

## INTRODUCTION



W. H. Auden

(1907-1973)

One of the most important poets of the twentieth century, Wystan Hugh Auden was born in York, in northern England, a rugged land of cliffs and escarpments that were to figure as part of his poetic landscape. His father was a prominent physician, his mother a former nurse; Auden was thus reared in a cultivated environment, a background that showed itself in his adoption of aristocratic behavior during his undergraduate career at the University of Oxford, 1925 to 1928. Originally intending to become a mining engineer, he abandoned this intention to become a poet, though his interest in science helped forge an intellectual rigor and objectivity that would characterize some of his best poetry. Along with fellow poets and students such as Stephen Spender, Auden became the leader of the so-called Thirties Group, which was to make its mark in that decade. Auden had already met Christopher Isherwood by this time, having attended St. Edmund's School in Surrey with him. With Isherwood, Auden wrote a travel book and three plays.

After receiving his degree from Oxford in 1928, Auden spent more than a year in Berlin with Isherwood and wrote poems which appeared in his first volume, *Poems*. A voracious and catholic reader, he had by this time come into contact with works on psychology and the theories of Homer Lane, a disciple of Sigmund Freud. The clinical nature of much of Auden's poetry of this period, dealing with man's anxiety and his fragmented self, can partly be attributed to the poet's interest in and interpretation of modern psychological theories. By 1930, Auden was teaching school in Scotland. *The Orators*, published in 1932, is an extraordinary collection of poems dealing with man's failings in a repressive society--the Enemy. By 1936, two more volumes followed, and his poetry had taken on what the public regarded then as Marxist tones.

The most eminent poet of his day, Auden emigrated to the United States in 1939, becoming an American citizen in 1946. For the rest of his life, except for brief periods as an Oxford professor, Auden remained a part of the American literary scene, the New York City literary scene in particular. He lectured and taught at a number of American colleges and universities and steadily produced a body of work that established him as one of the foremost poets of the century.

*Another Time* and *New Year Letter* introduce a less cryptic poet, one more committed to a Christian belief in man's failings and his capacity for redemption. Many of the poems in these volumes are lyrical, showing the influence of William Butler Yeats, and contain an almost existential outlook on Christianity. *The Age of Anxiety* (which won for Auden the Pulitzer Prize), *Nones*, and *The Shield of Achilles* reflect a

more quietly ruminative poet, the Christian interpreter of his society. Auden's major themes in these works treat the city as both a symbol for and a creation of man and his civilization. His landscapes are primarily urban and industrial, though some poems, such as the famous "In Praise of Limestone" (1948), suggesting the rugged northern district of his boyhood in England, describe the natural landscape in symbolic terms, as representing facets of the human personality as well as its spiritual conflicts.

Though some critics see the quality of Auden's work after 1945 as declining, a growing number have reassessed his canon and have come to regard him as a poet who continued to grow creatively throughout his career. Auden is a difficult but rewarding poet. His technical skill, his enormous range and mastery of numerous poetic forms show that, though a modernist, Auden is heir to the great tradition of English poetry. He has written sonnets, odes, epigrams, sestinas, villanelles, pastorals, ballades, satires, and a panoply of other formal types of poetry.

Auden could be viewed as a kind of twentieth century metaphysical poet. For example, his poetic treatment of the worldly and his use of ordinary objects and familiar places serve as points of departure from which witty, metaphorical meanings develop. His poems often have a conversational, colloquial tone. Like the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, Auden enjoyed witty playfulness, associating an abstract, even abstruse idea with a simple, even homely fact. His poems are marked by a keen intelligence that draws upon a wide range of cultural material. As Auden himself declared: Poetry is a game of knowledge.

Edward Fiorelli  
"W. H. Auden"  
*Cyclopedia of World Authors II*  
ed. Frank N. Magill  
(Salem 1989) 107-08

