W.H. AUDEN'S POETRY OF FIRST PHASE- A QUEST OF LIFE

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Abstract

The objective of this research project is to articulate the various components of the first phase of W. H. Auden's poetry which belongs to the period of five years (1928-1932). The first poetic phase is not only about middle class, turmoil, tensions, and capitalist society but also about psychological malaise. W.H. Auden wanted to relieve the grief-stricken people. Hence, he frequently shifted his focus in quest of life. He could not focus on one remedy and ideology. He kept on changing them. The poetry of the first phase is different from that of other phases. The paper discloses the noticeable inclinations and apprehensions reflected in this phase of poetry.

Keywords: *First Poetic Phase, Middle Class Society, Capitalist Society, Psychological Malaise, Remedy.*

1. Introduction

W.H. Auden, an Anglo-American poet with the qualities of head and heart is a great versatile personality who displayed his skill and competence in all his literary genres with numerous ideas. He endeared himself to his readers by dint of some certain qualities and characteristics of his poetry. These qualities and characteristics precisely made his poetry not only appealing but also discordant to one and all.

W.H. Auden was affected by various kinds of conflicting and differing impacts. There was an impact of psychology, Marxism and religion on him. He sometimes agreed and sometimes disagreed to these influences. He wanted to do something for the suffering mankind. He began to explore the life in order to relieve one and all. He expressed his despair and concern for the mankind. His poetry became the mouthpiece of numerous national as well as international social, political and religious problems.

His earliest phase of poetry was written under the influence of psychologist Sigmund Freud, George Groddeck, John Layard and Homer Lane. It was their influence which made him believe that crime and ailment are caused by psychosocial maladies. Furthermore, he had learnt that repression of sexual impulse and life-force (Id) triggers strong disturbances in the body and mind.

Auden wrote on psychological themes in his first phase of poetry which belongs to the period of five years (1928-1932). His poetic taste was at that time under the prominent influence of Sigmund Freud, George Groddeck, John Layard and Homer Lane. He

studied them. Under their influence, he believed that ‘crime’ and ‘ailment’ are caused by psychological maladies generally. He learnt that repression of the sexual impulse and the life-force called ‘Id’ causes considerable disturbances in the mind and physical ailments in the body. This period can be labeled ‘Freudian’.

Auden was always aware of the world outside his window, and being a very sensitive personality from his early childhood was influenced by all the three factors man, moment and milieu. Auden could not disassociate himself from the problems of people. He had great empathy. He always put himself in the shoes of others. For him the problems of the people were his own problems. His heart always beat for them. The theme of his poems was the problems and sufferings of the people. His poetry became the pulse of the people. His poetry always addressed the three factors man, moment and milieu. His poetry was never based on one kind of opinions. It changed when required.

2. Literature Review

(Lewis, Dennis 2018) presents a detailed discussion of Auden's sonnet sequence. He does not say much as regards the ideas expressed by Auden in the sonnets. (Kumar, Ajay 2014) unfolds the search for human values in the play of W H Auden. Here the research is confined to his plays. (Moss, Walter G. 2011) explores wisdom, religious faith and humor in W. H. Auden's poetry by and large. He also lacks disclosing any specific part of Auden's poetry. (Jenkins, N. 2007) reveals Auden's entire poetic journey from beginning to end, i.e. from 1927 to 1973. This article does not throw light on any specific poetic phase. (Spender, Stephen 1975) discloses the views of renowned people as regards W. H. Auden. Unlike other studies the present study is to articulate the various constituents of the first phase of W. H. Auden's poetry spanning the period of five years from 1928 to 1932 in the quest of life.

3. Middle Class Society

The first point raised in the first poetic phase is as regards the middle class society.

W.H. Auden was quick to notice things and to think promptly. He was an informed intellectual among the contemporary poets. He discloses various social, political and religious issues of his time. The rise of dictatorship, the exploitation of the poor and the weak, economic difference, spiritual vacuity, the escapist tendencies of the rich privileged classes and the tension and anxiety caused by the fear of the expected war, are all disclosed in his poetry. If we study Auden's poetry carefully we find that for him refinement and eloquence of the art of writing is secondary to the responsible task of making people conscious not only of their surroundings but also of their own selves which otherwise remains hidden from them. A deep study of his poetry reveals that his poetry turns out to be a very sensitive and subtle examination of the complexities and uncertainties of modern human existence and an effective agent of self-discovery for the readers. His poetry embracing Freudianism guides the people.

In the poetry of first phase Auden is a marvelous orator. He addresses his readers directly; a large number of his poems begin imperatively or in a question of petition and with the colloquial force of a born orator. He takes his readers to the heart of situation. His mastery over his speaking voice and forceful expression at once attracts the

audience. It is impossible for the reader not to listen to what he is saying. So the reader comes to accept the private world with willingness, being drawn into the game by the force of his direct address at the beginning. Moreover, his approach to his audience became easier and comfortable in his early years.

The psychological theories propounded by a few psychologists, the socio-political theories of Marx and the religious beliefs that were prevalent in his times, shaped his thoughts and thus influenced his poetry. He observed the psychological, social and political indispositions of his times. He promptly suggested the need of cure, firstly in psychological sense, then in political sense and lastly in religious sense. So far as his ideas, ideologies and themes are concerned, he seems to be in a state of flux. He is influenced by many psychologists, communists and Christian theologians. The way, he saw the life, also influenced him.

The young writers of the thirties were distinguished from the writers of previous decade mainly by their reaction to the contemporary events. Auden's mind thought and felt for the doomed society. A very sensitive poet like Auden could not remain aloof from the general political atmosphere prevailing around him. He was aware of the disintegration of that class of which he was a product. He was conscious of the fast disappearance of the values of life of the early twenties. Auden's poetry of the first phase of his literary career reveals his interest in social and political conditions existing around him.

He tried to make a diagnosis of the indispositions of the world around him and tried to find solutions to the problems it was facing. He thought it to be his duty to warn and protect against the ills besetting the age. He dealt in his poetry with the position of man in society and the various political forces working around him. Hence, his early poetry is of social criticism.

The poem "Petition" (Sir, No Man's Enemy)" was first published in the Poems (1930). The bourgeois (middle class) society has been criticised by Auden. He wants that the people should lead a free life. He has prayed for a change of the social order as well as a change of the human heart. In his poem "Petition" Auden prays to God for a change of the social order and human heart. He criticizes the middle class. He feels that the shame complex is responsible for the repression of sexual love i.e. Eros.

"Petition is a catch-all prayer in favour of every kind of regenerative theory, all revolutionary innovations..." (Rosenthal, 1972)

Modern civilization and culture have repressed sexuality in man and society. Sexual love is the main urge in man. If it is allowed, it works as the life force (Id). If it is not allowed, it leads to many physical problems. There is another force which is called the Superego. When man is afraid of social restrictions, it rises. It is like shame complex. It is responsible for the repression of the sexual love which is called Eros.

The poem is addressed to sexual love as love-god which is called Eros in Freudian psychology. He forgives all the sins of mankind except one. This sin is negation of sexual will. But the poet prays to be prodigal of his mercy. He is requested to forgive

even this sin. The negation of sexual desire turns men and women into the neurotic, the indisposed and cowards. This disposition makes people spiritually dead. Modern culture represses the sexual love. It has turned man into a spiritually and sexually dead. The sexual love-repression is more in the middle class. Auden prays to love-god to change the human heart so as to love the Freudian sexualist culture.

The poem 'Consider' was first published in *Poems* (1930). The poem reveals Auden's attack on his reader's consciousness for two reasons; first to consider the prevailing deteriorating condition of the society, and secondly he exhorts and stings his readers for some kind of action in order to save the society from complete deterioration and destruction.

The contemporary society and the condition of man in it form the main theme of the poem. Another thematic dimension of the poem is psychological in nature. Auden deals with death-wish of people and the role of Satan or death in human life. Death-wish occurs in man because he wants to escape from the realities of life and takes refuge in the world of superficial pleasures and in the world of pure imagination that is more frustrating on his part as the gratification of his desires is not possible and hence there is death-wish in his mind.

The poem begins with a kaleidoscopic picture of the contemporary condition of the bourgeois society around them where people are indulging in superficial pleasures. He asks people to have an aerial view of the society.

The poem is about the suffering of bourgeois society. Auden criticises the then bourgeois society which is on the verge of gradual deterioration. Anxiety and gloom make the bourgeois society suffer. The people become either insane or die of extreme fatigue by constant struggles against hostile forces. The poem gives a bird's-eye view of corrupt and sick bourgeois society.

"You cannot be away, then, no a classic fatigue
Not though you pack to leave within an hour" (Auden, 1976).

Thus, Auden depicted the middle class society with many problems. The society tries to face them. A.T. Tolley has rightly commented, "The image of the middle class as a doomed class was a constant one in the poetry of the thirties. It was connected with what was perhaps the most original mode of the period: satirical fantasy. The doomed world was projected as the 'mad' world it was" (Tolley, 1975).

4. Inner Turmoil, Tensions, Emotional Breakdown, Isolations and Alienations

The second point addressed by Auden in the first poetic phase is as regards inner turmoil, tensions, emotional breakdown, isolations and alienations

Auden's poems of early phase are under psychological influence. His early poetic career confronts a diseased society and decaying culture and a restless desire on the part of

poet to define it for what it is so that this can serve as the first step towards a disengagement from it. Here the primary emphasis is on the inner turmoil, emotional breakdown and a sense of isolation of the central figures. The image of the outer world is used to reflect this inner disturbance. In these early “Archaic-sounding” poems, as Ian Hamilton says, “The landscape... is the same as Wordsworth’s, though in Auden the area is desolate and the solitary is numbed by feelings of intense isolation and disappointment” (Hamilton, 1994). He wants to pin point the problems of people through the image of the outer world.

In Auden’s early poetry, we find inner split, and diseased psyche of the personae who are burdened by a hypnotically pestering past and a decaying culture, who always fail in love and who wander about without any aim lonely. This world of isolation and decay is depicted by images of countries in a state of breakdown of communication with one another, industries collapsing and individual’s fears and ignorance. Barbara Everett rightly reveals:

“...Every effect toward unity & the groups of people to cohere into a society, the individuals to meet in love, the mind to hold in peace - is frustrated” (Everett, 1964)

Auden’s poetry of the first phase unfolds a state of great disturbance, confusion and uncertainty. The people are tense. There is apparent emotional breakdown. There is a rift among the people. Richard Hoggart has rightly penned about him: “He interested himself particularly in loneliness, anxiety and fear, in the lost, the lonely, the unhappy...” (Spears, 1964).

Auden was concerned with the inner turmoil among individuals who represented the middle psyche; their emotional breakdown and sense of isolation was specially stressed. In this period the outer world is used as an image or a symbolic landscape to reveal the inner disturbance. Adrian Caesar rightly says, “...the political divisions and violence described are symptomatic of mental sickness on a wide scale” (Caesar, 1991).

W.H. Auden was very magnanimous. Human misery could easily move his heart. His poems put up the view of ideal society sans ills. He knew such society could never be achieved. But he wanted to work in this direction. He became an interpreter of his society. He was very quick to see the misery in the hearts of the people. The great world Depression of 1929-32 had caused massive unemployment in many European countries. Auden was displeased at that situation. “Unemployment hung massively over the decade until the effort of rearmament in its later years brought some dubious alleviation” (Spears, 1964). In his poem “Taller To-day” (1928), he discloses his annoyance and displeasure over the massive unemployment. “We see farms lighted all along the valley;/ Down at the mill-shed hammering stops/ and men go home” (Auden, 1976). Auden felt in 1929 that the poor were alienated from society. He found that the rich man were not sympathetic to the suffering of the poor. He finds the empathy missing between the poor and rich. He comes very heavily on such attitude in his poem A Free One: “Watch any day his nonchalant pauses, see/ His dexterous handling of a wrap as he/ Steps after into cars, the beggar’s envy” (Auden, 1976).

Auden was displeased at the prevailing scenario between 1928 and 1932. The life of the people was colourless. They did not have any passion. His poetry was under the influence of psycho-analytical ideas. He showed his prime concern with the poor who were underemployed or unemployed. Dr. Satish Kumar says, "He vividly expresses contemporary political tensions, social and economic unrest infecting industrial establishments" (Kumar, 2002). In his poem "The Capital", he expresses the humdrum and lifeless life of industrial labourers who are used not as human beings but as objects. These lines show his sympathy for the labour class: "In unlighted streets you hide away the appalling; /Factories where lives are made for a temporary use" (Kumar, 2002)

In the Poem "Venus Will Now Say a Few Words" (1929) a voice of nature speaks of turmoil. The turmoil is vividly addressed by him:

"At Green hearth was a fine site for a dam
And easy power, had they pushed the rail ...
The bridges were unbuilt and trouble comin" (Auden, 1976).

The loneliness, anxiety and neurosis of the personae can be noticed in "1929". He feels a kind of fear in the society:

"Is awareness and in fear of other,
Alone in flesh, himself no friend" (Auden, 1976).

Auden is disenchanted even with love. He seems to be in turmoil. The following stanza is from the same poem addresses love and insecurity: So, insecure, he loves and love/Is insecure, gives less than he expects (Auden, 1976).

Thus, it is observed that W.H. Auden knew the pain of the poor. The tension of the people was also known to him. Moreover in the same breath he felt the isolation in the society. Auden was in search of not only of a better and more satisfying pattern of individual life but also of a coherent community in which the isolated individual may find his place. He found the rich with no sympathy with the poor. The poor were alienated. The picture which is disclosed in his poetry of first phase is dismal.

5. Capitalist Society

Auden's poetry sets forth the crisis of his age. The post - war period of the twenties, in which Auden grew a young intellectual, was a period of slump, strikes, depression and unemployment. The crisis of economic depression and unemployment that Great Britain had to face in the late twenties was unprecedented. So the whole period of late twenties and thirties was a period of tension to which the young minds were bound to react strongly. The young writers of the thirties were distinguished from those of the previous decades mainly by their reactions of contemporary events, and these events to which they reacted as Stephen Spender tells us, "... unemployment economic crisis, nascent fascism, approaching war..." (Spender, 1951). The reactions were radical.

Capitalist society is also delineated by W.H. Auden in the first phase of his poetry. It has already been described that the rich did not have any sympathy for the poor. It has also been described in the earlier part of the same chapter that the condition of the

labour was not good. Labour relation (i.e. between workers and employers) was at the worst between 1928 and 1932 in the European countries especially in Great Britain, France and Germany. At that time the economic condition of England was not good. The human relations were also not cordial. Stan Smith remarks “In Auden’s early poems the decline of England is a recurring theme. Relics of an industry now comatose’ litter the landscape, as in ‘Who Stands; the crux left of the watershed, and human relationships are mysterious and enigmatic, played out within what seems a post-apocalyptic milieu” (Smith, 2004). The capitalist society did not protect the interest of the labour society. It shows the selfishness of the capitalist society. The labour society is unable to be protected. Given below is the suitable stanza from “The Capital”: “Like collars or chairs”, rooms where the lonely are battered slowly like pebbles into fortuitous shapes” (Auden, 1976).

Auden’s poem “Consider” seems to be his comment on the then capitalist society. It is down with sick culture and diseased psyche. Auden seems to believe in Marxist theory. He accepts that capitalist society is to be ruined. He apparently says to the financier that the game is up. Moreover, he seems to believe in the Freudian thinking of widespread neuroses. It is like the evidence of the decay in the capitalist society. The ruling class is sick beyond the limit.

“The Bonfires” (1931) is about lovers who instead of bearing the usual trials and going out, sit indoors. These lovers are the sick members of a sick society who lack communication. They are confined to their rooms. There is lack of free movements and communication. Communication is a must to solve the problems. Those who do not communicate are isolated from one and all. Those who do not converse are dumb. This isolation results in burning with unfulfilled desires:

“Bitter the blue smoke rises
From garden bonfires lit,
To where we burning sit:
Good, if it’s thorough” (Auden, 1976).

The functions of a capitalist state are portrayed in the poem “Let History be my Judge”. The poem presents that the majority of the people submit to the tyranny. He wants people to think and move freely. He wishes them to stand against the domination of all kinds. Moreover, the poem insists on hierarchical society:

“For never serious misgiving
Occurred to anyone,
Since there could be no question of living
If we did not win” (Auden, 1976).

Auden shows his displeasure in his poem “The Questioner Who Sits So Sly” (1929) on the capitalist society. He describes the decadent capitalist world where death-wish predominates. Auden sees the world with its changing values and cultural patterns constant in a flux in which destruction and recreation are constantly alternating:

“Yet wear no ruffian badge,
Nor lie behind the hedge,
Waiting with bombs of conspiracy
In arm- secrecy” (Auden, 1976).

6. Psychological Malaise of Individual

Psychological feeling of illness is the most remarkable concern in the first phase of W.H. Auden's poetry. He is indebted to Sigmund Freud, George Groddeck, Homer Lane, John Layard and D.H. Lawrence for his knowledge of psychological ills. It is under their influence, he opined that society and individuals are sick. It is because of culture which has suppressed the life-force. The social and psychological disorders are inextricably associated and these are indicated to be the symptoms of a general moral decadence. Auden's chief concern is to depict the decaying old order both in its social and psychological aspects and to seek for a transformation of that order through a disciplined moral behaviour and right action. He seeks to emphasise the enlargement of the frontiers of human heart but on the other hand, he regrets because he finds that modern society and its individuals do not keep an enlarged heart; they have turned their hearts within themselves. They are self-centered and as such cannot look beyond themselves. Hence they are on the verge of disintegration, decline and death.

In the poem “The Witnesses”, the speaker is either Libido (sexual impulse) or Id (life-force). He tells the readers that the young persons, who repress their sexual urge and Id, suffer from mental indisposition. They fall sick. They can't even sleep even at the late hours of the night. Such people suffer from mental commotion in near future. Their hearts are marked by the effect of their malaise. A person may have a reasonable course of disobeying Libido or Id yet he cannot escape the danger of a serious sickness.

“Young men late in the night
Toss on their beds ...” (Auden, 1976).

W.H. Auden takes the help of question-answer pattern to explain his views on the repression of Id and sexual urge in the poem “The Witnesses”. When the reader asks the speaker if the person who disobeys Id and sexual urge, can return to his ground of natural peaceful state sound and safe. Auden expresses his views through the speaker that he will even then suffer from unsubstantial ideas, great fears and horrible dreams. Auden advises the people to obey Id and Libido. He says that the person, who has intentionally repressed his Libido and his Id, has departed from the course of Nature. This kind of suppression is an invitation to mental disease. Such a person sinks into the state of violent mental commotion. This person is eaten away by hostile views. He loses his health and cheerfulness. This person cannot lead a harmonious life:

“Will he safe and sound
Return to his own ground?” (Auden, 1976).

Auden asserts in “Never Stronger” that the present scenario has made man helpless. It makes man weaker. He cannot look for a new life on account of fears. Man cannot be contented in the state of fear. He wanted to lead a fearless society. It was his wish to drive the fear away:

“Saying good-bye coming back, for fear
Is over there,
And the centre of anger
Is out of anger” (Auden, 1976).

“The Orators” (1932) is about the miserable condition of England and her citizens. Materialism could not help the people of England. He had understood these people psychologically. “What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?” (Mendelson, 1977). It analyses the psychic ailments of the individuals. The psychological crisis is the root cause of all the troubles in human life and society. He wanted them to be blissful. Viewed from this angle, we find that Auden is neither a pure Marxist nor a pure Freudian, nor a Lawrential; he is essentially a fundamentalist who draws on Dante’s description of sinners as much as he draws on Freud’s account of the neurotics. To Auden, the perversion of love is the root cause of all the psychological and spiritual maladies. He draws on the ideas on modern psychologists, mainly Freud, George Groddeck, Homer Lane and D.M. Lawrence. Under the combined influence of these psychologists he emphasizes the psychological disorders in “The Orators” as he did in other poems. Auden depicts the decaying old order.

That Auden kept on traveling from one place to another in search of some effective remedy, was because of his quarrelling self and disagreement of thoughts. His journey was candidly religious, intellectual and spiritual. He wanted to solve the problems of modern people. He kept on testing the effectiveness of various methods and remedies until he became conformist. The ardent and tireless desire to serve the suffering mankind made him wanderer throughout his poetic career. Somehow, he wanted to help the suffering people. He knew that it was not an easy job. Even then, he never considered it to be impossible. He always wanted to form a community in which everybody lived blissfully. He was looking for a genuine society:

“The problem of the modern poet or for
everyone else to-day is how to find or
form a genuine community ...’ (Auden, 1938)

Thus, we observe in the first phase of his poetry that W.H.Auden gave vent to his views in the influence of George Groddeck, Sigmund Freud, Carl Gusta Jung, Homer Lane and John Layard. He believed that sexual love i.e. Libido is the main urge in man. It bursts forth as the Life-force i.e. Id. In man, there is another force, too. It is death instinct i.e. the Super-ego. If the ‘Id’ is repressed due to the moral restraints of the society, it becomes a destructive force in the body. It makes a person neurotic ruled by a ‘death-wish’ which causes a number of psychological and physical diseases.

It is seen that Auden revealed the predicament of modern man in the light of weaknesses that have crept into his psyche. The conflict in Auden’s early poems is basically between the destructive death-wish and the vital forces shown by Freud and D.H. Lawrence. Early poetry is not only psychological but also analytical and realistic. In the earliest stage an attempt has been made to study Auden’s concern with the inner turmoil, tension, emotional breakdown, isolation and alienation of the members of the

middle class English society where the outer world is used primarily as an image or symbolic landscape to reflect the inner disturbance and psychological malaise of the individuals incorporating the capitalist society. Here the individual's "change of heart", his returning to his primordial and natural instincts has been taken as the suggested remedy for the restoration of the individual as well as social health.

Thus, from a shift of focus on the middle class society to the shift on the turmoil, from the shift of focus on the turmoil to the shift of focus on the capitalist society, from the shift of focus on the capitalist to the shift of focus on the psychological malaise in the first phase of his poetry, W.H. Auden kept on shifting his focus in quest of life. He kept on changing his remedies and ideologies. A note of discord seems to creep into his very first phase of poetry which prominently bears the stamp of psychological impacts.

7. Conclusion

That W.H. Auden was well informed and enlightened man, was on account of his broad and wide reading. The first poetic phase does not cover only middle class, turmoil, tensions, and capitalist society but also psychological malaise. Psychological malaise is the fourth subheading of the same chapter. Thus, from a shift of focus on the middle class society to the shift on the turmoil, from the shift of focus on the turmoil to the shift of focus on the capitalist society, from the shift of focus on the capitalist to the shift of focus on the psychological malaise in the first phase of his poetry, W.H. Auden kept on shifting his focus in quest of life to soothe the suffering mankind. He kept on changing his remedies and ideologies. Auden disclosed the prominent features, trends and concerns of his age. The individual's return to natural instincts and freedom to be given to primary impulse are the bases of the suggested remedy for the abolition of the individual and social malaise. He seems to help man who is in predicament.

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