

The Image of The Modern Man In Auden's Poetry

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Abstract :

The image of the modern man, though becoming a recurrent theme in twentieth century poetry and literature in general, is still a subject of interest and study. It reflects a search for truth, for a meaning to modern man's existence and for seeing his life as it is. The British born Wystan Hugh Auden is one of the most eminent poets of the twentieth century whose image of the modern man rings effectively in his poetry. His poetry reveals realms of social consciousness, politics, psychology, and religion. It portrays an age dominated by uncertainty, anxiety and disillusionment in which man suffered loss, disillusionment, political disappointment, unsettled social conditions and a feeling of spiritual vacuum. It is Auden's endeavour to penetrate the bitter consequences of the fading promises of the First World War, the existence of new republics, policies, mechanical and scientific progress, which showed man the way of new ease but leaving him to face phases of depression, of unemployment, of catastrophe of materialism.

The purpose of this paper is to trace this image of the modern man in Auden's poetry taking into consideration that his best poetry is written between the early and the late thirties.

Day breaks upon the world we know
of war wastefulness and woe,
Ashamed civilians come to grief-in brotherhoods without belief,
Whose good intention cannot cure the actual evils they endure.
(Auden, "The Double Man" (1941))

The image of the modern man, though becoming a recurrent theme, in twentieth century poetry and literature in general, is still a subject of interest and study. It reflects a search for truth, for truth, for a meaning to modern man's existence and for seeing his life as it is. Twentieth century poets in England sought to bring their poetry close to the real life of men, and the breakdown of that life. In this modern world, poets question the status, the nature and destiny of man. They were aware of the fading promises of the First World War, the international confusion which led to the Second World War, the existence of new republics, policies, and mechanical and scientific progress which showed the way to a new ease but leaving man to face phases of depression, of unemployment, of the catastrophe of materialism. In fact, no age has been more failing than the Twentieth century despite all its promises.

Williams S. Bunnell states in *Ten Twentieth Century Poets* that the modern man lived in dissatisfaction; "Hopes for a better world-economic, political, and social were bitterly disappointed ... Men who felt they had been betrayed by their leaders were not disposed to accept or trust authority"⁽¹⁾ Add to this, the growing power of Mussolini, Fascism and of Hitler and Nazism, Communism and the Spanish Civil War of 1936, all creating a "general unrest and pervasive seediness to the quality of life."⁽²⁾

Among the important and eminent poets of the Twentieth Century whose image of the modern man rings effectively in his poetry, is The British born Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-73). He is known as the most brilliant poet of his generation and essentially regarded the interpreter of the 1930s. Indeed, Auden's works reveal realms of social consciousness, politics, psychology and religion. They portray an age dominated by uncertainty, anxiety and disillusionment, where man suffered loss, political disappointment, unsettled social and economic conditions, and a feeling of spiritual vacuum. Thus, he writes:

Whenever I begin to think about the human creature

We must nurse to sense and decency.

An English area comes to mind

I see the native of my kind as a locality I love.⁽³⁾

("The New Year Letter", 1941)

It is Auden's aim to penetrate the bitter consequence of the war, which was supposed to put an end to the suffering man saw in the world. In his "Orators, an English study" (1932) he wonders: "What do we think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?"⁽⁴⁾ A question like this obviously reflects that England faced a social dilemma, a condition that crushed mankind and tore to pieces the vision of glory and the regained Eden that man looked for:

The man that worked for England

They have their grave at home ;

But they that fought for England

Following a falling star,

Alas, alas for England

They have their graves a far.⁽⁵⁾

Such lines, by G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), a twentieth century poet, essayist, and novelist, show that men were fighting for no good, for an illusion or false patriotism. The same reflection is found in John Masefield's (1878-1967) "Salt Water Ballad" in which he shows his sentiment towards the suffering and woes of war;

*The men of the tattered battalion
Which fights still it dies,
Dazed with the dust of the battle,
The din and the cries,
The man with the broken heads,
And the blood running in their eyes...*⁽⁶⁾

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), on the other hand, in recording the ugly reality of war and the battle-field says in "Ducle ET Decorum" that the modern man's

*Hanging face like a devil's sick of sin
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the forth-corrupted lungs
Bitten as the cud*⁽⁷⁾

Nothing but violence, degradation and bloody struggle were left for the modern man who returned from this aimless battle either corpse, bewildered, or in terrible anguish.

Accordingly, that sense of defeat which affected man psychologically, socially and politically speaking, came to be a dominant theme in almost all twentieth century poetry. To go into its details is beyond the scope of this paper. Auden's image of the modern man is our concern, taking into consideration that Auden's best poetry is written in the thirties.

Being a modern man himself, living in the midst of that muddle, he endeavored to express the harsh reality and the shattered life of his fellowmen. Auden speaks in a voice "of a citizen who knows the obligations of his citizenship,"⁽⁸⁾ in a time of crisis and dismay as he describes it. In presenting a socialist view point, he sought to reflect this difficult present of the thirties, grappling with this new and sick world, rather than looking nostalgically to an idealized past or searching for a world of shadows.

In the first phase of his poetic career, particularly that of the early thirties, Auden established his reputation by exploring the social scene, and the modern man's response to it, matched by a psychological insight and his attacks on capitalism and totalitarianism. Auden wrote with a great urgency about man as an isolated, unhappy figure, a wanderer on a quest who "can see a possible order in the muddle ... and he would like to help it emerge."⁽⁹⁾ This portrayal is presented in such poems as: "A Free One" (1930), "The Wanderer" (1932), "1929" (1935).

In the late thirties Auden's poetry shows an increase regard for the status of the urban man, emphasizing the need of love, self-knowledge, action rather than standing mute, still, and aloof in the midst of a disordered universe. Auden in this phase of his poetic career took a new outlook of his

role as poet to be endowed with "Anglocatholicism and public support of a Christian order" of love. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Many of the poems of this period reflect such a tendency blended with existentialist concepts: man's fear of the unknown, being exiled from the world, his fellow-men, and the real meaning of love. Poem "XXX" (1936), "Commentary" (1938), "Spain 1937", "September 1 1939", "The Unknown Citizen" (1939) are apt examples.

In "A Free One", Aden displays an early image of the modern man who is ironically seen skillfully

*Handling of a wrap as he
Steps after into cars, the beggar's envy,
"There is a free one", many say, better.
He is not that returning conqueror.*

But poised between shocking falls on Razor-edge.
(p. 80)

It is a picture of a figure whose public face conceals inner uncertainties.⁽¹¹⁾ Though he seems "a free one", his apparent freedom, confidence or will, is a false one. That psychic disturbance suggests a rooted evil, a social one, which deprives man from the sense of settlement, peace, and security. Instead, he would travel restlessly

*By daylight on from house to house
The longest way to the intrinsic peace,
With love's fidelity and with love's weakness.*
(p. 80)

It is a long search for an outlet, a needed relief out of this psychological failure and loneliness. Man's psychological distress and the social restlessness he suffers are also revealed in "The Wanderer"⁽¹²⁾. This poem introduces man as a destined wanderer, going on a quest, a long and dangerous one, mingled with hopes of finding a new world;

*Doom is dark and than any sea-dingle
Upon what man it fall
That he should leave his house,
No cloud-soft hand can hold him.*
(p. 50)

It seems that man's sense of estrangement stimulates in him a forceful desire to search for a place to dwell, a shelter to find safety, or companionship:

*But ever that man goes
Through place-keepers, through forest trees.*

A stranger to stranger's over untried sea,

Or lonely on fell as chat,

A bird stone-haunting, an unquiet bird.

(p. 50)

It is the soul's journey through the hardships of life, traveling as 'an unquiet bird', trying to gain a locality of his own or a sense of belongingness. Clive V. Ashworth comments on the poem by saying that "nothing in the world is accomplished without action; a mere place keeper never achieves thinness, existence or fullness of being."⁽¹³⁾ for

There head falls forward,

Fatigued at evening,

And dreams of home,

Waving from window...

(p. 50)

Man is left weary with unfulfilled hopes, having nothing to do but going to the unknown. T.S. Eliot records in *The Wasteland II* the same situation of man in modern times, whose social and psychological pressure make him burst out, saying:

What shall I do now? What shall I do?

I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street:

With my hair down, so, what shall we do tomorrow?

What shall ever do?⁽¹⁴⁾

It is very clear that man's realization of his lack of peace, happiness and freedom, stimulate him to find him solution, an answer to his aimless, isolated life. Hence, he has no choice but to wonder and wander. Probably, wandering for Auden is an action in itself.

Auden, however, gives his poem a note of optimism instead of increasing the wanderer's tensions. The final lines seem a kind of prayer suggesting that man would return hopefully, luckily 'with day a approaching, with leaning dawn' (p. 50). Though, he may face 'hostile capture', 'tigers spring at corner' and 'thunder bolt', but he would be protected:

Save him from gradual ruin spreading like a stain;

Converting number from vague to certain;

Bring joy, bring day of his returning.

(p. 50)

Accordingly, Auden gives the impression that man, despite the struggle he finds in his own 'anxious house where days are counted', or among the 'forest tree' or 'the suffocating water' is able to make "a home where ever there is suitable place to settle"⁽¹⁵⁾ That place in which man would stop his 'gradual ruin' is found within. In "The Wanderer", perhaps, Auden does not state that, but years later, he draws the same image of the restless modern man, pointing to the reason of his constant feeling of homesick:

*Climbing up and down and never,
Adjusted to the local needs of valleys
Where everything can be touched or reached by walking,
[His] eyes have never looked into infinite space.*
("In Praise of Limstone", p. 68)

These lines expressively refer to the importance of looking beyond the surface, the external;

*That is why, I suppose,
The best and worse never stayed here long but sought
Immoderate soils where the beauty was not so external
The light less public and the meaning of life
Something more than a mad camp.*
(p. 69)

It is a call for a journey into the landscape of the heart not the industrial one, for happiness and beauty lie in the deepest part of the soul.

In fact, Auden's attachment for the image of the wanderer is part of his own nature being a modern man himself and a wanderer poet at the same time. His awareness of the bitter realities of his time, was deepened by his constant travelling. Spending a time in Germany, he witnessed the rise of Nazim, and during the Spanish civil war of 1936, he served as ambulance driver, in addition to his residence in New York where he got the American citizenship and committed himself with Christianity. Eventually, he experienced the sense of having no solid roots in a world that wavers between old values and new revolutions. Probably, Auden was that wanderer, or that seeker for an ordered world not a distorted one, a world that transcends the physical universe. Yet he never escaped from the fact that the present society and the authorities, dominated the individual's life, giving him no importance. It is the

*Power that corrupts, that power to excess
The beautiful quite naturally possess,
To them the fathers and the children turn,
And all who long for their destruction.*⁽¹⁶⁾ ("XXII", 1934)

Such a destruction would make idleness dwell deep inside and lead the modern man 'to join the lost in their sneering circles'.⁽¹⁷⁾ Therefore, Auden addresses his fellow-citizens by saying: "Yours is the choice to be deaf", to be "flesh and bone", "standing uncertain and leave the pine tree shadow across your brow."⁽¹⁸⁾ It is man's choice either to let his brain be flicked by shadows perished by silence or take a step forward to break the bar. In "The Listeners" by Walter de la Mare, man's eternal endeavour to break life's sick silence goes in vain. De la Mare portrays the same world of emptiness, phantom, stillness and strangeness in which people of the modern world never respond to the voice of conscious:

*"Is there anybody there?" said the traveler,
knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forests ferny floor.*⁽¹⁹⁾

The traveler whoever he is, comes as a symbol of hope trying to awaken those, who are ironically called "listeners". They do not answer in fear to look deep into their heart to see the truth: 'That Tell them I came, and no one answered, / Never the least stir made the listeners.'⁽²⁰⁾

Auden, so as his contemporaries, rejected that death-like condition of man. This rejection is revealed in his "1929" (1933) in which he cries: 'It is time for the destruction of error' (p. 80), of oppression, man's degradation and self-humiliation. No use, no change would man achieve while he is

*Less certain of cure; and the loud madman
Sinks now into a more terrible calm.*

*-----
With underground proliferation of mould.*

("1929", p. 81)

The implication is that modern man began to shrink, give up his individuality and sacrifice his creativity into a state of stillness. These lines remind us of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in which man is presented as an escapist from responsible action and simply lives "like a patient etherized upon a table" never trying to "Disturb the universe" or "prepare a face to meet the faces that [he] meet(s)"⁽²¹⁾. With the same intensity of expression Auden goes on in his description of man's hesitant situation, measuring him in terms of irresolution

*With constant whisper and the casual question,
To haunt the poisoned in his shamed house,
With organized fear.*

(p. 81)

In other words, the responsibility does not only lie on the external forces of the modern world but also on the internal ones of man. When all turn against us, we must not turn against ourselves. Becoming victims of inside and outside forces, we will be left with no possibility of character development.

But what world furnish man with feeling of security and a waken his heart to defy his own weakness? For Auden it is love, the desire to creat the order of the heart, and to restore one's selfknowledge that he lost, by an urgent action. In Auden's poetry of the late thirties, he expresses that view of the world with the same concern to exemplify man's urban life that denied him his individual-self, leading to his submission to the demands of everyday life. In poem "XXX" written in 1936 (among his published poems of the 1930s), Auden addresses the modern man whose cold and moping station urge him to

*Stand up and fold
Your map of desolation.
Walk then, come
No longer numb,
Into your satisfaction.* (22)

The first step to get rid of the sickness of life is to rise, for there is no use of bells.

*That tall across the meadows
From the somber spire,
Toll for those unloving shadows
Love does not require.* (23)

The didactic tone throughout the poem is quite clear; "Teach the free man how to praise" Auden says in his elegy on Yeats in 1939. For him, it is the poet's role to enlighten man how to think, to prais God, to love. Thus , he shows his rejection of man's acceptance to be but an unloving shadow, as if he does not exist or considered as an abstracted thing. Yet, man can revive from his defeated existence by love, by action:

*All that lives may love;
Why longer Bow to loss
With arms across?
Strike and you shall conquer.
Coldest love will warn to action.* (24)

Feeling of warmth, content and peace are needed to change mans belief in being a modern victim of circumstances. But since the modern age made man's body nothing but a

*Favourite machine,
The human field became
Hostile to brotherhood and
Feeling like a forest.*

(“Commentary”, 1937, p. 265)

This feeling of inner wasteland increased in Auden himself when witnessing the Spanish Civil War. There he felt that he had to do something at least by being an ambulance driver. In “Spain 1937” which he wrote after the war, he explains that life “means nothing without the clear decision of individual responsibility”⁽²⁵⁾:

*What your proposal? To build The just city? I will.
I agree. Or is it suicide pact,
The romantic death? Very well, I accept, for
I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain.*

(p. 108)

Auden wrote in defence of the Spanish Republic against a fascist military insurrection, but Spain is simply a symbol stands for many battle fields in the past and in the future. Hence, struggle against depression and political oppression are the needed means to built the present city of humanity. The poet makes the idea clear that it is a call to arms, to achieve success, and combining human will :

*Tomorrow perhaps, the future,
Tomorrow the enlarging of consciousness
By diet and breathing,
Tomorrow the rediscovery of romantic love.*

(p. 108)

No just city would be built without love, real consciousness of perfect communion, the urgent redemption of man. It is the city of heart.

In “September 1, 1939”, whose title is the date of Hitler’s inversion of Poland, Auden similarly emphasizes the need to establish the just society. Auden’s choice of this war is but a symbolic one to refer to the struggle of life of modern civilization. Shirley Galloway asserts that Auden “admits the future may be fruitful and serene”⁽²⁶⁾, yet he focuses on the importance of the present, of seizing the day.

Again this poem is symbolic, having a universal element, though focusing on that particular date. It opens with modern man protest again his deterioration and self – bewilderment caused by the war in Europe:

*I sit in one of the dives
On fifty-second street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade.*

(p. 112)

The speaker places himself in a dive, a sordid drinking-house on a New York street, in a time which brought nothing to man but fear and a sense of indignation that

*Darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives:
Offends the September night.*

(p. 112)

Why the United state of America? Auden chose a 'neutral air', for the State was not at war with Germany. The bar, of the 'dive', hence seems an alien place in which the modern can conceal himself; hiding himself from himself:

*Faces a long the bar
Cling to their average day.
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play.*

(p. 112)

Light and music are symbols of man's means of escape, "this flight from true knowledge".⁽²⁷⁾

But this feeling of doom as the speaker suggests, can be put to an end by basis of universal love which denies the doctrine of eye for an eye; 'Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return.' (p. 112) It is that kind of love which mingles man with other individuals in action and vexes him to give freely and willingly, the Christian implication is quite vivid. Auden conveys his denouncement of evil or the 'error' that

*Bred in the bone of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have, not universal love
But to be loved alone*

(p. 114)

Only the power of the universal love can demolish the selfishness of human beings towards each other, love itself, and political tensions. To be loved

alone creeps inside their inner beings; it is the sensual emotion, the expression of the ego and self-love that Auden rejects. Instead, he affirms the fact that

*No one exists alone; Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen...
We must love one another or die.*

(p. 114)

It is a clear affirmation of the importance of love as a must to help man restoring his relationship with the universe and his fellow-men, and get a reconciliation with himself. That what gives his poem a sense of resignation and hope despite its bitterness.⁽²⁸⁾ This affirmation is echoed in his preface to his *Poets of the English language* (1950) in which he expresses the same urgent that

*Either we must discover a unity which repair
The fissures that separate the individual from
Society, feeling from both, or we shall surely
Die by spiritual despair and physical annihilation.⁽²⁹⁾*

Man, in other wards, will live in a static dwarfed situation, a condition which much appeals to the present political and the economic system in the western society. The well-organized, standardized and moralized, man is rejected in modern times. The governments want nothing from man but to be a number. In "The Unknown Citizen", Auden tackles this issue, that citizens are seen as numbers by their leaders, stripped from their individuality, given in return social security cards or numbers. Those cards were supposed to be for the benefit of people, but in fact, they were simply a means to track and retrieve information about their personal life.⁽³⁰⁾

"The Unknown Citizen", it is worth saying, portrays the image of the modern man according to the western society;

*He was found by the bureau of statistics to
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
For in everything he community.*

(p. 105)

The citizen is regarded ironically as a 'Saint' because he is doing everything according to order and for the sake of the general. No one complains about him, for he is a modern man in the real sense of the word. In the twentieth

century, civilization and modernity demand statistic rules of bureaucracy on the citizen who had everything necessary to the modern man,

*A phonograph, a radio, a car and frigidaire.
Also he reacts in an expected way or as it is required from him:*

*When there was peace, he was for
Peace: when there was war, he went.*

(p. 105)

So it is obviously that he has no voice at all to object, for a static person can never be heard and has no right to complain⁽¹³⁾ :

*But was he free? Was he happy?
The question is absurd. Had anything been wrong?
We should certainly have heard.*

(p. 105)

This question is still being asked. Can such an image fulfill the inner emptiness in man? Can modern civilization replace the important things that people need like love and happiness? Molly A. McGuire states in his essay "The Unknown Citizen Is Me" that

Now I understand the modern man is not
Always the best choice of living. They never
Get a chance to slow down and realized that
There are more important thing in life than
Being the perfect picture, ... I felt the time period
Reflected W.H. Auden's views, making the unknown
Citizen an example of the government's view of the
Perfect man in an overrated unrealistic society.⁽³²⁾

If this were the ideal image of modern man is to be an unknown citizen, so it would be really absurd to ask whether he is happy or free. Yet, one cannot help wondering.

NOTES

- 1- William S. Bunnell, *Ten Twentieth Century Potes* (London: James Brodie, no d.), p. 8.
- 2- Clive V. Ashworth, ed. *Notes on the Poetry of W.H. Auden* (London: Methuen Paperbacks, 1980), p. 7.
- 3- All quotations of Auden's poetry are taken from: Richard Hoggart, *W.H. Auden: A Selection* (Hutchinson Educational, 1956), p. 62. Otherwise the source is stated.
- 4- Quoted in Louis Untermeyer, *A Treasury of Great Poems : English and American* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 1200.
- 5- *Ibid.*, p. 1077.
- 6- *Ibid.*, p. 1099.
- 7- Untermeyer, ed. *Modern American Poetry* (U S A: Harcourt and World, 1962), p. 364.
- 8- On line [http:// web.mit.edu/teryu/www/unknown.html](http://web.mit.edu/teryu/www/unknown.html).
- 9- Hoggart (1965), p. 19.
- 10- Terence Dewsap, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Monarch Press, 1956), p. 9.
- 11- Hoggart (1965), p. 206.
- 12- "The Wanderer" depends on Anglo-saxon and Middle English poetry which is adapted to give a lesson or a sermon in the form of allegory. Auden describes the wanderer in a similar way as facing the hardships of fate. He shows at the same time the soul's journey through life.
- 13- Ashworth, p. 13.
- 14- T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber 1963), p. 67.
- 15- Hoggart (1965), p. 18.
- 16- Monoe K. Spears, ed. *The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 154.
- 17- *Ibid.*
- 18- *Ibid.*
- 19- Utermeyer, p. 1073.
- 20- *Ibid.*
- 21- *Ibid.*, p. 1150.
- 22- Spears, p. 160.
- 23- Dewsnap, p. 9.
- 24- Spears, p. 161.
- 25- John Fuller, *A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden* (London: Thames and Hudson), p. 258.
- 26- On line <http://www.Spain 1937.com/html>.
- 27- Ashworth, p. 44.
- 28- *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 29- Fuller, p. 260.

- 30- On line <http://www.4freeessays.com/essays/2509.s/html>.
- 31- Ibid.
- 32- Ibid.

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