

Re-imagining Auden's "September 1, 1939"

Sushila Ojha & Jaya Kritika Ojha

Abstract

The paper aims to reimagine Wystan Hugh Auden's famous poem September 1, 1939 and attempts to establish a connect with the contemporary world that we live in. Human thoughts, hearts, and the entire human species appear to be organised into watertight compartments. Additionally, it seeks to emphasise education's creative potential and value system. In times of crumbling beliefs, the entire world has become "a haunted wood." Through this poem, Auden cautions us to transcend earthly aspirations and transform our spirits from Eros to Agape. No longer can the plight of the hungry, jobless, unwell, homeless, undesired, and downtrodden be disregarded. Racism, terrorism, and exploitation will continue to plague the world unless all resources and all authorities are equally accessible. Therefore, loving and being loved are needs. More Audens are needed today, as are more voices speaking out against injustice and persecution. We require spirits that are sparked by love and respect for one another to make world a better place for all.

Keywords: Better World; Love; Reimagine.

...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 by W.H. Auden

W.H. Auden's poem September 1, 1939 is a song of love for all those who suffer due to segmentation of society, culture, state, and religion. We sit in the library of one of the millions of colleges across the globe, reading

Auden's poem titled 'September 1,1939'. To our amazement we realise, how truly honest to times this poem remains. We remember Auden—the poet-prophet, the seeker of Truth, the messenger of Love. As mentioned by Gale (2017), 'Auden is one of the world's best known and most revered poets'. The poem September 1,1939 becomes a mirror in our hands through which we can see the face of the world reflecting on this day of year 2022.

Ezra Pound defines poetry as 'news that stays, news proves to be true'. Pick any newspaper and you find the pages burning with news items that smell of that same "unmentionable odour of death". There is nothing anyone can do, and "the whole world" still lies in "stupor". In spite of all scientific excellence and technical expertise "human beings as an individual and humanity at large lie defenseless"

Human hearts and human minds and human race at large seem to be regimented in water-tight compartments. It also aims at focusing on the creative power and value system of education. Family and society no longer create happy and good human beings. The education system churns out money minting human machines with insensitive minds and blocked minds full of reservations. Such individuals believe in competition and worldly achievements only. Empathy, mutual understanding, tolerance, and coexistence are words meaningless to them.

In times of shattering faiths and beliefs, all space has been transformed into "a haunted wood". Auden makes this poem a speech of the dumb sufferers. The poet emerges as their advocate who demands social justice. Interpersonal relations of man and woman, man and man are also scrutinized by the poet. "Each woman and each man crave what it cannot have, not universal love but to be loved alone". Auden through this poem warns us to rise above the worldly levels and elevate our souls from Eros to Agape.

According to Corcoran (2007), Auden, a brilliant craftsman, is also a poet who conveys a strong feeling of an eccentric personal voice. Each illustrates Auden's anxiety to utilise his "voice / To undo the folded lie" in words from the later poem, "September 1, 1939."

As noted by Brut (2003), "September 1,1939 displays the strain of a man who already suspected (as he had not in "Spain") that reporting was not his business: it attempts to combine the civic, topical functions of reporting, the idiosyncratic privacy of modern song (and of his own developing

temperament), and the improving purpose of the sermon and theological tract (like those he would shortly write) into one simultaneously public and private, individual and representative piece”.

Williams (2004) states that “the poem clearly resonates with recent events and this resonance has not escaped the notice of the popular and official polity. The consideration of poetry alongside philosophy and jurisprudence permits reflection upon the history of ideas permeating many strands of thought and allows tentative conclusions to be drawn concerning implications for ‘local’ theory - especially ‘Anglo-American’ debate and the influence of discrete aspects of theory as they impinge one upon the other.

Auden unfolds the truth behind “the conspiracies of conventions” and of “the strength of collective man” and the helplessness of the “governors” who wake “to resume their compulsory games”. All promises made to the common man prove to be false. Auden wants us to get rid of the euphoric dreams that have deceived the eyes of man since times immemorial. Not only Auden’s “low dishonest decade”, was treacherous every decade has been so. It has always robbed away “the clever hopes”. They have seen “blind skyscrapers” proclaiming the strength of “collective man”. They have also seen these symbols being pulled down to earth and changed into Ground Zero. Even then similar skyscrapers continue to mushroom in every corner of the world. We are too wise to learn any lessons of 9/11/2001.

The poem has acquired a cult status that dares to ask crucial questions about the making and writing of history and politics, society, and culture. While the main reference point of this poem remains to be the onset of the Second World War with Germany’s invasion on Poland, it presents a limitless canvas against all trials in the history running through their course. Transcending into space and time from Thucydides to present day political theorists, thinkers, and leaders.

From Spain to Korea, from Constantinople to Kuwait, from Kabul to Kargil, from Hiroshima to Bosnia, from Vietnam to Iraq, from Colombo to Katmandu there lie testimonies of causalities and bloodshed that makes the humanity suffer. The smoke of burning flesh at Twin Tower on 9/11, Nairobi, Mumbai, Srinagar, London, Varanasi itself and above all on the Sansad Bhawan (Indian parliament house) stifles humanity. The moans and sighs are voiced over by a sensitive writer, a recorder who observes and sifts through these testimonies “all elderly rubbish” and puts it forth for the “pathetic grave” whose “enlightenment” is all driven away. This

poem works as recorded history that unravels the sinister realities that lie beneath the course of 'time' and 'space'.

The recorder of September 1, 1939 Wysten Hugh Auden voices one of the basic outcries of humanity, which has existed with human beings since time immemorial. He tries to voice the peculiar sentiment of the oppressed, which rises from the core of the heart, an outburst that can never come to an end.

The oppressed have suffered in the hands of autocrats-dictators, and often tracing a long path of pain and suffering, awakes and raises voice against oppression. This is a recurrent phenomenon. From Martin Luther to Hitler and from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten the "huge images" of scheming "psychopathic gods" stand accused of creating countless fractured countries, leaving behind a never-ending trail of hatred and distrust.

Auden's references to repeated violence and "international wrongs" are undeniable truths about the human conditions. This poem relentlessly probes the lust of political-religious zealots for absolute power and the underlying assumptions of history and truth, religion, and nationalism.

Scholars often credit Auden with coining the phrase "we are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don't know," which he dubbed the conceit of the social worker (pros, vol.2, p 347; cf. variants on pp-160, 180 and 424). But he never gave himself credit for it, hence his students never learned who actually wrote it. The phrase was attributed to English music-hall and radio comedian John Foster Hall (1867-1945), well known by his stage as the Revd. Vivian Foster, the Vicar of Mirth, according to a letter by R. Meikle published in *The Spectator* on November 22, 2002. The criticism of Auden made by *The New York Times* would be crucial to cite. Auden is praised as a powerful figure of twentieth-century literature for forging a distinctive lyrical voice that bridged the competing forces of modernity and tradition. He was a prolific poet with great technical proficiency, intellectual breadth, engaging wit and intelligence, and epigrammatic humour.

W.H. Auden, in one of his mature poems, wrote, "It is defeat gives proof we are alive". Alive we are all but alas, we are not "learning to love our neighbours". Auden confirms that "no one exists alone" and so he declares "we must love one another or die".

Mutual understanding, faith and love only can make us live. Only this

can be the life force and the consciousness. "If equal love there cannot be let the more loving one be me," -writes Auden in another poem. It is like a prayer, a commitment. It is the only hope of the "man-in-the-street". This is the "points of light" that "flash out wherever the Just/exchange their messages." The wish of the poet, therefore is "to be composed like them of Eros and of dust," Auden willingly shows an "affirming flame". With his liberating genius and radical humanism Auden's poem regenerated 'Faith' after 9/11,2001.

"Auden's words are everywhere" stated the Times Literary Supplement of London. After September 11, 2001, this poem was endlessly quoted, reprinted, circulated, and introduced into thousands of chatrooms on the Internet. It was read in memorial the poem's most familiar lines featured prominently in special issues of school-newspaper and was distributed by New York Times. Peter Steinfeld wrote in the same newspaper- New York Times 1.12.01- Auden's poem is drawing new attention.

Many individuals used poetry as a form of ritual like religion. The former U.S. Poet-Laureate, Robert Pinsky, once said that more frequently than not, the finest poems describing an incident were written decades before it occurred. Auden's stanzas swiftly took on a quasi-scriptural stature. Things that many people were expressing or experiencing were anticipated in indelible form.

But a poem like September 1, 1939, that offered only unambiguous answers to question designed to raise at the functions of rhetoric, could neither be news nor stay news. Eric McHenry finds that the apparent doubts and doubling-back of Auden only improve the poem. Additionally, he states that "its thematic ambiguity increases the idea that it is the poetry for our current anguish. Auden underscores the idea that there may be pains that even the most skillfully selected words are unable to adequately express by attaching a terrible sense of failure to it.

Our sorrows are many and multi-dimensional, deepened day by day. The madness in urban life has now become globalised. Tyrannical, obsessed, essentially the competitor-capitalist is out to destroy nature. Emergence of a weird transnationalism amongst terrorist groups, which are linked up in a sort threatens the existence of human life. Instead of secular democracy what we witness today is religious orthodoxy influencing people's lives more than ever. Such heightening fundamentalist ideas become powerful because they contain a critique of the nation states.

Sufferings of hungry, unemployed, ill, homeless, unwanted, and oppressed can no more be ignored. Unless there is an equal availability of all resources and all powers the world will continue to face exploitation, terrorism, and racism. The need therefore is to love and be loved. Today we need more Audens, more voices raising against inequality and oppression. We need souls ignited with love and mutual understanding.

President Abdul Kalam in his recent poem for youngsters says: "The ignited soul compared to any souls is the most powerful resource on the earth, above the earth and under the earth." Auden's words are like words of Buddha and Mahaveer, Kabir *Vaani* (voice) and Gandhi *Vachan* (words). It vibrates through the soul, the entire being like the Shahnai of Bismillah Khan. This poem is like a flute on which Auden plays a notation of love. Let us sing together a song of love so that this world could become livable, a better place for the frightened child, for the empty stomach, for the weeping eye, for the numb hands and the frozen hearts.

Works Cited:

- Burt, Stephen. "'September 1, 1939' Revisited: Or, Poetry, Politics, and the Idea of the Public." *American Literary History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, pp. 533-59.
- Corcoran, Neil, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Gale, Cengage Learning. *A Study Guide for W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939"*. Gale, Cengage Learning, 2016. www.the-criterion.com/V3/n3/Omila.pdf.
- "Legacy Project Chicago." *The Legacy Project*, www.legacy-project.org.
- "The W.H. Auden Society." *The Auden Society*, www.audensociety.org.
- Williams, Melanie L. "Then and Now: The Natural/Positivist Nexus at War: Auden's 'September 1, 1939'." *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2004, pp. 60-86.