

## W.H. Auden as a poet of Ninety Thirties

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### Abstract

Auden was a prolific writer of prose essays and reviews on literary, political, psychological and religious subjects, and he worked at various times on documentary films, poetic plays, and other forms of performance. Throughout his career he was both controversial and influential, and critical views on his work ranged from sharply dismissive, treating him as a lesser follower of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot to strongly affirmative, as in Joseph Brodsky's claim that he had "the greatest mind of the twentieth century". After his death, his poems became known to a much wider public than during his lifetime through films, broadcasts, and popular media.

**Keywords:** W.H. Auden, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot

### Introduction

No other decade ever witnessed the debate with such passionate convictions over great issues such as Fascism and Communism, Liberal democracy and socialism, pacifisms and militarism, moral traditionalism and progressivism, as did the nineteen thirties. The period opening with the great depression of 1929, and ending with the German invasion of Poland in 1939, which signaled the outbreak of the disastrous World War II, was highly disturbed witnessing the hunger marches, the mass rallies, the countrywide unemployment, the ruthless oppressions, protests and wars.

In such situations, it was W.H. Auden with the advent of whom on the literary scene, the depiction of such conditions found their lively picture in his poetry. Unlike Yeats, Lawrence, Eliot Pound, W.H. Auden never looked back to the past as a period of classical perfection where life was unified and hierarchy secure, and whenever he looks back in to history, it is not as nostalgic recapitulation but for seeking the causes which led to present condition.

W.H. Auden sincerely believes that a poet must be a healer too. The various ailments that assailed mankind, disturbed the sensitive mind of Auden. Human consciousness covered under the fear of destructive war and Auden felt the pangs of despair, but soon set out on his mission to heal the sick humanity; and all his poetry is an effort in that direction.

Auden makes a survey of the after effects; the decay, the degeneration of the post-war civilization, he proceed to diagnose it and, later on, remedy it. Auden was concerned about the rootlessness of the people due to progressive mechanization as in a conversation with Cyril Connolly, Auden is reported to said: "The general effect of the trends of machinery has been to de root people."

And, in one of his poems, he has also asserted:

More even than in Europe  
 The choice of pattern is made clear  
 To what conditions we must bow  
 In building the just city now

In his memorable poem, In Memory of W.B Yeats, he writes

In the nightmare of the dark  
 All the dogs of Europe bark  
 And the living nation wait  
 Each sequestered in its hate

The dehumanization consequent upon a lack of universal love has resulted into an unconcern for the other human beings. Human sufferings, according to Auden, is a strange phenomenon in that it evokes so little sympathy or even empathy in kindered breasts:

How it takes place  
 While someone else is eating or opening  
 A window or just walking dually alone

Similarly, the poem The Unknown Citizen is a powerful illustration of the society where man has to live for greater communities, his individuality is annihilated, where man becomes a mere mechanical adjunct to the various social and economic institutions which imperceptibly takes control of him. Man is forced to fulfill ridiculous obligation to his employer, union, social psychology giving modern man's existence a definition and shape.

The human condition is characterized by disease, decay and sufferings consequent upon the utter dehumanization and regimentation of individual. In The Shield of Achilles, Auden makes use of some devices as of T.S. Eliot by presenting the present in contrast with the ancient past which serves as an objective co-relative, and a commentary on the present when the poet points out:

A plan without a future, bare and brown  
 No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,  
 Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down

The dehumanization has picked where human being do not

any more remain individuals with warmth and discretion. The fickle nesses of the modern civilization is vivid and, instead of finding the scenes of ritual pity, white flower-garlanded heifers, she finds a scene of concentration camps in an unknown place where:

Three pale figures were led forth and bound  
To three posts driven upright in the ground

This shows the starkness of aimlessness, violence, spiritual barrenness and inner hollowness. Thus, our modern world is a world where “girls are raped,” and “two boys knife a third.” Auden’s diagnosis of human misery consequent upon large scale degeneration ranges from psycho-pathological to social to economic and, finally, to religious disorder. He makes pungent satirical attack on the entire system by saying that the roots of sickness lies in human mind. Man refuses to respond to wishes which are natural and, therefore, godly; by suppressing them man worships the unnatural, the evil, and that the self in everyman is placed in every conceivable context of the existing social situation and with surgical incisiveness.

Self- love is another cause of the miserable plight in which human being finds themselves as the poet puts it as:

Our dreadful appetite demands a world”  
Whose order, origin and purpose will  
Be fluent satisfaction of our will

W.H. Auden’s poem, Look Stranger, is a powerful illustration of self-love pitched against selfless and disciplined love where the poet asserts:

Love gave thee power, but took the will

There is no doubt in denying the fact that it warns us against the dangers of sexual love as it arouse the mean feelings of jealousy and guilt, and keeps one from the nobler and higher feelings of love which can bring about real happiness and good to oneself and others as is pointed out by the poet in the poem, Victor, where the poet asserts:

Don’t dishonor the family name

Auden then goes to remedy the various ills conflicting the society by making a close study of Freudian, Marxian and Christian concept in order to be able to remedy it. Auden reaches the conclusion that if a man lives in harmony with his creative life-force, he leads a happy life. In Kierkegaard’s philosophy, Auden finds a more satisfactory answer than his study of psycho-analysis and Marxism had provided him. Kierkegaardian existentialism is a search for the common truth by being honest about the subjectivity. Faith, Auden believes, is man’s greatest need, and when man has no faith, he yields to the forces of darkness.

To, conclude, we can safely and rightly aver that Auden as a poet of shadows and dark chamber, and improbable possibilities. He surfeited himself with the diseased abnormality of mankind not for its own safe, but because he wants to heal this sick world of abnormality, because he could glimpse the Paradiso beyond the Purgatorio, because he knows that behind this veil of misery and sadness lies the

bliss, the ecstasy, the paradisal beauty, the stillness born of awareness, the vast expanse of light in which Budha walks, Jesus lives.

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