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The Age of Anxiety: An Analysis of Auden's Poem

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Abstract

Auden's anxiety in the context of a religious framework provided by the Christian existentialist theologian's -Soren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr and C.N. Cochrane. The Age of Anxiety, in detail, it analyses how through this symbolic poem, Auden once again retraces his anxiety as it passes through all the early phases of his life. Auden employs the imagery of the quest for water, which is similar to Eliot's search for the Holy Grail in The Waste Land, though the major symbolism of The Age of Anxiety is similar to the symbolism in Eliot's poems, the conclusion is nevertheless a different one. While Eliot's poem ends on a note of spiritual reaffirmation, Auden's fails to overcome his spiritual anxiety. Because the poem ends as a mere fantasy, and empty dream. The Age of Anxiety being his last long poem may not be exactly the objective co-relative of Auden's own experience, it nevertheless 'shows that being his last long poem, it conveys the poet's message.

To express his ideas forcefully, Auden did never hesitate to make use of any dogmatic language, he could lay his hands on, with a sense of detachment. As a result he came to be labelled as one of the best political poets of the 19th Century. Though, he himself claimed to be more of a religious poet.

Keywords: Anxiety, Spiritual, Dogmatic, Portrayal, Isolation and Aggression

Introduction

The quest for identity has been one of the persistent themes of modern literature. In the absence of any value patterns, the literary artist, who is said to be the highest point of contemporary consciousness becomes a faithful historian of his age and thus reflects the spiritual malaise of his times. Auden's poetry which is an expression of anxiety and solitude which has resulted from the alienation of the individual's consciousness from the tribal consciousness. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Philosopher aptly expresses the spiritual dilemma of the modern man in the word 'angst: Modern man rootless unclaimed and lonely is indeed a pathetic figure. In modern literature the father figure who laid down the law, has largely been replaced by the son, in search of a father, in search of law or else finding an escape from it. Gnawed by

metaphysical anxiety, he is desperately in search of an integrating experience which may bring wholeness to his divided neurotic self.

It was his preoccupation with anxiety which emerges as one of the major thematic strands in the entire writings. In fact anxiety is like a proverbial gadfly which would never allow Auden's poetic horse to rest. His rising consciousness embraces into itself the entire gamut of human experience from mother's possessive love, through the love of comrades, emphasised by a Marxian ideology, to the ultimate spiritual love which acts as a cementing force for the disintegrated humanity. Though anxiety emerges as a major theme in Auden's poetry, no full-fledged study of this aspect of his poetry has been made so far, hence this humble attempt to examine Auden's poetry, in the context of anxiety which acts as the major force in his entire writings.

While the first chapter introduces the subject, the second traces the social milieu in which Auden grew up and refers to the various traumatic experiences of early life which moulded his poetic sensibility. It analyses the breakdown of the western culture which created problems for the young writer, for the collapse of traditional frames of references led, to the breakdown of communication between the writer and the reader. The chapter also focusses on the impact of Psychology which interpreted anxiety in terms of sexual repressions and sense of guilt which resulted from neurosis. The influences of the Marxian ideology on the young poet who found a hope in this new philosophy like many of his contemporaries. Auden too, was fascinated by communism which seemed to offer not only a solution to social ills but also became a surrogate for the lost Christian God, Auden could use a new system of ideas to expound his vision of life but soon the disillusionment set in. Disillusioned with Marxism, Auden turned towards Christianity.

Explanation/Analysis

For a long time Auden tried to defend his early poetry on sociological and political grounds. He analysed his own poetry as a simple one, where his interest was not directed towards the serious contents it contained, but to his free and masterful act of creation. He rated his entire poetry as, some sort of a game of knowledge, because his attention was not directed to the experience it contained, but to his own poetic consciousness and understanding of that particular experience and its portrayal in the best communicable manner.

He wrote as a free agent, restlessly and voluntarily turning from style to style, one subject to another, exploring the potentialities of a particular situation or an idea. Thus his poems are a rapid, easy moving accretion of ideas, images and insights. In the later part of his career, he turned to a kind of literary work that demanded his free exercise of verbal and rhythmic talent in contrast to his more personal and original imaginative insight found in his earlier poems. The personal anxiety seems to have lost priority over the social anxiety of his surroundings. Throughout his poetry Auden tried to live up to, the image of the questing hero. This image seems to have haunted his poems for nearly 30 years as an active figure. As an artist, he looked for an artistic fabrication, which would succeed in presenting a reasonable parallel between the existence of good life and an ideal community. He tried to achieve it by a perfect ordination of its many

elements, like the reconciliation of turbulent and contradictory feelings in human mind and the fruitful coexistence of human beings in a community. And this became the unifying force of his works, despite his extremely wide interests in moral, psychological and social spheres, To express his ideas forcefully, Auden did never hesitate to make use of any dogmatic language, he could lay his hands on, with a sense of detachment. As a result he came to be labelled as one of the best political poets of the 19th Century. Though, he himself claimed to be more of a religious poet. As a political poet, Auden's sympathies were divided between the Middle Class leftists, the pure working class, his feelings for England, his home and between the Marxist ideal, and between fantasies of private love and facts of public service. The earlier poems seemed to be penned down at a moment of crisis when a positive action demanded to be taken over these dual choices. In course of his career instead of changing from a political to a religious point of view, he first tried to reconcile the controversies that haunted his mind. These were concerned with topics like freedom and necessity, isolation and community, art and reality. The transformation from one to the other is achieved in a very subtle and romantic way. The evaluation of Auden's poems in the present study has revealed a consistent element of anxiety which was responsible for the growth of his mind and the predominant modern character of his poetry. In fact it is his preoccupation with anxiety that makes him the representative poet of his times. Moreover this sense of anxiety does not remain a static theme in his writings but becomes a dynamic force which reveals not only ' Auden's own early problems concerning his deep Lawrence -like mother fixation, but also those traumatic school experiences which left an indelible mark on his sensitive mind. From personal anxiety the poet is driven to the examination of social anxiety where the human person losses his identity and becomes a victim of the social and economic forces which led to the diminution of his status from a Lord of the inverse to a mere automation, who is not even given a name but merely numbered as a unit of the vast inhuman social and political machine. Ultimately the poet comes to experience profound spiritual anxiety because he comes face to face with the vexatious existentialist dilemmas which no modern, conscious artist could afford. Auden's poetry is a kind of spiritual quest of the western intellectual who has lost his moorings in religion. In a world over-whelmed by the two great wars, which unleashed the forces of violence and aggression, the poet found nothing but the negation of Christian belief in basic goodness and nobility of man, in a world surrounded by concentration camps, interrogation centres, where third degree methods were applied the poet sees low redeeming feature in the world around him, Since the modern poet had lost his communication with his readers he is obliged to return to symbolism, to effectively convey his sense of anxiety at the loss of human values in a Godless universe. Auden not only employs symbols from modern psychology and contemporary urban life he also uses landscapes which, in his poetry acquire a deep allegorical meaning.

In fact his entire poetry looks like a voyage into the unknown, for he was convinced that man's spiritual Journey, continuously crosses, the frontier of knowledge and reason. The so-called Kierkegaard a 'leap of faith' becomes a kind of spiritual necessity. The acute sense of guilt once the companion of sexual repression and social injustice, became for Auden an acknowledgement of original sin. The release from this anxiety was no longer now the personal and instinctual, but universal. In other words this sense of anxiety worked his poetic and spiritual progress from Eros to Agape.

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