

The Human Condition as Reflected in W.H. Auden's Poetry

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Abstract

W. H. Auden's poetry offers a profound and multifaceted exploration of the human condition, reflecting the moral, psychological, and social anxieties of the twentieth century. Writing in an era shaped by political upheaval, war, industrialization, and the decline of traditional belief systems, Auden presents human existence as deeply conflicted yet persistently hopeful. His poetry interrogates themes of alienation, love, suffering, faith, and responsibility, portraying individuals caught between private desires and public obligations. Auden often depicts modern humanity as spiritually disoriented, struggling with loneliness and fear in a fragmented world governed by impersonal forces and ideological extremes. At the same time, Auden's work resists despair by affirming the redemptive possibilities of love, compassion, and ethical awareness. Love, in its various forms—romantic, communal, and divine—emerges as a central response to human isolation. Auden suggests that while individuals cannot escape suffering or moral failure, they can achieve meaning through conscious moral choice and mutual care. His poetry also reflects a strong psychological dimension, influenced by Freudian thought, which allows him to explore inner conflicts, guilt, and self-deception as integral aspects of the human condition. Stylistically, Auden's use of diverse forms, voices, and tones mirrors the complexity of human experience itself. By blending irony with sincerity and intellect with emotion, he captures both the vulnerability and resilience of humanity. Ultimately, Auden's poetry presents the human condition as a dynamic struggle between despair and hope, emphasizing personal responsibility and love as essential to human survival and moral renewal. Through this vision, Auden remains a vital poetic voice for understanding the enduring challenges of human existence.

Key Words – Human condition, alienation, morality, modernity, suffering, responsibility.

1. Introduction

Wystan Hugh Auden has long been regarded as one of the greatest poets of the 1930s, expressing a potent creative reaction against the senselessness of the modern Western society. His poetry expresses the state of the times in a sincere and sensitive way. Auden is chiefly the spokesperson of the 1930s, and his name always appears in sharp contrast when the era is discussed. When one mentions Auden, images of the 1930s nearly always come to mind. To a lesser degree, the opposite is also true: Auden's name is probably going to come up first in any conversation about the 1930s.

The Auden age is popularly known as '**The Age of Anxiety**'. A generation of doubters and sceptics arrived, causing irritation and powerlessness to fester. Malcolm Bradbury's statement of this sick age has been frequently cited to highlight the state of Europe during that era:

The moral and human resources were depleted and the commitment to individuals and inner life seemed threatened by the mechanical and the collective age. England looked like a Wasteland.¹

In fact, the 1930s were what Auden called a time of crisis and fear. It was definitely his decade of darkness where society was plagued by several ills that hindered personal fulfillment and meaningful growth. The two world wars and their effects brought instability to all areas of life. The 1930s brought an atmosphere of anarchy, visions of chaos, and encounters with the absurd, forcing poets and writers to delve deeper into the human condition in search of a more rational world. Most of the important writings of the 1930s can be seen as a series of efforts in response to the crisis. Auden posited this problem in the mid-1930s in his birthday poem to Christopher Isherwood:

So in this hour of crisis and dismay

What better than your strict and adult pen

Can warn us, from the colours and the consolations

The showy arid works, reveals

The squalid shadow of academy and garden,

Make action urgent and its nature clear? Who give us nearer insight to resist

The expanding fear, the savaging disaster?²

According to Auden, a writer needs to be mature and strict. Auden characterizes the decade of the 1930s in his poem "September 1939" as a dismal and dishonest decade. The human condition in a world devoid of morals and meanings is revealed in the majority of Auden's poems. "The Shield of Achilles" depicts the tattered, barren wasteland in a simplistic manner.

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone;

Loitered about the vacancy, all bird

Flew up to safety from his well aimed stone;

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third;

Were axioms to him, who'd never heard

Of any world where promises were kept,

Or one could weep because another wept.³

Auden depicts ragged urchins in this poem who are alone, aimless, and devoid of human feeling as they throw stones at a helpless bird. Today's world produces "ragged urchins" instead of athletes. Teenage

girls are being sexually satisfied by being raped. Life is cruel and ferocious. It is completely devoid of love, friendship, and sympathy.

In a different poem titled "**The Unknown Citizen**," Auden illustrates how a man's identity is destroyed in modern society and he is reduced to a mere cog in the machine, a tool serving the greater community. The poem explores man's forced conformity to a conventional way of life and thought in the modern era of science and technology. Because of the commitment of modern civilization to consumerism, modern man is miserable. The different social and economic systems that gradually enslave man turn him into a mindless machine:

He was found by the Bureau of statistics to be

One against whom there was no official complaint,

And all the reports on his conduct agree

That in the modern sense of an old fashioned word, he was a saint.⁴

And the poem ends on a question crystallizes the absurdity of this regimented life of the modern man:

Was he free? Was he happy?

The question is absurd.⁵

To his horror, and to ours, Auden discovered that liberty and happiness are not valued in the grotesque world of modernity. In the ordered society, man is tied and forced to fulfill the absurd duties of his employer's Union and the Press. Man is not free in modern society. He is bound by various kinds of duties. In the poem "**The Capital**", he describes the dull and lifeless lives of industrial workers who are treated as objects rather than human beings.

In unlighted streets you hide away the appalling

Factories where lives are made for a temporary use,

Like collars or chairs, rooms where the lonely are hated,

Slowly like pebbles into fortuitous shapes.⁶

Auden's "**Consider**" is also a documentary about the decadence of civilization. The poem describes the decadence of modern society in a very specific way. It is a decadent culture and social decadence is a manifestation of the decadence of the psyche. He shows us a panorama of the decadent and decaying world. We see a highly artificial world, we see a cigarette end smoking on the border, and we see a garden party. We then see an audience at the Winter Sport hotel, who are trapped by their shallow sense of fun and rely on the hotel band to fill their emptiness. Then the scene moves to the countryside, where the band's music is playing to farmers 'sitting in kitchens' in the wild fens.

Consider this and in our time

As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman:

The clouds rift suddenly look there

At cigarette end smouldering on a border

At the first garden party of the year.

Pass on, admire the view of the massif

Through plate-glass windows of the sports hotel:⁷

2. Conclusion

Auden has captured the human condition in the 1930s with the authenticity of his own. Auden believed that when people have no faith, they give in too easily to the dark forces. Dark times lead to corruption, misery and precipitate disaster. But Auden concludes that when man is armed with the power of faith, circumstances become his ally and help to build the return of light and happiness.

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