
An Overview of *City Without Walls* by W. H. Auden

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Received: 20 Jan 2024, Accepted: 28 Jan 2024, Published with Peer Reviewed on line: 31 Jan 2024

Abstract

W.H. Auden was one of the greatest poets of twentieth century. His poetry not only presents the crisis of the age but also provides the truth that can hold the parts together. *City Without Walls* is his volume of poetry of his later years. It has reflective poems that delve into the theme of urban isolation amidst the bustling landscape of a modern city. Through vivid imagery and evocative language, Auden captures the alienation and disconnection experienced by individuals in urban environment while exploring the possibilities of human connection and solidarity. This research paper aims to analyse the poet's exploration of urban life and its problems. It also examines the themes, symbols, language, and socio-cultural context of the verses. By delving into the complexities of Auden's portrayal of urban isolation and human connection, this paper provides insight into the enduring relevance of the volume in contemporary society.

Keywords: Human, Identity, Imagery, Isolation, Symbolism, Urban

Introduction

W.H. Auden was a great poet and thinker. He had an extra ordinary personality. During his Oxford days many young intellectuals were attracted by him. He was regarded to have a superior intellectual and a greater "creative genius"¹. During his early career it was remarked about him that "a new star had arisen, it seemed in the English sky"². But since his early works, there has also been hostile criticism of his poetry. Dr. F.R. Leavis felt the need of "essential maturity"³ in Auden's poetry. Some reviewers pointed out a gradual decline of his poetic efficiency. But in the fifties the younger poets accepted Auden as their model. Both English and Americans were greatly influenced by his poetic images and metrical forms. Prof. Richard Haggart brought out his monumental book on W.H. Auden entitled *Auden: An Introductory Essays*. It was published in 1951. The essays in this collection examine his poetry from aesthetic view point. Since this work, the critics have been giving a better treatment to his works. Two well known American critics Randall Jarrell and J.W. Beach gave their elaborate view of Auden's poetry which aroused interest of many critics and readers. Auden is essentially a poet of ideas. He maintains a synthesis between the form and meaning in his poetry. In his latest volumes of poems, Auden breaks no new ground. The poems of this period carry almost the similar theme and style as his earlier works. These poems clearly depict his deep concern with the complexities of contemporary human life. There is a combination of serious as well as light tone.

"City Without Walls" is a poem included in his volume *City Without Walls*. It invites readers to contemplate the existential solitude experienced within the urban landscape. Auden's portrayal of urban isolation and human connection resonates with contemporary readers, reflecting the challenges of modern urban living. Auden's image of a city without walls is symbolic of modern man's alienation and a life of disintegration. According to Auden, the urban society is "like the desert, a place without

limits"⁴. He further says that in modern times the walls of tradition and culture have shattered in the cities. The values of traditional society are reversed. Henceforth the life of modern man is aimless and directionless. In such a world people go in only for their external necessities. They "are incapable of deeds and only exhibit social behaviour"⁵. No one cares for the neighbourhood. Man suffers from alienation and boredom. In such a world many have lost good taste and others have become cultural snobs. Thus the tool of irony is employed to depict the situation. The poem presents powerful images from the contemporary world. Auden has used vivid imagery, rich symbolism, and evocative language to contribute to the exploration of urban life. This paper explores a nuanced analysis of its themes and socio-cultural context.

Auden vividly portrays the isolation and anonymity of urban life in his poem "City Without Walls." He describes the city as a place where individuals are living in the noise and are lost. Like hermits people are confined to steel and glass in a highly technological world today. It is a world of "factories in which the functional/ Hobbesian Man is mass -produced"⁶, and there is a reversal of the old traditional social values. The imagery conveys the sense of disorientation and alienation experienced by city dwellers. There is hardly any true friend to these city dwellers. For their mental engagement and companionship they need only one thing the most and that is the newsfeed and the network. Auden further explores the theme of urban isolation by depicting individuals as aliens suggesting a profound sense of estrangement within the urban landscape. Due to the alienating factors the people are suffering with boredom and always facing the glare of nothing which is his "pernicious foe"(p.12). Moreover, Auden utilises the cityscape itself as a metaphor for the psychological state of its inhabitants. Critics have noted the profound impact of Auden's depiction of urban isolation. For example, literary critic Edward Mendelson observes, "Auden's portrayal of urban isolation in 'City Without Walls' captures the existential angst of modern individuals navigating the complexities of urban life"⁷.

Auden's use of rich symbolism and vivid imagery adds depth to the exploration of urban isolation. The "walls" mentioned in the poem symbolise not only physical barriers but also psychological boundaries that isolate individuals from one another. They evoke a sense of confinement and separation, highlighting the barriers that hinder genuine human connection in the urban landscape. The poet talks of the haunted wood in the poem which represents the labyrinthine nature of the city, where individuals navigate through a maze of streets and alleys, feeling lost and disoriented. Auden describes that human mind has been left with no place to go. There is existential emptiness and psychological maze that characterise urban life. The symbolism of walls and haunted woods in Auden's poem underscores the psychological barriers and disorientation experienced by individuals in the urban landscape.

Auden's use of language and tone in "City Without Walls" contributes to the poem's emotional depth and resonance. The poet employs a somber and reflective tone, evoking a sense of melancholy and introspection. The use of metaphors and similes, such as comparing the city to a haunted wood adds layers of meaning to the poem, inviting readers to contemplate the complexities of urban life. Auden's language evokes a sense of yearning for connection amidst the transient and ever-changing nature of the city. Literary critic Harold Bloom praises Auden's mastery of language in "City Without Walls," stating, "Auden's use of language in the poem is both evocative and profound, capturing the nuances of urban isolation with lyrical precision"⁸. The style of the poem characterises rich use of

irony. Through the employment of effective and subtle irony he exposes the malady of the modern world.

Small Marvel, then, if many adopt
cancer, as the only offered career
Worth while, if wards are full of
gents who believe that they are Jesus Christ.(p.13)

There is use of the irony of cancer which is a modern substitute for crucifixion. It implies a contrast between a purely physical disease which is the result of some psychic malady. The selfless spiritual sacrifice heightens the effect of intended irony. We can note many other examples of forceful irony in this poem. He begins with an ironic account of the present day world of “hotels designed to deteriorate/ their glam already corrupted-guests”(p.11). He ends with a powerful irony in the last line with the conversational rhythm:

Thereupon, bored, a third voice:
“Go to sleep now for God ’s sake!
You both will feel better by breakfast time.”(p.11)

There is use of irony throughout the poem. The poem also has the feature of economy of expression. Through this the poet has presented the typical feature of modern civilisation which uses unique expressions.

In comparison to other works by Auden, such as "The Age of Anxiety" and "September 1, 1939," "City Without Walls" offers a more introspective exploration of urban isolation. While "The Age of Anxiety" delves into the existential angst of the modern individual, and "September 1, 1939" reflects on the broader socio-political context of the time, "City Without Walls" focuses specifically on the psychological landscape of the city and the human experience within it. “The Age of Anxiety” and “September 1, 1939” offer broader social and political commentary, “City Without Walls” provides a more intimate exploration of urban isolation and human connection.

His poem “Prologue at Sixty” employs the mode of irony for presenting the ethos of our age in which people are guided by flesh. He says “live well by law of the Flesh”(p.121). This reminds us of his poem “The Age of Anxiety”. The style of the poem is meditative which is well suited for the poet to reflect on himself and his surroundings simultaneously. There is abundant use of wit and wisdom for unique ironic expression. They expose the strange truths of the ordinary life of present times. In his poem “Song of the Ogres”, the poet presents the frightening threats given by the enemies of mankind. They are actually our own fears and temptations.

Forceful wit and irony can be noted in his poem “Marginalia”. It is remarkable for its moving ideas and unique expression. It remained as fragment and could not be developed as whole and so the poet has entitled it as “Marginalia”. Wit and irony of the poet is expressed through the condensed expression of a few lines such as:

True love enjoys
Twenty-two vision,
But talks like a myopic. (p.57)

Many poems of this volume have greater emotive expression and their poetic structure is much improved. A poem “Since” evokes the happy moments of the past, but it is in contrast with the later

years which have been disgusting. The poet concludes that finally the problem is resolved in an effective way. True and unchanging love wins. The poet writes: “but round your image/ there is no fog, and the Earth/ can still astonish”(p.40). There is personal tone in this poem which presents the intimate feelings. This makes it a moving lyric.

City Without Walls contains many beautiful poems which moralise landscape. In “Fairground”, the poet has presented an embodiment of youthfulness and freedom of young age as opposed to the limitations of the old age. There is a much liked poem entitled “River Profile”. It has forceful rhythm. The tone is modulating and is suggestive of the movement of river from hill-top to the ground and then to the sea. Movement and pause is suggested with the use of short lines at the end of every stanza. The first line of the new stanza suggests the unending and forceful flow of the river when it passes through different stages during its movement. The river is just like life. The poet writes :

wearies to its final
act of surrender, effacement, atonement
in a huge amorphous aggregate, no cuddled
attractive child ever dreams of, non-country,
image of death as
a spherical dew-drop of life.(p.94)

There is balanced use of harsh and soft sounds which suggest the forceful movement of the river. They produce a remarkable sound effect.

Auden’s poetry has the feature of unevenness and it is found in his last volumes too. There have been powerful poems and also weak ones, but most of them have profundity of thought and uniqueness of expression. In one of the poems “Joseph Weinheber” we find a harmonious, blending of powerful irony and forceful feeling. The happy reconciliation of form and the meaning in the powerful poems of his last volume give the quality of excellence to this great poet. We find that there is pre-dominance of thought over feeling. There is use of rich irony in most of the poems which is reflective. The intellectual power of the poet is evident in his writings.

To understand the socio-cultural context of his volume *City Without Walls*, it is essential to consider Auden's personal experiences and influences. Auden wrote the poem during a period of social and political upheaval, where rapid urbanisation and technological advancements were reshaping the fabric of society. The poem reflects Auden's observations of the changing urban landscape and its impact on human relationships and individual identity. Auden's depiction of urban isolation in *City Without Walls* reflects the broader socio-cultural shifts taking place during the early 20th century. The individuals were grappled with the complexities of modern urban life. Moreover, Auden's own experiences as an expatriate in New York City during the 1940s influenced his portrayal of urban isolation in the poem. The anonymity and transience of city life, coupled with the existential uncertainties of the time, informed Auden's exploration of urban alienation and disconnection.

Despite the pervasive sense of urban isolation depicted in the poems of this volume, Auden also explores the possibilities of human connection and solidarity. He suggests that amidst the chaos and alienation of the city, there are moments of empathy and compassion that bind individuals together. Auden not only talks of the city without walls but also the city within. This underscore the importance

of inner resilience and human solidarity in navigating the challenges of urban life. Auden's emphasis on human solidarity in the poems offer a counterbalance to the pervasive sense of urban isolation. It highlights the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Moreover, Auden's portrayal of human connection in the poems serve as a testament to the enduring capacity for empathy and compassion amidst the impersonal and fragmented landscape of the urban areas.

City Without Walls by W. H. Auden offers a poignant reflection on the complexities of urban life, exploring themes of isolation, identity, and human connection. Through vivid imagery, rich symbolism, and evocative language, Auden captures the existential solitude experienced within the bustling cityscape. Despite the pervasive sense of urban isolation depicted in the poem, Auden also suggests the possibility of human connection and solidarity, reminding readers of the resilience of the human spirit in navigating the challenges of urban life. The poems of this volume have happy reconciliation of meaning and form. This proves W.H. Auden as an excellent poet of ideas. There is predominance of thought over feeling. The use of irony and wit and the reflective mode of several poems of this volume testify the excellence of the poet. The poems do reflect the excellent craftsmanship of the writer and prove his intellectual power. The chief characteristic of Auden's poetry is his diversity of theme and pattern. But beneath this lies a point of unity. He believed that poetry brings new awareness through unique expression of illuminating ideas. Auden is a great poet of ideas who gave poetic form to his ideas about human life and its problems. "*City Without Walls*, the last volume published in his life time, presents the twentieth century ethos as forcefully as his earliest volume *Poems* 1930 attacked a decaying society"⁹.

References-

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