

Theme of Love as a Unifying Force in the Poetry of W.H. Auden

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of the unifying force of love in the poetry of W. H. Auden. Auden's works often delve into the complexities of human relationships and the transformative power of love. Through an analysis of selected poems, this study examines how Auden portrays love as a unifying and reconciling force amidst the chaos and fragmentation of modern life. The paper argues that Auden's poetry highlights the ability of love to transcend barriers of time, space, and difference, fostering connection and understanding among individuals. By delving into Auden's exploration of love's various manifestations and its role in shaping personal and communal identities, this study seeks to elucidate the enduring relevance of love as a unifying theme in Auden's poetic oeuvre.

Keywords: - Divine will, Humanism, Love, Reconciliation, Redemption, Unifying force.

Introduction

Wystan Hugh Auden, commonly known as W. H. Auden, stands as one of the most influential poets of the 20th century, renowned for his insightful exploration of the human condition. Central to Auden's poetic vision is the theme of the unifying force of love, which pervades his works, providing a lens through which he examines the complexities of existence and relationships. Auden's poetry often reflects the tumultuous landscape of the modern world, marked by alienation, conflict, and fragmentation. Yet, amidst this chaos, Auden consistently extols the redemptive power of love as a unifying force capable of transcending barriers and healing divisions. In Auden's verse, love emerges not merely as a sentimental or romantic notion but as a profound and transformative energy that binds individuals together and fosters a sense of unity and belonging.

With the publication of *Poems*, in 1930, he was recognised as a great poet and thinker. The great scholars of the time acknowledged his worth. One of the dominant themes of his poetry is love. When we compare him with other love poets, we find that they talk of pure romance whereas Auden's verses had significant intellectual content. He treats love not as an emotional realisation only but a force of vitality. Auden had varied interest. Initially he had interest in psychology and politics and later in religion. This gave a rational pattern to his poetry. He had moral and social concerns which lead to such writings which could result in bringing social harmony. "He has ever been in search of a principal that may set in order the warring elements in human personality, as well as in human society, and thereby bring about a state of social harmony and individual fulfilment".¹ He consciously probed into various possibilities of love.

One of Auden's most famous poems, "Lullaby" from his collection *Another Time*, illustrates this theme poignantly. In this poem, Auden evokes the image of a parent singing a lullaby to their child, offering solace and comfort in a world fraught with uncertainty. The act of singing becomes a metaphor for love's ability to soothe and unify, bridging the gap between generations and instilling a sense of security amidst life's trials. Similarly, in "As I Walked Out One Evening," Auden explores the enduring nature of love across time and space. The poem's refrain, "O love, the interest itself in thoughtless heaven," underscores love's timeless and universal significance, transcending the boundaries of individual experience to connect all humanity in a shared emotion. Auden's engagement with love is multifaceted and nuanced, reflecting the intricacies of

human relationships and the diverse manifestations of love in both personal and societal contexts. Beyond its portrayal as a mere sentiment, Auden presents love as a dynamic and transformative energy that shapes individual identities and fosters connections on a profound level.

Auden also delves into the complexities of romantic love, acknowledging its capacity for both ecstasy and anguish. In poems like "Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love," Auden celebrates the intimacy and vulnerability inherent in romantic relationships, suggesting that love has the power to unite souls in a profound and transformative union. In the early works, his treatment of love is based on Eros of Sigmund Freud treating love as a basic life giving force in human beings which can be realised with instinctive character of man. In his *Poems XVI*, he gives "The beautiful image of natural and free growth of a grass with its new leaves shooting upward and the roots confidently going downward inside the earth powerfully brings out the idea of the creative force in nature, which Auden identifies with the force of love in human life."² Thus, his early poetry talks of psychic balance of free and integrated self and its suppression leads to disintegration. He further talks of love as an energy which gives strength, but if it remains to selfishness of physicality, it will lead to weakness. He also talks of love for society which is above the self. It is selfless love which keeps society above the interest of an individual. Auden thinks that it is the choice of an individual to be selfish or to look for a healthy act of discipline love, which stands for unifying principle. In his poem "September 1, 1930" Auden declares,

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Or Eros and of dust.
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair.
Show an affirming flame.³

This is not self-love but a social disciplined love. Auden observes that instinct should be subservient to reason for true fulfilment of love.

In many of Auden's poems, love serves as a catalyst for self-discovery and personal growth. For instance, in "Funeral Blues," Auden mourns the loss of a loved one, but amidst the grief, there is a poignant acknowledgment of the depth of feeling and the transformative power of love. Through the portrayal of intense emotional bonds, Auden suggests that love not only enriches individual lives but also serves as a unifying thread that connects people across time and space. Moreover, Auden explores the communal aspects of love, emphasising its role in forging bonds within families, communities, and even nations. In poems like "Refugee Blues," Auden confronts the plight of refugees and marginalised communities, highlighting the universal need for compassion and solidarity. Here, love emerges as a unifying force that transcends differences and prompts individuals to empathise with the suffering of others, fostering a sense of shared humanity and interconnectedness.

Auden's approach is humanistic in his work *Another Time*. For him love is a way of living. His verses of love accept him as a conscious thinker. In *Look Stranger Poem XXVIII*, reality of love is presented from humanistic point of you. These verses have a beautiful blending of personal urge and universal truth. Love can transcend all negativity. Primary concern here is human. In Poem IX of *Another Time*, Auden invokes for an absolute surrender of oneself to love. This leads us to attain a better place, a new awareness. Here love is presented as a source which fulfils human beings. The poet here asserts to accept human conditions. He feels that it is only through love that our life gains meaning.

In his poem, "Epithalamion" (*Another Time*, Part III, VI), the poet transcends geographical boundaries and depicts universal love. Love evolves to the level of humanism here. Love is viewed as a proof of human unity. Auden was a humanist who searched the great powers of love. He looked for the religious basis of this. Christianity propagates love as a universal and divine force. Man can transcend and evolve by having purity of heart. The *Bible* too talks of selfless love for all. Man can achieve redemption only by being humble before God. Auden's idea of love towards his maturity was that of a unifying principle which considers the entire creation as one. It demands an unconditional love towards God's creation. This is the highest form of love. He deals with the idea of selfless love. Herbert Greenberg correctly remarks that changes in Auden's thinking "may be regarded as a renewed effort to answer the question of how and by what authority love is to fulfil itself in a divided creature."⁴ In his first long poem of religious phase, *The New Year Letter*, he emphasises that love illuminates. He says that to unify with all, it is necessary to have love for all:

We need to love all since we are
Each a unique particular
That is no giant, god, or dwarf,
But one odd human isomorph;
We can love each because we know
All, of us, that this is so.⁵

In "For the Time Being", the poet calls to surrender the individual to the divine will. The purpose of human life is to connect to the logos and thus achieve salvation. Jesus Christ was the embodiment of perfect divine love. He was incarnated to show path to the marked souls to achieve their true objective of life. In the initial part of the poem, Mary is told of the significance of individual and the divine will by Gabriel, who says:

Hear, child, what I am sent to tell:
Love wills your dream to happen, so
Love's will on earth may be, through you.
No longer a pretend but true.⁶

He puts sports further, that with the denial of the divine love, one falls. Eve suffered because of this, and so are we suffering. It is only through redemption that one can evolve and that is possible by connecting oneself to logos. It is only with this that one can be healed forever.

Auden again and again emphasises that universal and divine love can only bring redemption. Auden's matured view of love was full of humanistic approach. He viewed that there has always been struggle between the will of an individual and his own conscience. There has been struggle between the world outside and inside. It is essential to remark that the interest of Auden was never limited to narrow and personal aspect of romantic kind of individual love. For him love always had broader aspect having social and humanistic approach. He talked about inner struggle of the individual with his conscience. He relates to the struggles and

disturbances outside, and also inside. Auden puts forth his religious view as “no religion is credible today which lacks an existential aspect.”⁷ In many of his poems Auden has tried to bring forth the struggle of an individual to evolve. In his poem “In Sickness and in Health”, the poet gives the same theme. One needs to rise above self and merge with divinity. This poem talks of sexual perversion and political violence, which actually symbolise that true love leads to metaphysical despair. Here the lover accepts that human beings have limitations. He talks to his beloved about the need to realise universal love.

Beloved, we are always in the wrong.
 Handling so clumsily our stupid lives,
 Suffering too little or too long,
 Too careful even in our selfish loves:
 The decorative manias we obey
 Die in grimaces round us every day.
 Yet through their tohu-bohu comes a voice
 Which utters an absurd command — Rejoice.⁸

Thus the poet brings forth the idea that individual will needs to be surrendered to the divine will. It is only with this that soul will evolve, unify with the creation and fulfil the purpose of this human life. This is how one may find the right path.

Finally, Auden's poetry often intertwines themes of love with spiritual and existential questions, portraying love as a sacred and transcendent force that offers redemption to humanity. In poems like "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," Auden explores the divine aspects of love, suggesting that it has the power to transcend earthly boundaries and connect individuals with higher truth. Through his fusion of religious imagery and existential themes, Auden invites readers to contemplate the transformative potential of love in both earthly and transcendent realms. “Never again could Love appear personified in Auden's poetry without the weight of this appeal to grace.”⁹

In most of his love poems, Auden explores the relevance of love to life. He found that love has a force which unifies all. Initially his love lyrics were intellectual but later they were charged with the thought that may illuminate the humanity. According to Stephen Spender, the direction of Auden's poetry has been “towards the defining of the concept of love.”¹⁰ Dealing with the theme of love, Auden tries to bring forth the idea of unifying force of love, rather than dealing with love, as mere involvement of feelings and emotions. He kept himself detached from emotional involvement. It was the unifying force of love that he evoked in his love poetry. With such higher ideas Auden proved himself to be a great lyricist. In conclusion, W. H. Auden's poetry offers a rich and multifaceted exploration of the theme of love as a unifying force. Through his nuanced portrayal of love's transformative power, Auden invites readers to contemplate its profound impact on individual lives and societal dynamics, emphasising its ability to bridge differences, inspire empathy, and foster a sense of interconnectedness in an often fragmented world. “Throughout the nineteen-thirties it was easily possible to find a place for Mr. Auden on the map of things as a prodigiously clever and intelligent young man who had mastered all the difficult lessons of Hopkins and Eliot and Pound and Yeats, who had a curious capacity for viewing all the disintegration of modern life "as the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman" as a young man who was creating a new music of his own....”¹¹

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