

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

## Reading Auden's *September 1, 1939* as an Anti-War Poem

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### Abstract

Wystan Hugh Auden's "September 1, 1939" has immense potential of being read as an anti-war poem as it depicts horrors of the Second World War. It was included in the volume of his poems entitled *Another Time* (1940). It was first published in *The New Republic* issue of October 18, 1939. The poem is on a historical and nearly political theme. It is, no doubt, a lyrical poem, mostly reflective in character. Obviously, the date in the caption announces beyond doubt that the poem is concerned with the beginning of the Second World War.

**Keywords-** Reflection, Tragedy, War, Patriotism, Doom

As the title of the poem is drawn from the Second World War, which began on September 1, 1939 on the day when Germany had attacked Poland, two days after which Britain and France together declared war on Germany as both the nations had pledged Poland to help her in case of aggression by a foreign power. The principal cause of the war was the aggressive policy of the German National Socialist Government, which itself had its origin in the rise of Hitler to the post of Chancellor. For some seven or eight years before the outbreak of the war between Germany and the Allies, the Nazi government had subordinated the entire social and political life of Germany to the creation of a war machine for the sake of occupying neighboring countries. The soul object was domination of the continent of Europe. After more than five years during which the war took a global form, the Allies succeeded in defeating Hitler and in September 1935, Germany surrendered and remained under allied occupation for a number of years for paying off war in indemnities. It was divided into four different territories to remain under the control of Soviet Union, USA, Britain, and France.

When the Second World War had already been declared and state of war registered between England and Germany, and when all the necessary war time precautions were being taken, poet sits in an underground shelter of a building on the Fifty Second Street, and analyses the errors of omission and commission, committed during the last decade by the chiefs of the states, who were involved in the last great war and were parties to different treaties with Germany:

I sit in one of the dives

On Fifty-second Street

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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 odour of death  
Offends the September night.

(“September 1, 1939”)

He comments that dishonesty was writ large on the transaction of those chiefs, who has practically sent rolling obvious cycle for hate. Had they looped into the heart of the enemy as into their own, the present state of things would not be precipitated. In his opinion the Allies were not fair and were impartial to Germany but vindictive. Hence the Second World War is the sort of retribution. In the mean times ordinary people were busy in their work-day and they never bothered about the performances of the war lords. Now, they have been subjected to all sorts of sufferings on account of the action of those heads of the states.

The common people are practically the escape-goats, who suffer from the consequences of the errors committed by the authorities. They are now reduced to Ginny pigs. They had a life of defenseless but innocent children lost in the gloom of despair for no fault of their own. Love, universal love was the only panacea for all these ills, but it was listen lost upon leaders of states who were then guilty of an unfair deal. It will not serve any useful purpose to be ethical now in the present state of things. In the context of hunger all men are equally helpless, irrespective of high and low unless they love one another and take the responsibility of feeding in one another in a state, it will be meaningless as an institution. The poet therefore, exposes the lie of these high sounding institutions which cannot provide security of the common people and fulfill their basic needs.

The poet cynically comments on the international wrong committed by the chief of the states who were guilty of an unjust deal with Germany. Auden explodes the myth of collective security with banter and ridicule as the race for rearmament and war hysteria progresses at tremendous speed there and people all over the world suffer from the fear psychosis at the possibility of another world war. Heads of different states now raise futile excuses regarding this phenomenon and blame one another. In the meantime the common people suffer from the result of this grievous mismanagement. Subjected to hunger and seeking underground shelters for protection, they are reduced to the position of children lost in a wood of perpetual despair. For the while they are kept under an illusion of a happy life in bars. Love, universal love alone could serve as a panacea for all these ills, but unfortunately, this lesson was lost upon the war-lords, when they close the last great-war.

Auden came under the influence of Freud and his psychological approach to the problems of human life. He led emphasis on “change of heart” for the betterment of the

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common people. He wanted better understanding among the highbrows rather than a sentimental sympathy for the masses. For Auden pity was a stride and evil thing. A real change of heart was needed for the settlement of human life. In some of his points there is a note of satire against modern civilization. There is a search in his poems for the overt and covert enemies of the society. He was all for the 'proletariat and his sympathies, for the unloved and unlucky'. His poetry thus became extremely class conscious and was dominated by the Marxian notion of the society. He wanted, above all, "the creation of a society in which the real and the living contact between man and man may again become possible."

As an artist and experimenter Arden shows intellectual curiosity and picked up ideas, facts and suggestions from several quarters. He was influenced in his technique by Eliot, Owen, Hopkins and the French symbolists. "From Eliot, came the symbolic method the use of modern imagery and of abstract expression; from Owen the use of assonance and internal rhyme; from Hopkins the example of severe consideration, at whatever pains to the reader". (Sarkar and Mitra, 2010) The language of his poetry would not be generally followed by ordinary readers. It often gives the impression of written in a sort of private family language and of being addressed rather self-consciously and exclusively to the initiative. It is however a kind of poetry which is more intellectual than emotional. None the less, it is characterized by a new virility and new sins of the contemporary situation in the England and the world and as such as it exposes the hollowness and the disintegration in post-war civilization.

The poet analyses the causes of the Second World War and sits in an underground shelter. All hopes of averting the war have melted away. Fear, anger and apprehension of death sway men's heart. The poet analysis the atmosphere of euphoria and hopeful dreams that persisted in English in French circles, when frenzied war preparations were going on in Germany during the thirties in Europe. They were practically taken at unawares when the later inverted Poland.

As the clever hopes of a low dishonest decade expire, I sit, uncertain and afraid in one of the dives of fifty second street. Waves of anger and fear, obsessing over private lives, circulate over the bright and darkened lands of the earth. The unmentionable odour of death offends the September night. All their hopes were belied and they were practically forced to declare war against Germany, and thus the Second World War was precipitated. What then ensued was a chorus of angry prospects and universal experience of fear and apprehension of death all over the world. Some even experienced a foretaste of death in their imagination; for a world war meant widespread death and devastation. The poet writes:

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,  
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In the second stanza the poet communicates how accurate scholarship can unearth the whole offence that has driven a culture mad from Luther until now (can), find what occurred at Linz, (and) what huge image made a psychopathic god: the public and I know what all school children learn (namely that) those to whom evil is done do evil in return. The emergence of dictatorship in Germany has been a riddle of European history during the thirties of the present century. What special characteristics of the German race favoured such a phenomenon can be investigated into by true scholars. It however, remains a fact that there are certain traits in German character and culture, which favour a kind of revolt such as witnessed in the emergence of Martin Luther who revolted against Roman Catholicism and gave birth to Protestantism in Christianity. It was from that culture Hitler rose. Was it this culture of the German race or the schooling that he received at Linz that was responsible for generating this mania or mental disorder in Hitler? Scholars of history or psychoanalysis may discover that the public, however, are satisfied with the knowledge that he was the product of injustice and unfair deal, which Germany received at the hands of the Allies after the conclusion of the first world war. The poet himself is persuaded accordingly. He makes use of synecdoche i.e.; abstract for concrete when he uses the expression “accurate scholarship”. The allusion to Luther, the German reformer and founder of Protestantism. He rose from a very poor state of life; his means were so slight that he used to sing in the streets for earning a few coins. At eighteen Luther entered the University of Erfurt, where he took a degree in 1504. He was ordained a priest in 1507 and in 1508 he became a Professor of Philosophy. Therefore the allusion of Luther in the verse of Auden is very apt:

Accurate scholarship can  
Unearth the whole offence  
From Luther until now  
That has driven a culture mad  
Find what occurred at Linz

(“September 1, 1939”)

In the third stanza the poet dwells upon the arbitrary conduct of dictators, as in the case of Thucydides, the Greek historian and advocate of democracy who was exiled by a tyrant and dictator for his failure to save Amphipolis in a naval battle. There is a perpetual controversy about democracy and dictatorship. There are periods in the history of the world which favours the growth of Democracy, and there are also periods which help in the rise of dictatorship. It depends on the particular milieu and the zeitgeist during a particular period of history. Democracy and Dictatorship existed also in ancient Greece. Thucydides favoured democracy and advocated it. In this stanza Auden makes use of a transferred epithet. The dictators who were advanced in age, talked a lot about their victims, even after their decapitation and death so that they could not come out of their graves to challenge the truth of the charges made against them. Another example of a transferred epithet is “apathetic grave”. The poet in a very contemplative mood writes:

But who can live for long

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In an euphoric dream;  
Out of the mirror they stare,  
Imperialism face  
And the international wrong.

(“September 1, 1939”)

In the fourth stanza the poet turns his attention from dictator if the past with their nefarious activities to a dictator of the living present, whose all the more nefarious actions have now led to a global war. Now war time precautions being adopted, have been taken up to keep the lights off and observe total blackouts in order to avoid being targets of enemy bombers. For no fault of theirs now innocent people have been subjected to untold memories; they have to form the habits of living in the dark like animals; however painful the habit may be, they cannot help following it. They have to put up with, under compulsion, all sorts of mismanagement. The poet prides:

Each language pours its vain  
Competitive excuse:  
But who can live for long  
In a euphoric dream;

(“September 1, 1939”)

Some unique phrases have been used like the habit of forming pain, blind skyscrapers, the strength of collective man. These refreshing phrases mark out Auden as a unique poet. By the “habit of forming pain” Auden hints at the pain of forming new habits such as living in the dark both when indoors and when out of doors in cars, which are under compulsion to put out head lights. By “blind skyscrapers” Auden means skyscrapers made of steel, brick and mortar that are inanimate hence blind. They appear to be raising their heads to sky but, though endowed with full scale opportunity for unobstructed vision they cannot of themselves visualize a danger, such as a bobber flying above their heads.

In the fifth stanza Auden concentrates on the ordinary people during war emergency. In their underground shelter the people live a conventional and complacent life of eating, drinking and merry making in the bars all the day round. The same routine of life is repeated their from day to day. They practically lived a life of illusion of the perilous situation above. They are like children lost in haunted woods.

In the sixth stanza the poet points to one of the crudest and most fundamental characteristics of mankind from the most violent military men such as, dictators to the commonest of men which was pointed out by a Russian ballet dancer viz; self-love or in other words selfishness. It is inherent in the blood and instinctively manifests itself in human actions.

In the seventh stanza the poet communicate that neglect of work and mismanagement have been almost habitual so, it is very rarely found in the circle of office goers or even in the circle of administrator that there is any real or sincere awakening of a sense of beauty. There

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is practically no serious ethical life anywhere. The poet beautifully raises a series of question by the end of this stanza:

Who can release them now  
Who can reach the deaf  
Who can speak for the dumb ?

(“September 1, 1939”)

In the eighth stanza the poet has a voice, however lone it may be and with the help of this voice he can undo the wrong at least to a certain extent both in the ordinary men and in the governmental machinery. He can at least expose the state as a blatant lie, if it cannot act as a cohesive force by appraising the hunger of all people forming part of it. The poet has used refreshing phrases and metaphor “the romantic lie”, “folded lie”, the lie of authority. The poet beautifully writes in the eighth stanza:

All I have is a voice  
To undo the folded lie,  
The romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual man in the street  
And the lie of Authority

(“September 1, 1939”)

In the ninth and last stanza the poet concludes his reflections not in a negative but positive spirit. He says in effect that as far as the eye can see and the mind can travel the world in which he lives is in a state of utter insecurity and it lies stupefied by the helplessness of the mortals that live there. Yet, he ironically remarks, their peoples, who pride in their fairness and justice, exchange fire from time to time as the only language of mutual communication they know. It may be mere mock –fights of soldiers, practicing on their guns at or real fights. However, the fiery bullets that rush out of their fire arms flash in the sky as points of light and they appear as so many dots of light. No matter then the problems of the world remain unsolved and the poet in spite of all the common limitations of a human being feels an inspiration in the immortal recesses of the spirit within him break as under the thick wall of gloom and despair that encircle him all around by a bold, affirming attitude to them.

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