweetened the hearts of their descendants—has been chased out of town. He's gotten only scorn for his efforts and slander for his generosity. Your old enemy, a vulgar critic, turned the common mob against him.

Get going, restless spirit. Bury yourself in the Glasnevin Cemetery ground, like a blanket, until you can't hear anything. It's not yet time for you to inhale the sea air and hover in corners, eavesdropping on the living. You experienced enough misery while you were alive. Go, go! You're better off in the grave.

THEMES

SERVICE, SACRIFICE, AND INGRATITUDE

"To a Shade" is a bitter lament addressed to Irish nationalist leader Charles Parnell (1846-1891), who campaigned for Ireland's independence but died virtually powerless after a scandal. Addressing Parnell's ghost ("Shade"), the speaker urges him to stay in the grave rather than revisit "the town" (Dublin), because its people still fail to appreciate public servants like him. The speaker complains that Dubliners, in their continuing ingratitude, have just "driven" out another man (the art dealer Hugh Lane) who shared Parnell's "passionate" selflessness. "To a Shade" serves as an acknowledgment of these men's work and its importance while also mourning the fact that those who truly love and sacrifice for their people are rarely appreciated in their own lifetimes.

The poem laments two men who tried to perform good deeds for their people but found themselves punished rather than rewarded "for [their] pains." Though the poem never names these men, its references and context would have identified them to Yeats's readers:

- The "Shade" is Charles Parnell, an Irish nationalist leader who had died in disgrace after an adultery scandal.
- The other "man" of Parnell's "kind" is Hugh Lane, whose Municipal Gallery of Modern Art had failed to win Dublin's financial support. ("To a Shade" is one of several poems Yeats wrote about Lane and his gallery, which Yeats believed would benefit Dublin. Parnell's "monument" had recently been built in the same city, prompting Yeats to connect Parnell's failure with Lane's.)

Referring to the news about Lane, the speaker informs Parnell's ghost that "they" (the public) are still up to "their old tricks." They're again mistreating a man of Parnell's "passionate serving kind"—that is, a man who passionately worked to serve his people. The speaker tells Parnell's ghost that he and this other man share a common "enemy": the "foul mouth" of

rumor-mongers and critics, who rally the people ("the pack") against noble public servants.

Public service is thankless—so thankless, the speaker implies, that public servants are better off alone in the grave than working among their people. Though Dublin has finally built Parnell a monument, the recognition has come too late, and the speaker sarcastically wonders if the statue's "builder has been paid." In other words, the town continues to snub those who work on its behalf.

The speaker thus suggests that, if Parnell's ghost visits Dublin, he'll be "happier" among its seagulls than its people—and that he'll better off leaving town quickly. In fact, the speaker advises Parnell that he'd be "safer in the tomb" than among the living. In the speaker's view, the "pains" (sacrifices) and "open-handedness" (generosity) of public servants like Parnell bring them only "insult" and "disgrace."

Ultimately, then, the poem makes a cynical statement: a political version of the idiom that "no good deed goes unpunished." At the same time, it acknowledges the worth of what public servants *try* to do. In particular, it honors the "loftier thought" and "Sweeter emotion" that Lane tried to bring to the public—and that the public would have appreciated, "had they only known."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9
- Between Lines 9-10
- Lines 10-18
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-24

LIFE'S SORROWS VS. DEATH'S SERENITY

"To a Shade" echoes one of the most ancient ideas in literature: that the peace of death is superior to the pain of life. The speaker portrays the living world as full of misery, conflict, and disappointment and imagines "the tomb" as a restful bed. While acknowledging that life may hold some lingering appeal for "unquiet" (restless) spirits, the poem insists that death is "safer" than the turmoil the dead have left behind.

The poem portrays life, and human society in particular, as shabby and disappointing. The speaker never actually names "the town" they're criticizing, so there's a sense that the town could stand in for human society in general. The "houses" of that town can only "put on majesty" in a certain light; they're actually "gaunt" (meager) and unimpressive. By extension, human society in general isn't all that impressive. In fact, according to the speaker, the town's "gulls" make better company than its "men." The speaker misanthropically prefers animals and nature ("the sea") to humankind. That's because the general public is merciless and ungrateful; they drag down their best servants and representatives like a "pack" of wolves.

By contrast, the poem imagines death as a rest from human folly. The speaker advises the ghost of Parnell to go back to the grave, because "You had enough of sorrow before death"—and revisiting humanity can only cause more sorrow. Referring to Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, the speaker tells Parnell's ghost to "gather the Glasnevin coverlet / About your head till the dust stops your ear." In other words: enjoy death as a respite from the turmoil and foolishness of human life. All in all, the speaker views death as "safer" and more peaceful than the disappointing human world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9
- Lines 14-18
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

If you have revisited the town, thin Shade,
Whether to look upon your monument
(I wonder if the builder has been paid)

The title "To a Shade" frames the poem as an apostrophe to a dead person. The term "shade" is often specifically associated with underworld spirits in ancient Greek and Roman myth, but it can refer to any ghost.

Lines 1-3 begin addressing this "Shade" in a fairly plain, conversational tone. The speaker calls the shade "thin," emphasizing its deprivation in the afterlife and perhaps expressing a touch of pity. The speaker then suggests that the shade might have recently "revisited the town," perhaps "to look upon your monument." Though the town and monument aren't named, these clues—along with other work Yeats was publishing at the time, and his body of work in general—start to establish a topical context for the poem.

The "Shade" is the ghost of Irish nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell, who had died in 1891, shortly after a scandal involving an extramarital affair caused his political downfall. Even in disgrace, Parnell remained a popular and respected leader among many Irish nationalists, and after years of fundraising, a statue honoring him (the Parnell Monument) was unveiled on O'Connell Street in Dublin in 1911. Yeats wrote "To a Shade" roughly two years later, in September 1913. The poem imagines, then, that Parnell's ghost might have left his tomb to check out the new Parnell statue.

The speaker, meanwhile, is clearly Yeats himself, who was born in a Dublin suburb and was deeply invested in all things Irish.

He's considered the greatest Irish poet of his age, and in the early 20th century, his work began to incorporate more topical commentary on modern Ireland, in contrast with the mythological material that dominated the poems of his youth. He went on to write several other poems about Parnell and his legacy, including "Parnell's Funeral" (the title poem of *Parnell's Funeral and Other Poems*, 1935), "Come Gather Round Me Parnellites," and "Parnell."

Yeats generally admired Parnell (though his feelings varied over the years) and felt the public had judged him unfairly in the adultery scandal. To that end, "To a Shade" criticizes Dublin's ingratitude toward Parnell and public servants like him. Although the city had built Parnell a "monument," it had done so only *after* his disgrace and death. The snarky parenthetical in line 3—"(I wonder if the builder has been paid)"—implies that the city might even have been ungrateful and cheap enough to stiff the statue's sculptor! (The sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *was* paid, but the statue was funded partly via subscriptions from Irish-American donors—in other words, Dublin didn't pay for it in full.)

LINES 4-7

Or happier-thoughted when the day is spent
To drink of that salt breath out of the sea
When grey gulls flit about instead of men,
And the gaunt houses put on majesty:

Lines 4-7 imagine another activity Parnell's ghost might have dabbled in while wandering Dublin. Instead of checking out the Parnell Monument, the speaker suggests, the ghost might have visited the seaside, "drink[ing]" in the "salt[y]" air and spending time with "gulls" rather than people. The ghost might have done so at sunset, "when the day is spent / [...] And the gaunt houses put on majesty." Such a seaside visit, the speaker, would leave Parnell's ghost "happier-thoughted" than visiting the monument and mingling with common "men."

Again, Yeats's portrayal of Dublin is passive-aggressive at best. The city's houses may look majestic at sunset, but this majesty is "put on" like a temporary or illusory garment. In reality, the houses are "gaunt"—narrow, meager, shabby. And it doesn't say much for the city's human residents that the company of gulls might be preferable! As the poem goes on, the reason for this snarky attitude becomes clear. Even though Dublin has built a statue of Parnell after his death, Yeats feels the city treated him terribly during his life.

Even so, these lines provide the closest thing to a lyrical description in the poem. After all, the speaker *does* appreciate the sea, the gulls, and the sunset hour, and he imagines that these things might make Parnell "happier," too. The language becomes a bit prettier to match: notice the alliteration in "salt"/"sea" and "grey gulls"/"gaunt," for example, and the assonance in "When"/"instead"/"men."

LINES 8-9

Let these content you and be gone again;
For they are at their old tricks yet.

After the more lyrical language of lines 4-7, lines 8-9 bring the poem back down to earth. The long, complex sentence that began in line 1 ends on a note of colloquial bluntness and anticlimax.

The speaker has described how Parnell's ghost might have occupied himself in Dublin: by visiting the Parnell Monument, perhaps, or taking in the sunset by the sea. There's an undertone of bitterness in the description, as though Parnell might have mixed feelings about "revisit[ing] the town." Still, the speaker now declares that these limited enjoyments will have to be enough. If you *have* been here, he tells Parnell's ghost, "Let these [experiences] content you and be gone again." In other words, quit while you're ahead and get out of town. Why? Because "they are at their old tricks yet."

The poem never names "they," but in context, the word seems to refer to the people of Dublin. It could be interpreted more narrowly as the *leaders* of Dublin, or more broadly as the people of *Ireland* (since Dublin is the Irish capital). Yeats is hurling an accusation here, so he's leaving himself some wiggle room by making the target slightly ambiguous. Still, the basic meaning is clear: the generic "they" (the people and/or their leaders) remain as devious and disappointing as they were when Parnell was alive. They're still up to "their old tricks," so there's no reason for the great man's ghost to stick around long.

BETWEEN LINES 9-10, LINES 10-14

A man
Of your own passionate serving kind who had brought
In his full hands what, had they only known,
Had given their children's children loftier thought,
Sweeter emotion, working in their veins
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,

Lines 9-14 mark a shift in the poem, signaled by the dropped and indented phrase "A man" in line 9. The speaker shares some news with Parnell's ghost, as if catching him up on what's happened since he died.

He informs Parnell's ghost that another figure like him—"A man / Of your own passionate serving kind"—has recently been "driven" out of Dublin. The city is still up to "their old tricks" in the sense that they're still mistreating public servants. This time, they targeted not a political but a cultural leader: a man who had generously "brought" them cultural treasures. Metaphorically, he came offering these gifts "In his full hands." If Dublin had "only known" their value, the gifts would have left a tremendous legacy for posterity: they would have "given" the city's grandchildren "loftier thought" and "Sweeter emotion." They would have both pacified and ennobled those future generations, "working in their veins / Like gentle blood."

("Gentle" here can mean both "mild" and "aristocratic." The pun slyly implies that Dublin, as it stands, is a bit violent and crass, a backwater that could have used the cultural boost.)

So who is this generous "man," and what are the gifts he offered? Yeats is alluding to topical events that most of his readers would have been familiar with but require some explanation over a century later:

- These lines refer to the art dealer and gallery owner Hugh Percy Lane, a native Irishman and friend of Yeats's.
- In 1908, Lane founded the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, considered the world's first modern art gallery, in Dublin. But the project stalled in the following decade, as the city government denied him much-needed funding. He was forced to seek a home for his art collection in London instead, so in that sense, he was "driven from" town.
- The backlash against his gallery was led by cultural conservatives who found modern art scandalous; one of them, the newspaper publisher William Martin Murphy, had also financed Charles Parnell's opposition during Parnell's adultery scandal.

Basically, Yeats felt that Dublin's enemies of culture and progress had thwarted two of Ireland's finest public servants. Other poems in Yeats's *Responsibilities* (1914) also address the Lane issue, including the famous "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing." Through these poems, Yeats publicly defended his friend and the art he valued. His literary intervention further inflamed the controversy, which only grew more complicated when Lane died suddenly in 1915.

LINES 15-18

And insult heaped upon him for his pains,
And for his open-handedness, disgrace;
Your enemy, an old foul mouth, had set
The pack upon him.

Having alluded to Hugh Lane's noble intentions in lines 9-14, the poem now describes Lane's suffering at the hands of the public. The repetition (including anaphora) in lines 15-16 conveys how that suffering grew and grew:

And insult heaped upon him for his pains,
And for his open-handedness, disgrace;

In other words, Dubliners hurt him in one way, *and* another, *and* another. Metaphorically, they "heaped" abuse on him in return for his efforts on their behalf. They repaid his "open-handedness," or generosity, with public "disgrace." The speaker doesn't seem to believe these attacks were random. He accuses Lane's "enemy," described in a harsh synecdoche as "an old foul mouth," of "set[ting] / The pack upon" Lane.

Again, Yeats leaves himself some wiggle room by not naming this enemy outright. In theory, it could be an abstract or generic enemy: the "foul mouth" of gossip, vulgarity, etc. But Yeats's author's note in the 1916 edition of *Responsibilities* suggests that this enemy is a specific person: Irish newspaper magnate William Martin Murphy.

Murphy had led a public campaign against Lane's art gallery; he'd also financed a key opponent of Charles Parnell a generation earlier. As Yeats wrote:

> The first serious opposition [to Lane's gallery] began in the *Irish Catholic*, the chief Dublin clerical paper, and Mr. William Murphy, the organiser of the recent lock-out and Mr. Healy's financial supporter in his attack upon Parnell, a man of great influence, brought to its support a few days later his newspapers *The Evening Herald* and *The Irish Independent*, the most popular of Irish daily papers.

In other words, Yeats felt that Murphy had turned the Irish public against two honorable men. In fact, he'd incited the public to attack them like a "pack" of hunting dogs.

BETWEEN LINES 18-19, LINES 19-22

Go, unquiet wanderer,
And gather the Glasnevin coverlet
About your head till the dust stops your ear,
The time for you to taste of that salt breath
And listen at the corners has not come;

Like line 9, line 18 is a dropped line that marks a shift in the poem. Having told Charles Parnell's ghost about the other "man" (that is, Hugh Lane) and his troubles, the speaker again urges the ghost to leave. The two caesuras in line 18 (the period after "him," followed by the indentation and comma of "Go, unquiet") directly precede and follow "Go," heightening the emphasis on this brisk command. The speaker really thinks this ghost should leave!

In lines 19-20, the speaker tells Parnell to "gather the Glasnevin coverlet / About [his] head" until he can no longer hear anything. This is a reference to Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, which dates to 1832 and bills itself as "Ireland's National Cemetery." Parnell was buried there in 1891. Metaphorically, then, the speaker is telling Parnell's ghost to get back to his burial site, slip back underground as if crawling under a bedspread, and shut out the noise of human activity. The idea is that the turmoil of human life (or at least Dublin life) is just too much; Parnell would be better off escaping it than hanging around it.

The speaker adds that "The time for you to taste of that salt breath / And listen at the corners has not come." In other words, it's not yet time for Parnell's ghost to wander around Dublin, inhaling the sea air and eavesdropping on the living. The

speaker may be implying that such a time *will* come—that Irish culture will someday be able to honor Parnell properly, and his ghost will be pleased to revisit Dublin. Sadly, in the speaker's view, that day has not yet arrived.

LINES 23-24

You had enough of sorrow before death—
Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.

"To a Shade" ends on a note of bitter lament. "You had enough of sorrow before death," the speaker tells the ghost of Parnell. The implication is clear: there's no reason to seek out further misery *after* death by revisiting the town that made him miserable.

Yeats is mainly alluding, here, to the scandal that effectively ended Parnell's political career the year before his death:

- News broke in 1890 that he had conducted a long-term adulterous affair with a married woman, Katharine O'Shea, fathering three of her children. O'Shea was separated from her husband William, and she and Parnell married after her divorce from William was complete, but the unusual relationship shocked late 19th-century Ireland.
- Parnell lost much of his political support amid the scandal, and while he maintained some popular support, health problems prevented him from mounting a successful comeback. He died in 1891 before he could compete in the 1892 general election. He and Katharine had been married less than four months.

After so much "sorrow," the speaker suggests, Parnell deserves a rest. There's no point in haunting Dublin, especially when the climate there remains so hostile to men of the "passionate serving kind" (line 10). With the help of repetition (specifically, epizeuxis), the speaker insists that Parnell would be better off dead:

> Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.

The two caesuras in this final line (one marked by the poem's only exclamation point) are the first to appear since line 18. Combined with the repetition of "Away," they dramatically disrupt the poem's rhythm, conveying the urgency of the speaker's command. During these tumultuous times, Yeats suggests, Dublin just isn't "safe[]" for public servants—or even their ghosts!

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The poem consists of an apostrophe to the "Shade," or ghost, of Irish nationalist leader Charles Parnell. A ghost can't respond to the living, of course, and this ghost probably isn't meant to be literal anyway (although Yeats did believe in the supernatural!). Instead, the apostrophe is a dramatic device. Addressing the "Shade" of this dead politician allows Yeats to comment on Irish history, which seems to haunt the country's living residents.

The speaker—again, a stand-in for Yeats himself—informs Parnell's ghost that Dublin hasn't improved since he died, so he might as well stay in the grave. Specifically, the speaker compares the plight of a "man" *like* Parnell (a reference to the art dealer Hugh Lane) to Parnell's own plight shortly before his death. In the speaker's view, Dublin has been unfairly hostile to both of these men.

The tone of the apostrophe is complex; it's both respectful of Parnell's memory and slightly acidic or irreverent. The speaker honors Parnell (whom he didn't know personally) for being a man of the "passionate serving kind," someone genuinely dedicated to the public welfare. But he also irritably tells Parnell's ghost: "Away, away! You are safer in the tomb." This isn't a lofty address to a beloved leader; it's more an expression of impatience with the state of present-day politics.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9
- Between Lines 9-10
- Lines 10-18
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-24

METAPHOR

The poem's figurative language—including metaphor, simile, and synecdoche—helps express the speaker's disappointment and indignation.

In alluding to Hugh Lane, for example (the "man" of lines 9-18), the speaker praises his "open-handedness" (line 16) and describes him as offering Dubliners a gift "In his full hands" (line 11). These are metaphors for Lane's generosity, and they frame his modern art gallery as a cultural gift he hoped to bestow on the city.

According to the speaker, the gift would have "work[ed]" in Dubliners' "veins / Like gentle blood," if they'd only accepted it. This simile contains a double-edged pun: "gentle" can mean mild, tender, etc., but it can also mean genteel or aristocratic. So the speaker is implying that Lane's gift—the art in his gallery—would have softened Dubliners' emotions, but also that it would have made them classier, raised their sophistication level, etc. He's suggesting that Dublin is a bit of a backwater and could have used the cultural education!

According to the speaker, Lane's good deed was punished rather than rewarded: "insult" was "heaped upon him." This

simple metaphor suggests that he felt the full weight of Dubliners' hostility, as if they intended to bury his reputation. The poem also alludes to a specific "enemy" (likely the newspaper publisher William Martin Murphy) who incited the attacks against Lane. Yeats describes this enemy as "an old foul mouth," a synecdoche that reduces him to his crude, vulgar speech.

Finally, the metaphor in lines 19-20 compares the soil of "Glasnevin" (Dublin's Glasnevin Cemetery) to a "coverlet," or bedspread. The speaker urges the "Shade" (Charles Parnell's ghost) to bury himself in this "coverlet" once more—to return to the grave as if going back to bed. This metaphor portrays death as a blissfully quiet, restful state, in contrast with the harsh, noisy world of the living.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "who had brought / In his full hands"
- **Lines 13-14:** "working in their veins / Like gentle blood,"
- **Line 15:** "And insult heaped upon him"
- **Line 16:** "And for his open-handedness"
- **Line 17:** "Your enemy, an old foul mouth,"
- **Lines 19-20:** "And gather the Glasnevin coverlet / About your head till the dust stops your ear,"

CAESURA

"To a Shade" contains a number of caesuras, several of which mark significant or sudden transitions in the poem.

Lines 9 and 18, for example, contain a special form of caesura. These are *dropped lines*, meaning that the second part of each line is dropped and indented, marking a transition that's visually similar to but not quite as forceful as a stanza break.

In line 18, the dramatic pause adds an ominous intensity to the claim about the "pack" (the public that had turned on Yeats's friend). It also stresses the word "Go," which directly follows the full stop and is itself directly followed by a comma. In other words, "Go" is a monosyllabic command set off by caesuras on either side. These combined effects make it extremely forceful. The speaker *really* wants this ghost to leave!

The caesuras in the last line drive home the same message:

> Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.

The pause marked by a comma adds significant emphasis to "Away." The pause marked by an exclamation point (the only one in the poem) dials that emphasis up to the max. Both of these caesuras immediately follow a run of five caesura-free lines (lines 19-23). By disrupting the stanza's smooth lyrical flow, they make the speaker's directive sound all the more urgent.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "town, thin"
- **Line 9:** "yet."
- **Between Lines 9-10:** " A"
- **Line 11:** "what, had"
- **Line 13:** "emotion, working"
- **Line 14:** "blood, has"
- **Line 16:** "open-handedness, disgrace"
- **Line 17:** "enemy, an," "mouth, had"
- **Line 18:** "him."
- **Between Lines 18-19:** " Go, unquiet"
- **Line 24:** "Away, away! You"

REPETITION

The poem contains several instances of repetition. For example, the phrase "To drink of that salt breath" in the first stanza returns as "to taste of that salt breath" in the last. These phrases refer to inhaling the salty sea air (in the coastal city of Dublin). The repetition—with slight variation—provides an element of symmetry, tying the end of the poem back to the beginning. The repeated phrase also offers a breath of fresh air, a "taste" of natural beauty, within a generally bitter poem about human affairs.

A touch of anaphora appears in lines 15-16:

> And insult heaped upon him for his pains,
> And for his open-handedness, disgrace;

The repeated "And" reinforces the sense that Dubliners were subjecting "him" (Hugh Lane) to one "insult" after another. These lines also contain the figure of speech known as chiasmus: "insult [...] for his pains [...] for his openhandedness, disgrace." This device adds emphasis to the two related terms "insult" and "disgrace," again underscoring how badly Dublin treated Lane.

The poem's final repetition is its simplest: "Away, away!" This brisk epizeuxis, punctuated with an exclamation point, conveys the speaker's bitterness and exasperation. The speaker has already told Parnell's ghost to "be gone" (line 8) and "Go" (line 18); now, with the help of repetition, the command becomes more urgent than ever.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "of that salt breath"
- **Line 12:** "children's children"
- **Line 15:** "And," "for his"
- **Line 16:** "And," "for his"
- **Line 21:** "of that salt breath"
- **Line 24:** "Away, away!"

VOCABULARY

The town (Line 1) - The city of Dublin (as indicated by the later reference to Dublin's Glasnevin Cemetery).

Shade (Line 1) - Ghost; spirit from the afterlife.

Your monument (Line 2) - Dublin's statue of Charles Parnell, recently completed at the time the poem was written. (The "you" of the poem is the ghost of Parnell.)

Happier-thoughted (Line 4) - In a better mood; experiencing more pleasant thoughts.

Gaunt (Line 7) - Skinny or emaciated. (Here metaphorically suggesting that the houses are narrow, shabby, etc.)

Put on (Line 7) - Display, as if putting on an article of clothing. (Possibly with the sense of displaying a *false* quality, similar to the expression "put on an act.")

They/Their (Line 9, Line 11, Line 12, Line 13) - The residents of the town (i.e., Dubliners).

A man (Between Lines 9-10) - A reference to the art dealer Sir Hugh Percy Lane. (See Context section for more.)

Serving (Line 10) - Devoted to service, especially public service.

Gentle (Line 14) - Could imply both "tender, mild-mannered" and "noble, aristocratic."

Pains (Line 15) - Troubles; efforts.

Open-handedness (Line 16) - Generosity; willingness to help others.

Your enemy (Line 17) - Could refer collectively to the "foul mouth" of public insult, criticism, etc. However, the more specific reference is to Irish newspaper publisher William Martin Murphy (1844-1919), who had financed political attacks on Charles Parnell during Parnell's adultery scandal, and who also led a campaign against the modern art gallery for which Hugh Lane sought public funding. In other words, he opposed both of the men the poem honors.

Unquiet (Between Lines 18-19) - Unsettled; unable to be silent or still. Can also suggest "troubled." Here, it indicates that the ghost is restlessly wandering out of its grave.

Glasnevin coverlet (Line 19) - A metaphor for the soil of Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin. The speaker urges Parnell's ghost to bury himself in this soil as if crawling under a blanket.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Technically, "To a Shade" consists of one continuous stanza. However, it contains two dropped lines (lines 9 and 18), in which the drops and indentations function very much like stanza breaks that signal pauses and transitions in the speaker's stream of thought. At the same time, the fact that they're *pauses* rather than full breaks keeps the poem's momentum strong, suggesting the force of the speaker's emotion. As he criticizes the residents of Dublin and defends the legacies of Parnell and Lane, the speaker displays the kind of "passion[]" he praises in line 10.

The poem uses iambic pentameter, the most common meter in English (see Meter section for more), as well as an alternating rhyme scheme (ABABCDCD, etc.). The structure loosens at times, however, as Yeats varies the meter frequently for emphasis or musical effect, and mixes in some slant rhymes (e.g., "man"/"known") with the full rhymes. This combination of formality and looseness fits the poem well: it's a public tribute to both a leader (Parnell) and a friend (Lane), and its tone combines lofty public sentiment with irreverent complaint.

METER

The poem uses the most common meter in English-language poetry: iambic pentameter. This means that its lines typically contain five stressed syllables following an alternating unstressed-stressed pattern: da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM. Readers can hear this pattern in line 3, for example:

(I won- | der if | the buil- | der has | been paid)

Iambic pentameter is said to be the meter that most closely approximates the rhythms of natural English speech. Again, line 3 is a good example: "I wonder if the builder has been paid" is something one might say in normal conversation, but it's also a perfect pentameter line.

Like most metrical poems, however, this one contains many variations on the standard pattern. Yeats had a highly intuitive musical ear, and he was never afraid to vary a meter for emphasis or expressive effect. Listen to line 1, for instance:

If you have | revis- | ited | the town, | thin Shade,

Here, the first syllable is stressed; the words "you" and "have" basically get contracted into one unstressed syllable for metrical purposes (as if they were the contraction "you've"), and the line ends with a spondee, or a foot consisting of two stressed syllables. It therefore places the strongest emphasis on "thin Shade"—meaning the spirit of Charles Parnell, who is the poem's subject. The rhythm sounds more or less like pentameter, but it's rough, unforced, and natural. This style is well suited to a poem that addresses a countryman (or the ghost of a countryman) conversationally and irreverently.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem rhymes on alternating lines, so its overall rhyme

scheme is ABABCDCDEFEF, etc.

Most of its rhymes are exact, but it includes a few slant rhymes as well: "man"/"known," "wanderer"/"ear," "come"/"tomb." The slant rhymes introduce some looseness into an otherwise strict scheme, much as the poem's sometimes casual phrases ("I wonder if the builder has been paid," "their old tricks," "an old foul mouth," etc.) add an informal element to Yeats's formal tribute. In general, Yeats tended to mix exact rhymes with occasional slant rhymes, keeping the music of his poems flexible and slightly unpredictable rather than rigid and forced.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is never identified, but it's clearly W. B. Yeats. The speaker refers to himself once in the first person, in line 3, so this isn't just a generic narrative voice. More importantly, the poem addresses topical subjects that Yeats often returned to in his writing, including the controversy surrounding his friend Hugh Lane and the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art.

Yeats addressed that controversy in other poems from around the same period, including "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing" and "To a Wealthy Man" (full title: "To a Wealthy Man Who Promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery If It Were Proved the People Wanted Pictures"). Toward the end of his career, he returned to the subject in the poem "The Municipal Gallery Revisited." He also wrote about Charles Parnell on other occasions, including in the poem "Parnell's Funeral."

In other words, "To a Shade" shows Yeats in full public-poet mode, speaking as himself on the topical events of his day.

SETTING

The poem is set in an unnamed "town" (line 1). As the detail about "Glasnevin" Cemetery (lines 19-20) reveals, this town is the city of Dublin. Yeats was born in a Dublin suburb (Sandymount), so he's pretty much describing his hometown. Dublin is also the capital of Ireland, and it's located on the country's eastern coast; hence the speaker's references to the "sea," the "gulls," and the "salt breath" of the air.

The poem reflects Yeats's mixed, sometimes antagonistic feelings toward Dublin. On the one hand, he was deeply invested in Irish history, culture, and politics, so the city was the center of his cultural universe. (Though he also spent much of his life in London.) On the other hand, he was sharply critical of what he perceived as the city's provincialism and hypocrisy.

"To a Shade" takes several jabs at the city's government and people—the unnamed "they" who are up to "their old tricks yet" (line 9). The poem suggests that both Charles Parnell and Hugh Lane were too good for their city—perhaps even their country. Dublin needed them, the speaker implies, but it didn't deserve them. Worse, it cruelly rejected them in spite of their "passionate" public service (line 10). It hounded them like a "pack" of animals, repaying their good works with "insult" and "disgrace" rather than gratitude (lines 15-18). In this hostile environment, the speaker advises, the "safe[st]" place for Parnell's ghost is Glasnevin Cemetery. (At least for now: the speaker suggests that a more hospitable "time" might "come" in the future.)

Smaller details reflect the speaker's antagonism, too. Line 7 describes the city's "gaunt houses" as merely "put[ting] on majesty" at sunset; in other words, they may look noble in a certain light, but they're actually shabby. (By extension, the line implies that the city's *character* is shabby.) The speaker also wistfully mentions the "loftier thought" and "Sweeter emotion" Lane tried and failed to bring to the city. This implies that Dublin is something of a backwater and could've used the extra refinement!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

W. B. Yeats is generally considered the most influential Irish poet in modern history. He was the central figure of the Irish Literary Revival, a.k.a. the Celtic Twilight, a movement that brought renewed attention to Ireland's literature, culture, and Gaelic heritage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this time, Yeats based many notable works on Irish and Celtic myth and legend, including his epic poem *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889) and his play *The Countess Kathleen* (1892).

"To a Shade," meanwhile, appears in Yeats's 1916 collection *Responsibilities and Other Poems*, which was originally published in 1914 as *Responsibilities and a Play*. *Responsibilities* falls in what's known as Yeats's "middle period," a phase of his career when he began to trade the more antique diction and myth-heavy content of his previous books for a simpler, modern style. (In the poem "A Coat," from the same collection, he famously imagines his previous style as a coat he's cast off for good.)

The style of "To a Shade" also reflects the broader literary era in which it was written. Starting in the first decade of the 1900s, many English-language poets began abandoning traditional meter and rhyme in favor of free verse and other experimental techniques. Many also began using more colloquial diction and focusing on the images and conflicts of 20th-century life. These new approaches helped define what is now called "modernist" poetry.

"To a Shade" uses meter and rhyme (as Yeats would do throughout his career), but its diction and phrasing are fairly relaxed and colloquial compared to early Yeats. While it contains some stylized, "poetic" phrases such as "happier-

thoughted" (line 4), it also contains blunt statements such as "I wonder if the builder has been paid" (line 3). It's a poem about current events in Ireland, as opposed to, say, a subject from Irish mythology (as many early Yeats poems were). At the same time, its speaker sounds a bit wary of modernity; he certainly doesn't consider it a revolutionary improvement on the past (see "they are at their old tricks yet," line 9).

In some ways, then, "To a Shade" reads like a poem of the late Romantic period (the era of English-language poetry stretching from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s). In others, it seems to anticipate the changes of modernism. Not coincidentally, its topical subject and cultural references also bridge the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Irish Literary Revival developed during a tumultuous period in Ireland. It was associated with the Irish nationalist movement that sought self-government for Ireland, first within the United Kingdom and later outside it. Through a combination of literature and activism, the writers of this movement hoped to raise Irish national consciousness—that is, encourage Ireland to see itself as a cohesive, potentially self-governing people with a rich cultural tradition.

Yeasts wrote "To a Shade" during this tumultuous time, a few years before the 1916 Easter Rising (an insurrection against British rule, which he commemorated in his famous poem "Easter, 1916") and less than a decade before the establishment of the Irish Free State. Dated September 29, 1913, "To a Shade" addresses the ghost of Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891), a popular Irish nationalist and Member of Parliament whose career was damaged by a scandal involving an extramarital affair. The poem defends Parnell's legacy, as well as the work of Sir Hugh Percy Lane (1875-1915), whose passion for public service Yeats compares to Parnell's.

Lane was a modern art dealer known for collecting works by French Impressionists, including Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. He founded the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin in 1908, but when he failed to secure the financial support of the Dublin Corporation (the city government), the project foundered. As *The Guardian* explains:

> [W]hen Lane and various well-connected people agitated for money to purchase modern paintings and a building to put them in, there was a predictable groundswell against them: modern art was described as a luxury in a city that needed root-and-branch social reform. And [...] a flavour of libertinism and license also attached to the new painting (as was often mentioned disapprovingly in relation to Renoir's buxom girls in the arms of burly workmen). [...] Yeats's pugnacious public poems did little to help. When, in 1913, Lane's preferred plans [...] were turned down, and after debates in the Corporation turned nasty, he offered 39 modern paintings to the National Gallery in London. The London Gallery accepted them, though on the understanding that they wouldn't immediately exhibit them.

Basically, Yeats felt that the narrow-mindedness of Dublin's leaders and citizens had spoiled Lane's work, just as it had wrecked Parnell's career a generation before. He strongly believed that Lane's gallery would enhance Ireland's culture—the "thought" and "emotion" of his people (lines 12-14)—yet his spirited public defenses of Lane inflamed the controversy further.

Lane died in the famous sinking of the Lusitania in 1915, so by the time *Responsibilities and Other Poems* was published, "To a Shade" had become a tribute to *two* dead men. Lane's will left the 39 modern paintings to Dublin after all, but a legal controversy initially kept their status in limbo. For many years, the paintings alternated between London and Dublin, but they're now permanently located in the latter city. Lane's Municipal Gallery ultimately found a permanent home, too—in Parnell Square, Dublin.

Toward the end of his life, Yeats wrote another well-known reflection on Lane and his gallery: "The Municipal Gallery Revisited." He also wrote several more poems about Parnell, including "Parnell's Funeral" (title poem of *Parnell's Funeral and Other Poems*, 1935), and "Come Gather Round Me Parnellites" and "Parnell" (both from *New Poems*, 1938).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Responsibilities and Other Poems — Browse the 1916 collection in which "To a Shade" appeared. (https://archive.org/details/responsibilities00yeatuoft/page/n5/mode/2up)
- More on Parnell — Read about the life of Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish leader elegized in "To a Shade." (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Stewart-Parnell)
- More on Sir Hugh Lane — Read about Sir Hugh Percy Lane and the controversy over his Municipal Gallery, which Yeats alludes to in "To a Shade." (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/30/how-ireland-was-robbed-hugh-lanes-great-art-collection)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a short biography of Yeats at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)

- Yeats, Nobel Laureate — More facts about Yeats, along with his Nobel Prize citation, at Nobelprize.org. (https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1923/yeats/facts/)
- Yeats's Note on the Poem — Read Yeats's own explanation of his defense of Hugh Lane and Charles Parnell, printed in an author's note in the 1916 edition of Responsibilities. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36865/36865-h/36865-h.htm#page181)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- Adam's Curse
- Among School Children
- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- A Prayer for my Daughter
- Byzantium
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- The Song of Wandering Aengus
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- When You Are Old

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