

DESPAIR AND DESPONDENCY IN THE POETRY OF W.H. AUDEN

Dr. Deepti Mishra

M.A. Ph.D (English), B.Ed

Add. – Mishra Medical Store

Station Road, Pilibhit.

As it was a period of crisis, dismay and loss of value. Auden and his contemporaries were greatly agitated and tried to diagnose the ills of modern civilization in Marxian and Freudian terms. During this phase Auden visited Belgium, Iceland, Spain and China and examined their political, economic, social problems and conditions and found that....

“Everywhere man was in the quandary.”

Auden was like a current of fresh air that refreshes and makes the people breath a long breath; He was in fact a leader who made the people conscious of their problems and tried to pull them out from the abyss of despair and despondency. Auden started on his poetic journey in search of human values. In “Journey to Iceland” Auden describes the Icelanders leading a life of poverty but there also the native asks similar question as the Englishman:

“Where is the homage when shall justice be done? Who is against me? Why am I always alone?”¹

In this atmosphere of war and violence Auden turned his attention to men’s inner world. In a sonnet dedicated to E.M. Froster, Auden points out the importance of inner life...

*Though Italy and Kings are far away
And truth a subject only bombs discuss
Our ear unfriendly, still you speak to us
Insisting that the Inner life can pay.²*

In book III “Six Odes” of ‘The Orators’, Auden feels sad at the gloomy atmosphere of the nightmarish world where repression, poverty and violence rule. Modern man is always haunted by insecurity and loss of values. Even despair is not his own.

*Nor even is despair your own ideas of safety
Comes general assault on your ideas of safety
That sense of famine, central anguish felt
For goodness wasted at peripheral fault.³*

Auden also saw man haunted by all kinds of fears- fear of police, fear of total annihilation due to a nuclear war, fear of society and its rigid morality etc.

In his poem ‘ The Two Climbs’ he may finds himself climbing mountain where he may have no water to quench his thirst and no shelter to save him from scorching heat.

*Free from short haired man executives,
The sad and useless faces round may home,
Upon the mountain of my fear, climb,
Above a break neck scorching rock, no caves, no cool, no water.⁴*

Auden calls this era an epoch of “The Third Great Disappointment”⁵ People are probably more intelligent but their hearts are stunted. Industrialization and economic disparity have led to hatred and fear. ‘The Capital’ presents the picture of a big industrial city in which the rich enjoy all comforts, while the poor live in miseries.

Another poem of Auden ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’ as its title indicates in an elegy written to mourn on the death of W.B. Yeats, but it is different from the conventional elegy. Here nature is represented as going in its course indifferent and unaffected. The great poet’s death goes unnoticed both by men and nature. Human life goes on as usual and so does nature.

Thus Auden felt very much emotionally disturbed by the challenging social and economic problems around him. During all the phases of his poetic career the early, the middle and the last phase. He is equally concerned about man’s miserable plight and is pre-occupied with exploring ways and means of pulling him out of his terrible situation. His concern was emotional but his treatment was most intellectual. His poetry is a treasure house of ideas which leave an indelible impact on the mind of the reader.

References

- Auden, ‘Journey to Iceland: A letter to Christopher Isherwood in letter from Iceland, W.H. Auden and Louis Macnicie 1937 rpt London Faber 1967, P-23
Sonnets from China no. XXI, Collected Short Poems P-138
Collected Shorter Poems P-33
‘The Two Climbs’ Collected Shorter Poems p-76
Auden commentary in Journey To A War, W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, Rev. Edn. (1939, Rpt. London, Faber and Faber 1973)