

## **Morgan Walker: A Hidden Message: Auden's Personal Protest in Time of War**

W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" can be interpreted as having two messages regarding society. On the surface, the poem comments on how the dishonesty and manipulation of government can lead to war. The author uses this primary interpretation as a vessel to mask and deliver his underlying critique of homophobia. In order to create duality in interpretation of the poem, Auden uses codified language to conceal the underlying theme of the lack of acceptance of homosexuality in society. The poem creates metaphors, such as a contrast of light and dark and uses implications through historical figures and government to show the offense done to homosexuals. The two interpretations of the poem are able to coexist without impeding or contradicting one another. By setting up a historical scenario and then commenting on societal errors, Auden is able to effectively shift tones without harshly criticizing the audience on social injustices.

Wystan Hugh Auden was born in England in 1907 and had two older brothers. Auden's family moved around the country for various reasons, typically because of his father's work. The first extremely significant event in Auden's life that shows a major connection with his future profession in poetry was when Wystan was eight years old, he was sent to St. Edmund's boarding school. While attending school he received what would be considered a traditional education given to English boys of upper classes. His level of studies and high education lead to receiving a scholarship to Oxford in which he was going to study in the natural sciences. While at the University, his tutor, Nevill Coghill was extremely sympathetic to Auden's youthful curiosity and helped to guide Auden into an English literature major (Farnan 34). These events set up the beginning of Auden's future in poetry.

While at Oxford, Auden seemed to have feelings for fellow undergraduate men and these feelings had gone unexpressed. While at college, he tried to develop heterosexual traits through such things as psychoanalysis and celibacy (Bucknell 1). After graduating from college and Auden sought out to expand his education and gain freedom. He found this freedom in Berlin when he lived in the middle-class suburb of Nikolassee. While in Berlin, Auden began to experiment with his new found freedom through sexual activity (Farnan 36). In Berlin, Auden indulged himself in the relationships that he had been denied in college. He wrote to friends back home about male brothels and men who were available for money in the bars and around the neighborhood (Bucknell 1). Auden's new life in Berlin began a process of self-examination that allowed him to understand his sexual nature. He later moved back to England, but frequently visited Berlin because he missed the lifestyle. After one of the visits in July 1930, Auden wrote six love poems in German that were inspired by the love affairs that he had in Berlin and the kind of man that he longed for. The poems are very direct and had a tone of melancholy, disillusioned, even cynical love and express such ideas as selfish love, and that it is short and sometimes brutish (Bucknell 1). They were written in such a fashion and in a foreign language because Auden never expected them to be published. He felt that by writing them in a foreign language, it allowed him to disguise certain aspects in case others tried to read it, which freed him to speak more openly on the difficult theme of love (Bucknell 2). Auden even kept track of many of his feelings and experiences in a journal that he kept in

which he stated such things as how his guilt about his homosexuality drove him to search for new lovers (Faran 38).

In 1939, Auden made a major move to America in order to alter his lifestyle and explore new horizons. Soon after he arrived, a major event happened in his life. While attending an event organized by the League of American Writers, Auden met a young man named Chester Kallman (Osborne 190). Auden and Kallman started a relationship soon after, and became friends and lovers until his death (Osborne 192). Though in 1935, Auden married a woman named Erika Mann, this was primarily a act of kindness to allow Mann to escape from the Nazi's in Germany (Osborne 105). Auden lived most of his life with Kallman and Mann, and continued his relationship with Kallman. Auden's love for Kallman was extremely strong and it would be unrealistic to think that Auden's love life would not affect the subject matter of his poetry.

The fact that Auden met and fell in love with Kallman in 1939, the same year that he wrote "September 1, 1939," gives some inkling that the subject matter of the poem could have deep seeded roots in Auden's personal feelings about love particularly coupled with fact that some of Auden's previous poems have been suggested as having dual interpretations. In the article "But Who Would Get It?": Auden and the Codes of Poetry and Desire," Richard Bozorth examines a passage from "The Temple," in which a character Stephen cries out "Destroy this temple." Bozorth argues that the line would mean very little to readers who are unaware that "the temple" is Spender's image for the eroticized male body. Bozorth believes that "the line divides readers by way of privileged knowledge" (Bozorth 712). Bozorth goes on to give another example from the same work in which he argues that the lines are not only cryptic but encrypted and contain code-names that are most likely only known to inside readership in which only those close to Auden would understand the references. Bozorth believes that the codes that Auden creates quite often "invoke insider knowledge about homosexuality (Bozorth 712). In another one of Auden's poems, "As I walked out one evening," the lines "You shall love your crooked neighbour/With your crooked heart" comment on the unfaithfulness of all lovers. However, Bozorth suggests that because "crookedness" is one of Auden's favorite tropes for homosexuality, it is very likely that Auden is declaring the transience of gay love (Bozorth 712). Auden finds ways to create duality in his work so that he can bring a deep meaning to multiple groups of people. Since Auden has a personal connection with the homosexual community it would make sense that he is creating a second meaning behind his work that speaks to homosexuals. By creating a second meaning to his work, homosexuals are able to connect with his poetry and understand it on a deeper level.

Auden's poetry attempts to involve the reader and create a "self critical dialogue with the new perspective on himself" (Blair 35). Auden goes about attempting to accomplish this by creating generality in his poems. Auden wants to lead a variety of readers to respond to his poetry in their own way (Blair 36). To lead his audience to a state of self-examination, Auden must avoid abstract language so that his audience does not become confused with his wording. On the other hand, Auden felt that he could not be too narrow with his language because then his audience would be extremely limited (Blair 37). When writing poems, Auden felt he had to balance the ideas of philosophy and history. This idea shows up in his poem "September 1, 1939" in which Auden uses the historical event of war as a platform to state his own personal philosophy.

Auden's style and form both reflect his ideology in writing poetry and creating deeper meanings within them. His diction ranges from classically poetic to very scientific and obscene

and he chooses words that have duality in meaning, either referencing a topic that has nothing to do with the superficial meaning of the poem, or having some historical significance (Blair 126). Auden's poem "Many Happy Returns," for example, is a birthday letter to a seven year old boy, and yet its good wishes do not exemplify conventional wishes and hopes for materialistic items or even feelings of happiness (Blair 136). Within this particular poem, Auden uses the conventions of a particular holiday and uses language in the poem to create an altered perception of what one may typically view as the norm. Auden seems to exemplify this in "September 1, 1939" by creating one historical context for the poem on the surface while commenting on the treatment of the homosexual community at the time. Auden felt that only through playing with form and technique within a poem can a reader or writer be tricked into discovering new insight into a poem (Blair 153).

"September 1, 1939" was written within the first year of Auden's residence in the United States, and superficially expresses Auden's political opinions about WWII and his skepticism of governmental authority. The poem contains attacks on a consumer society and has representations of large, abstract and anti-spiritual social machines that exemplify the "lie of authority" (Firchow 177). Auden uses historical references and literary devices such as metaphors to help drive his opinion home about his disgust for what he sees as a dishonest government. Concerning the war, Auden believes that the people of the world should be more truthful to one another. This idea plays into the actions of governments at the time. Governments used quite a bit of propaganda during wartime to depict certain groups of people and countries in certain lights. Auden only seeks to suggest that people put more emphasis in honesty and loyalty in one another (Firchow 180).

The primary interpretation is very similar to what can be read as a secondary interpretation regarding the intolerance of homosexuality. Through the poem, specifically the mask of Auden's opinions about WWII, Auden is able to express his deeper feelings that the world should be more open and honest with one another regarding homosexuality. The world should tolerate all different types of people, who may differ in ethnicity, beliefs or sexual preference. His creation of metaphors and use of historical references are set up in his primary interpretation to give support to his ideas but they also have a deeper seeded meaning that allows Auden to secretly comment the societal treatment of homosexuality.

In the poem, Auden creates a metaphor of light and dark, that in the primary interpretation sets up a contrast between the individuals who are honest and hopeful for the future against those who are corrupt and dishonest. The meaning behind the metaphor in terms of the intolerance of homosexuality interpretation is the light represents those who are accepting and embrace homosexual lifestyle and the dark is those who are intolerant and look down on homosexuals. In lines "Waves of anger and fear/Circulate over the bright/And darkened lands of the earth" Auden is expressing the feelings of "fear" that are being felt, not only about the fear moving about the corrupt places of the world during war, but over the feelings that people felt towards the homosexual community (6-8). At the time, homosexuality was not openly spoken about, and therefore not openly accepted by society. The feelings of fear represent the feelings that people felt towards the notion of homosexuals because being openly gay was somewhat of a new concept that was beginning to surface in society. In line 47, Auden continues his metaphor of light and dark by stating that "The lights must never go out." This line means similar things in both interpretations of Auden's poem. He is trying to express the idea that if love is lost, humans are doomed. In the perspective of war, the love is the honesty and respect between humans, while the homosexual interpretation takes the idea that if we do not learn to love and tolerate one another, we are doomed. The world must be accepting of all

types of people, and the "lights [that] must never go out" are those who are tolerable and accepting of other people (47). Auden goes on to describe the dark as "conservative" in line 67. He does this not to just comment on the people who are controlled by a deceiving government, but to show how people and governmental institutions are typically unwavering in their opinions. In this particular case, Auden is suggesting that people are far too conservative in their opinions and should step away from conservative thinking and embrace changing times and new ideas. Auden ends his metaphor with the image of an "affirming flame" which in both interpretations use this image to show the strength that Auden feels for emotions about the subjects in which he's speaking about.

Auden also employs historical references to support his perspectives. The first major reference is the mention of Martin Luther. Auden's claim that "scholarship can/Unearth the whole offence/From Luther until now" to parallel the religious ideology that Hitler shared with Martin Luther (12-14). Both men were anti-semites but also both spoke against homosexuality (Zeiss 1). The inclusion of the reference to Martin Luther adds historical validity to the current events and the prosecution that is currently taking place in the times of war with dishonest governments and the unequal treatment of homosexuals throughout time. Another historical reference that Auden makes is Nijinsky and Diaghilev. The line speaks of what "Is true of the normal heart;" which in the context of the war, Auden uses this reference to emphasize the idea that people seek isolation and avoid love for one another and confrontation (61). In the context of tolerance for homosexuality, Auden includes this reference because Nijinsky and Diaghilev were homosexuals and the subject Auden uses Nijinsky to speak is love (Kolb 149). The "error bred in the bone/of each woman and each man/Craves what it cannot have" can not only refer to the idea of avoiding confrontation but the "error" can be seen as homosexual nature and the "crav[ing] what it cannot have" would be referring to members of the same sex. The other major reference that Auden makes is the mention of Eros. Essentially Auden states, that like Eros he shows an affirming flame. The inclusion of Eros is used to evoke feelings of compassion that helps to show humans in a loving light. Eros was the the god of love and sexuality in Greek mythology and by including him in the poem, Auden wants to show the equality in all love around the world. Love is equal ground for all, and people should feel free to love whomever they wish, male or female.

Auden has several other instances in which his language is ambiguous and can be interpreted in more than one way scattered through the poem. The scenario in which Auden sets up that the "dense commuters come/Repeating their morning vows,/I will be true to the wife,/ I'll concentrate more on my work,?" can be seen as a people who are controlled and manipulated by their government through propaganda, lies and deception (69-72). However, these lines can also reflect the idea that there are homosexual men and women who force themselves into a false life of heterosexuality who remind themselves repeatedly that they are heterosexual through statements such as these. These men and woman would feel forced to live this way because of the lack of acceptance of homosexuals at the time. Auden also speaks of "undo[ing] the folded lie,/The romantic lie in the brain/Of the sensual man-in-the-street" which refers to speaking out against the deceptive government (79-81). However, the "romantic lie in the brain" could be the idea that some homosexuals have been brainwashed to act heterosexually and adopt a heterosexual lifestyle. Auden saying that "All [he has] is a voice" to speak out against these injustices, sends the message that Auden is using this poem as a platform to speak out against the mistreatment of homosexuals (78). Other references in the poem such as the "international wrong" are applicable in both interpretations as the wrong and injustices that are being done in the world, either the lying by governmental bodies when referring to the war, or the mistreatment of homosexuals(44).

Early on in the poem, the reference to "Those to whom evil is done,/Do evil in return?" refers to Hitler persecuting the Jews, and the wrong that governmental bodies administer on its people will eventually be reciprocated and the people who were the subject of injustice, will retaliate and even the score. The idea of retaliation works in both interpretations of the poem, because just like the idea that the people who are treated wrongly by the government will retaliate, the same holds true for the injusticed homosexuals who are abused and not treated as equals.

The idea that the poem is commenting on the inequality of homosexuals in society, works along with the primary interpretation of the poem because in both instances Auden is using the poem to speak out against injustices and seek truth and equality either in government or society. Auden's poem is read primarily as a critique on the dishonesty of government because of the outbreak of war and what was occurring in the world. Since the war is such a significant event, and the poem is written at the brink of the war, it is what the majority of readers is considering when reading this poem. However, Auden's personal life and the language and references within the poem give evidence to a deeper meaning. Auden loved to play with language and help people self-reflect by reading his work. By creating a poem with two levels of interpretation Auden is able to speak about two different subjects that he feels very strongly about both of which work together to rally for a more honest tolerable world.

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