

W.H. AUDEN AS THE VOICE OF THIRTIES: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

No other decade ever witnessed the debate with such passionate convictions over great issues such as Fascism and Communalism, Liberal democracy and socialism, pacificism 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.

Under such circumstances, it was W.H. Auden with the advent of who 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 as says Mendelson: "Everything that was more distinctive about Auden can be traced back to his absorption in the present."

Cleanth Brooks himself finds Auden's poetry revealing "the structure of inclusion, with a maxim density and firmness and with no grib over simplification."

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FULL PAPER

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. 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.

After making an in depth study and survey of the aftermaths; the decay, the degeneration of the post-war civilization, Auden proceeds 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 Cyrill Connally, Auden is reported to say: "The general effect of the trends of machinery has been to deroot 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 suffering, 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 also 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 fulfil ridiculous obligation to his employer, union, social psychology and The Press. 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 ficklenesses 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 away 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.

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

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