

Martina Pavlikova*

READING AUDEN AS A RESOURCE FOR EXISTENTIAL REFLECTION IN A SOCIETY WITH TECHNOCRATIC AND HEDONISTIC TENDENCIES

*The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of a remarkable writer, Wystan Hugh Auden (1907 - 1973), who was strongly influenced by the philosophy and thinking of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, especially by his works *Either - Or*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Works of Love* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. Auden's poetry is noted for its stylistic and technical achievement, its engagement with politics, morals, love, purity and religion, and its unique variety in tone, form and content. It is enormously rich in allusions, poetic tone and intellectual power. The content of his poems ranges from philosophical meditations, the concept of being, the concept of man, anxiety, aloneness and despair, to the contemporary crises of modern man and the evolution of society. His poetry becomes a resource for existential reflection in modern society with the technocratic and hedonistic tendencies of consumer society of which this paper is an in-depth analysis.*

Keywords: Kierkegaard, poetry, moral, love, religion, society, hedonism, technocratic tendency, consumer society.

1. Introduction

Wystan Hugh Auden is one of the greatest and most influential poets of modern times. His verse combines evocative descriptions of his inner world and feelings with personal responses to the major events of the 20th century. At the same time, he is a most inward and subjective poet. Considered individually, his poems are often extremely obscure. They are therefore less 'suited' than those of most modern poets to the kind of critical treatment that begins by considering the poem as an isolated, independent and discrete entity. The odd impersonality of W.H. Auden consistently lends his poetry, even at its deepest insight into the human heart, an air of strangeness. Thus, according to Kirsch (2005), "Auden always insisted on the material, the physical, ultimately all the realities and necessities of man's bodily condition, in human experience, and the proper understanding and acceptance of the flesh and its relation to the spirit" [1, p. 27].

Auden wrote many different kinds of poetry, in highly varied styles and forms. He wrote compressed short stories, plays, biographical and critical essays. He used the traditional genre, sonnet, elegy, eclogue, song, epistle, oratorio, drama and wrote occasional poems on private and public events.

2. Christian narrativity and symbolism in the poems

After 1939, Auden's literary work was strongly influenced by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, whose writings were introduced to him by Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Nicolas Nabokov and Charles Williams. In Kierkegaard, Auden found what amounted to a theological foundation in his poetry [2]. The Danish philosopher had made careful distinctions between the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious modes of existence and Auden implemented these into his own literary work. Auden realized that "faith offers a new horizon of meaning of one's being" [3, p. 159].

For Auden, "Kierkegaard's belief that a man is related in his life to an unconditional absolute that he must continuously search for but never fully know, resonated profoundly with Auden's own spiritual instincts of faith and doubt, as did Kierkegaard's consequent exploration of man's existential relationship with God in his everyday life" [1, p. 23].

In one of his last poems, *Thanksgiving*, Auden wrote that: "Wild Kierkegaard, Williams and Lewis" [4, p. 316] guided him back to belief. This is also reflected in another passage from Auden's anthology of Kierkegaard's works: "Kierkegaard was neither a poet nor a philosopher, but a preacher, an expounder and defender of Christian doctrine and Christian Conduct" [5, p. vii]. Kierkegaard's legacy helped Auden create his own ideas about

* Martina Pavlikova

Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra, Slovakia
E-mail: mpavlikova@ukf.sk

Christianity. This compelled Auden to write more on theological topics. Regarding this matter, he wrote: "There is a faith by which a man lives his life as a man, i.e. the presuppositions he holds in order that 1. he may make sense of his past and present experience; 2. he may be able to act toward the future with a sense that his action will be meaningful and effective; 3. that he and his world may be changed from what they were to something more satisfactory" [6, p. 109]. For Auden, the combination of poetry and faith fulfilled all three important criteria.

American professor of English, Arthur Kirsch, notes that Auden's faith "expanded the horizons of his mind as well as his heart, and his formidable intelligence, in turn, probed the nature and limits of his Christian belief, animating his continuous quest not only to believe still but also to believe again" [1, p. xi]. When leaving Europe, Auden had to make a choice to either leave and save his life, or stay in Europe risking death and facing the imminent horror of Hitler's regime. This reminds us of Kierkegaard's predicament, as Roman Kralik and Luboš Torok point out: "for Kierkegaard the either - or choice is typical" [7, p. 69]. Similar to Kierkegaard, Auden was forced to make a comparable choice. However, Auden's choice was more acutely existential.

Edward Mendelson suggests that: "Kierkegaard's existential Christianity offered two strengths that psychoanalysis and politics could not: it perceived its relation to an absolute value; and it understood that it could never claim to know or embody that value. Auden scarcely needed Kierkegaard's absolute to know that Hitler was in the wrong, but because it obliged him to acknowledge that he too was in the wrong, he could believe its implicit judgment against Hitler more thoroughly than he could believe judgments that gave secret consolations to vanity" [8, p. 130]. Gareth Reeves explains the meaning of Kierkegaard's view of humanity: "Kierkegaard's view of humanity as made up of conscious beings perpetually obliged to exercise their free will to choose from an infinity of foreseeable possibilities, means that each individual presents his unique case" [9, pp. 191].

According to Arthur Kirsch: "By 1938, issues of Christian faith become quite unmistakable in Auden's work" [1, p. 15]. Auden's poem, *As I walked out one evening*, is very specific. The first part of this ballad describes eternal hopes of romantic love. The second part describes the conquest of such love in terms of Time. In ballad, the lover confesses love to his beloved woman. He stresses that his "love has no endings" [4, p. 66]. However, in the distance, all clocks in the city began to whirr and chime: "O let not Time deceive you, You cannot conquer Time" [4, p. 66]. The clock becomes a reminder of uncompromising reality of mortality and of the imperfection of human life. Then the clocks order the people: "You shall love your crooked neighbor with your crooked heart" [4, p. 67]. For Auden, it was an "internalization of the biblical injunction, a religious understanding and alleviation of his own sense of isolation and a movement toward the self-forgiveness

that was the necessary condition for his love of his neighbor" [1, p. 17].

"O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress,
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.
O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start,
You shall love your crooked neighbor
With your crooked heart" [4, p. 67].

Christian symbolism is present also in the line that emphasizes that man is imperfect and essentially powerless: "life remains blessings, although you cannot bless" [4, p. 67]. In the final stanza of the poem *As I Walked Out One Evening*, the cessation of the clocks draws the poem back from the terms of time. Auden expressed his thoughts on time in mordantly explicit terms:

"What right have I to swear
Even at one a.m.
To you till I die?
Earth meets too many crimes
For fibs to interest her,
If I can give my word,
Forgiveness can recur
Any number of times
In Time. Which is absurd.
Tempus fugit. Quite.
So finish up your drink.
All flesh is grass. It is." [4, p. 271]

What we hear here is an echo of the Biblical text from Isaiah 40:6-8: "The voice said, 'Cry out!' And he said, 'What shall I cry?' All flesh *is* grass, and all its loveliness *is* like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; Surely the people *are* grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever" [10, p. 95].

3. The Concept of Suffering

In his poems, W. H. Auden also developed a unique concept of suffering. One of his finest pieces is the poem *September 1, 1939*. The poem was written in 1939, just as German troops invaded Poland and began the Second World War. Auden begins his poem with the speaker sitting in a dive bar in New York City. Hitler's actions have brought the "low dishonest decade" to a close, bringing "the unmentionable odor of death" to the September evening. Auden notes how, despite all imperfections, "we must love one another or die" [4, p. 97]. He was convinced, that to love one another truly is possible only when we start to perceive our neighbor as human being created by God in his own image. He added that loving one's neighbor "is a bodily, blood relationship" [11, p. 297]. Auden also asks:

"Our bodies cannot love:
But without one,
What works of Love could we do?" [12, p. 713].

Because of the rising power of Hitler and the Second World War, Auden was forced to leave Europe and began his new life in the USA. Similar to Tillich, Auden "came to understand Kierkegaard better through the suffering of the 1st World War, in which he served as a field spiritual on the Western Front and where he lived through real anxiety" [13, p. 187]. His poem *September 1, 1939* reflects the existential anxiety of a displaced person:

"I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-Second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives,
The unmentionable odor of death
Offends the September night" [4, p. 91].

Auden argues that during war-time "everybody is reduced to the anxious status of a shady character or a displaced person" [14, p. 3]. Issues pertaining to displaced individuals and communities have always been complex and difficult to deal with. American scholar Hubert Jurjewicz in his paper titled *Mechanisms through which spirituality leads to resilience for immigrants* highlights the complicated life of immigrants and points out different problems connected with immigration: "Mechanisms through which spirituality leads to resilience for immigrants - short scheme: 1. Spirituality - problems encountered by immigrants: racism, lack of money, no family ties, culture shock, food & basic necessities and fear of deportation. 2. Mechanisms - healing mental injury, strengthening personal relationships, reducing anxiety & depression, maintaining a positive outlook, accepting change as part of life and changing attitudes towards problems. 3. Resilience - some problems persist, but individuals are 'used' to them. They resume relative normality in spite of the hitherto existing challenges" [15, p. 24].

For a better understanding of Auden, it is important to note that in the first stanza of his poem, the term "alone" clearly presents the conflict between the individual and the state and the individual's moral responsibility. In the fourth stanza the poet focuses on New York City, where he settled after his arrival from Europe.

"Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long

In a euphoric dream:
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong.
Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The light must never go out
The music must always play" [4, p. 96].

The city represents modern capitalism. Auden outlines "blind skyscrapers" [4, p. 96] that "proclaim the strength of Collective Man" [4, p. 96] via competition and diversity. The ultimate reason for this social blindness is isolationism. People are tied to their average lives; they desire to pursue their happy dreams, and they keep the music playing and the lights on so that they will never see how morally lost they are. They trust the government or the capitalist telling them to remain neutral and unbiased for their own sake, which fits their egoistic and sensual desires to fulfill their selfish goals without regard for what is happening in Europe.

Auden developed in his poems a unique concept of suffering. One of his masterpieces, the poem *Musée des Beaux Arts*, depicts the human position of suffering in the "dispassionate landscape of the daily life of man as well as of nature" [1, p. 18]. It is the only poem that Auden based on a specific painting. The painting concerned was Brueghel's picture *The Fall of Icarus*. "The poem, in its brisk survey of quotidian life, in the midst of which astonishing events take place" [16, p. 99]:

"About suffering they were never wrong.
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position, how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
walking dully along" [4, p. 87].

The second stanza of the poem reflects Auden's focus on Brueghel's painting of the fall of Icarus. In Christian narration, Icarus is a figure often interpreted as a type of Christ. Auden describes:

"In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster, the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure, the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on" [4, p. 87].

The moral message of this poem concerns human indifference, which is a manifestation of the moral failure and refusal to love one's neighbor. Just in refusing to love one's neighbor Auden sees a fundamental violation of the Christian faith and considers it a serious sin. The poem also presents another interpretative dimension. "Both stanzas of *Musée des Beaux Arts* derive their power from the juxtaposition of momentous suffering with the unconcerned lives of ordinary people" [1, p. 20]. The poem has enjoyed "an unusual popularity, and this may well be due to the

way in which the mythic or miraculous subject of the painting is subdued and domesticated to our habitual and quotidian experience" [16, p. 100].

Another poem by Auden which reflects suffering is *Refugee Blues*. This poem laments the plight of the Jews who were forced to escape from Europe when the Holocaust started and Jews were killed or imprisoned under the cruel regime of Hitler which sentenced them all to death. The narrator of the poem thinks that he heard the rumbling of an imminent storm, but finally, it was Hitler sentencing all Jews to death: "I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky, it was Hitler over Europe, saying: 'They must die'" [4, p. 92]. It is a chilling and depressing poem about suffering which reminds one of the extents to which humanity can fall, becoming beasts and cruel, thirsty for each other's blood and lives. Auden reminds how seriously humanity can fail:

"Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet, there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.
Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now"
[4, p. 91].

4. The Concept of Love

Auden's poetry was also affected by a very unusual mystical experience of Agape. He highlights a formative, mystical episode which he experienced one summer night in 1933 while he was spending pleasant time with some colleagues:

"I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly, because thanks to the power, I was doing it-what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself. My personal feelings towards them were unchanged-they were still colleagues, not intimate friends-but I felt their existence as themselves to be of infinite value and rejoiced in it" [16, p. 69-70].

Auden later describes this feeling as a vision of 'Agape,' or a kind of brotherly love. He perceived them as sexless human beings and encountered absolutely pure love. Because of this experience he aligned his faith with the moral, human imperative to love one's neighbor as one's self.

Auden's view of romantic love, however, is not only an expression of his personal temperament, but in turn reflects his religious attitude: Auden always honored and respected the state of marriage. He emphasized that: "Like everything which is not the involuntary result of fleeting emotion but the creation of time and will, any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely more interesting and significant than any romance, however passionate" [17, p. 248].

Every image Auden invokes signifies a symptomatic condition of society or individual psychology. His poetry also reflects

a unique concept of love. Auden developed this concept in one of his most admired, quoted and anthologized poems, which he was eventually to title his poem *Lay Your Sleeping Head My Love*. According to Hecht, in this poem Auden "made at least one change in the course of time: in the last line of the second stanza, which originally went 'The hermit's sensual ecstasy,' the word 'sensual' was changed to 'carnal.' Within the wide spectrum of love, including love as mysteriously curative of both individual and social ills, the love described here is vulnerable, touching, and decently screened as regards gender" [18, p. 103].

"Lay your sleeping head, my love,
human on my faithless arm,
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral,
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lay,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful" [4, p. 53].

Auden's poem *Alone* is another philosophical meditation on love. The poem analyzes the difference between the aching that is linked to being the subject of someone's love and being alone. Are we, human beings really alone? What is the essence of human relationships? Auden suggests the metaphysical presence of God in the life of each human by highlighting that we are never alone.

"Each lover has some theory of his own
About the difference between the ache
Of being with his love, and being alone:
Why what, when dreaming, is dear flesh and bone
That really stirs the senses, when awake,
Appears a simulacrum of his own.
Narcissus disbelieves in the unknown;
He cannot join his image in the lake
So long as he assumes he is alone.
The child, the waterfall, the fire, the stone,
Are always up to mischief, though, and take
The universe for granted as their own.
The elderly, like Proust, are always prone
To think of love as a subjective fake;
The more they love, the more they feel alone.
Whatever view we hold, it must be shown
Why every lover has a wish to make
Some kind of otherness his own:
Perhaps, in fact, we never are alone" [19, p. 312].

5. Conclusion

Auden's existential poems reflect a moral, spiritual and imaginative approach towards life. All his authorship highlights love and warns against the human cruelty that comes from war.

Our contemporary society is more or less consumer oriented. Reading Auden can morally and spiritually enrich each reader, cultivating in him a sense of longing for a deeper meaning of life. Auden's legacy remains very appropriate for current modern society. After his emigration to the United States, Auden's poems reflect powerful Christian narration and religious symbolism. Auden "was a great poet and critic, but he should also be remembered, and would have wished to be remembered, as a man who sought to lead a Christian life" [1, p. 179]. Auden's concepts of love, aloneness and suffering can play the role of

a spiritual guide for the individual modern man when faced with the problems of life in a society marked by hedonistic and technocratic tendencies. "The path to an authentic subjectivity seems to lead inevitably through the complicated and sometimes painful struggles of life. One should not expect to make sense of his own life without an arduous struggle to interpret one's existence in relation to self, the world, and to God. The power and wisdom of such interpretation [...] comes from God as the source, guide, and goal of the journey" [20, p. 106].

References:

- [1] KIRSCH, A.: *Auden and Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. ISBN 978-0-300-10814-9.
- [2] For more on despair in Kierkegaard, see: VALCO, M.: Kierkegaard's 'Sickness unto Death' as a Resource in our Search for Personal Authenticity. *European J. of Science and Theology*, vol. 12, No. 1, 2016, 100-101. ISSN 1841-0464; for a contrasting approach, see: HAJKO, D.: Indian Philosophy at the Turn of the Millennium. *Filozofia*, vol. 69, No. 9, 794-795. ISSN 0046-385 X.
- [3] KONDRLA, P., KRALIK, R.: Authentic Being and Moral Conscience. *European J. of Science and Theology*, vol. 12, No. 4, 2016, 155-164. ISSN 1841-0464.
- [4] AUDEN, W. H.: *Selected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007. ISBN 978-0-307-27808-1.
- [5] AUDEN, W. H.: *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*. New York: David McKay, 1999. ISBN 978-0-940-322.
- [6] AUDEN, W. H.: *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose, vol. II: 1939-1948*. Mendelson, E. (ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, 109. ISBN 0-691-08935-3.
- [7] KRALIK, R., TOROK, L.: Concept of Relationship God-man in Kierkegaard's Writing 'What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air.' *European J. of Science and Theology*, vol. 12, No. 2, 2016, 65-74. ISSN 1841-0464.
- [8] MENDELSON, E.: *Later Auden*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999. ISBN: 0-374-18408-9.
- [9] REEVES, G.: *Auden and Religion*. The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden, Smith, S. (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. ISBN 0 521 53647 2.
- [10] Daniel Slivka points out an important hermeneutic principle in this regard: "The Bible itself gives us signs on how to find the original meanings hidden in it and how to use them in the present-day context." SLIVKA, D.: Hebraic scriptural hermeneutics in the ancient Hellenistic world. *European J. of Science and Theology*, vol. 11, No. 5, 2015, 87-96. ISSN 1841-0464. The Biblical quotation is from: *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*. Nashville: Nelson. 1982. ISBN 978-0840700537.
- [11] AUDEN, W. H.: *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*. Mendelson, E. (ed.). London: Faber and Fiber, 1977. ISBN:0571108326; Compare to: KONDRLA, P.: Apophatic theology, philosophy of dialogue and communication perspectives. *European J. of Science and Theology*, vol. 12, No. 1, 2016, 117-128. ISSN 1841-0464.
- [12] AUDEN, W. H.: *Collected Poems*, Mendelson, E. (ed.) 2nd ed., New York: Random House, 1991. ISBN 978-0679731979.
- [13] KRALIK, R.: Kierkegaard and his Influence on Tillich's Philosophy of Religion. *European J. of Science and Theology*, vol. 11, No. 3, 2015, 183-189. ISSN 1841-0464. For a recent appraisal of Tillich's theology, see: KRALIK, R.: Key Philosophical-Theological concepts of Soren Kierkegaard in the work of Paul Tillich. *J. of Science and Theology*, vol. 11, No. 4, 2015, 179-188. ISSN 841-0464.
- [14] AUDEN, W. H.: *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-691-13815-13815-2.
- [15] JURJEWICZ, H.: Mechanisms through which Spirituality Leads to Resilience for Immigrants. *European J. of Science and Theology*, vol. 12, No. 4, 2016, 17-25. ISSN 1841-0464.
- [16] AUDEN, W. H.: *Forewords and Afterwards*, New York: Random House, 1973. ISBN 0-394-48359-6.
- [17] AUDEN, W. H.: *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book*. New York : Viking, 1970. ISBN 978-0670209941.
- [18] HECHT, A.: *Hidden Law - The Poetry of W. H. Auden*. Harvard : Harvard University Press, 1993. ISBN 0-674-3900-7.
- [19] AUDEN, W. H.: *Collected Poems*. New York : Vintage Books, 1991. ISBN 978-0679731979.
- [20] VALCO, M., KRALIK, R., BARRETT, L.: Moral Implications of Augustine's Philosophical and Spiritual Journey in his Confessions. *Communications - Scientific Letters of the University of Zilina*, vol. 17, No. 2, 2015, 103-108. ISSN 1335-4205. On this question see also: HAJKO, D.: Wilmon Henry Sheldon and his "Synthesis of Philosophies" (in Slovak), *Filozofia*, vol. 71, No. 3, 2016, 209-219. ISSN 0046-385 X; VALCO, M.: The Roots and Nature of Luther's Theological Understanding of 'Missio Dei' in the Context of Reformation Agenda. *European J. of Science and Theology*, vol. 12, No. 4, 2016, 181-188. ISSN 1841-0464.