

**THE CAUSES OF THE 'PAIN OF LIVING': A SURVEY OF W. H.
AUDEN'S POETRY**

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Abstract

The paper takes a peep into the life of man with a view to exposing the experiences of man. The result of this is the identification of pain as being about the only thing that man seems created for in addition to the grave. Blamed for this by poets generally, and W.H. Auden specifically are "Man" and "God" who have been identified as the real and remote factors that cause this "pain of living." However, the immediate factors identified as the causes of pain of living are: "futility of life," "human indifference" and "capitalism". For this exercise W. H. Auden's poetry forms the major reference.

Introduction

Man has always been besieged by pains over the ages. And mankind has over the years attempted resolving this plight. They have tried to adduce reasons for the problems of man. Primary among those striving to solve this problem are artists. These have given so many different reasons for the plight of man. In all these none has been as explicit and all embracing as W. H. Auden. Like every other artist W. H. Auden's works are about man in society. However, he differs from many in the sense that he emphasized the "Pain of living" as Harding (216) would say. Although the "Pain of living" could be generally blamed on God and man, the immediate causes are three direct factors associated with the two above. These three are "the futility of life", "human indifference" and "capitalism".

Futility of Life and the "Pain of Living"

One of the main causes of the "pain of living" as depicted by Auden, and that which is outside the control of man has to do with the futility of life. Man came to this world without a definite role or end, except the grave. One then begins to wonder at the reason for the existence of man on earth. It is this situation that Auden questions in "Doom's day song". The situation presented is such that all creations are described as stupid and "jumbled in one common box". Strikingly, it is the very best of creations that are cited as examples of this stupidity: "Orchid, swan and Caesar." Another picture of futility is presented in the second stanza where we are presented with "persona grata [who are] now with none / And... / Poets who can only pun." Poets are supposed to be of the best minds. If they can only pun, then they are degenerates. The situation becomes serious in the third stanza. We see nursing mothers furtively pointing at the sky that is crimson with the setting sun. Perhaps, there is danger ("Crimson") and also, perhaps, the end is near ("setting sun"). The ultimate mark of danger and death is lurking in the valley of the fox: "In the valley of the fox/Gleams the

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barrel of the gun." Carrying on the sense of danger, he says that it is now too late, and that had we acted earlier we could have escaped:

Once we could have made the docks
Now it is too late to fly.

The poem ends on a note of lack of seriousness on the part of men:

Once too often you and I
Did what we should have done;
Round the rampant rugged rocks
Rude and ragged rascals run.

Not that the voice ends by calling himself and "we" (all of us) rascals. The overall impression that one gets at the end of the poem is that life and existence are utterly meaningless. As such, one begins to wonder why we are actually here (in existence). This often leads to greater pains as we encounter pains in our daily effort to live.

This theme is further dealt with in the poem "The Wanderer." The poem begins with a description of doom: "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea - dingle." Automatically, one gets the impression that the situation is not good. It is gloomy. The word "doom" evokes that feeling, we are further given a description of the situation of "What man it [Doom] fall[s]:- no succour, only problems shall bedevil him: "No cloud-soft hand can hold him," but he goes "though forest trees" and he becomes a "stranger to strangers" over turbulent sea within water that is "suffocating". In this condition the man will become "fatigued" and begin to have dreams and wishful thinking. From the above it is clear that there is no respite for man. One important fact to note is that the doom is not self inflicted; it merely falls on man, and he has no choice.

This is very much like what Awoonor (41 - 42) says in "Songs of Sorrow". We hear the voice blame the gods and the ancestors who are represented by Dzogbese Lisa, Nyidevu, Kpeti, and Kove for the evil that has befallen man. Here the futility of life is reflected and* this is a very painful experience.

In "The Wanderer" we find that man merely wanders and that in the course of this wandering we are exposed to "hostile capture" and "Sudden tigers" leap "at corner"; and that our houses are exposed to "thunder bolt" and "gradual ruin. "This seals any doubt that one may have harboured about the suffering that men are exposed to. One may begin to ask questions as Auden implicitly asks: what is the essence of our being here (on earth) if all we experience is pain that is not self inflicted but God inflicted?

Another poet who has raised similar questions is Thomas Hardy. In his "Nature's Questioning" we are presented with "Field, flock, fool and lonely trees," which seem to say "We wonder, ever wonder, why we find us here

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[earth]!" Hardy is more direct in "HAP" (1522-23) where the persona wonders how he would feel:

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

In such a situation no succour but pains would come to man, especially, as he is helpless in the face of such a "Powerfuller" force.

This "Powerfuller" force is further named, and he actually speaks in another poem by Hardy, "God-Forgotten". He is the Almighty God. God is presented as having forgotten the earth and the human race: "The Earth, sayest thou? The Human race? / By me created? Sad its lot? / Nay: I have no remembrance of such place."

This utter forgetfulness and negligence according to these poets is the root of the "pain of living." Put another way, the futility of life, which results from divine negligence and forgetfulness, is the cause of "pain of living."

Human Indifference and the "Pain of Living"

Another cause of the pain of living in Auden's poetry is human indifference. This, as against the "futility of life" discussed earlier, is within the control of man except one wants to say that it is a direct result of the negligence of God towards man. Auden is very loud in his proclamation against human indifference in "Songs of the Beggars". In the poem there is a "silent statue" which is a metaphor for the insensitive man; and the beggars make their wishes known to it. Among the wishes are that they be invited to dine with the nobility, that they be allowed to move freely with the high in the society at games and relaxation, and that they be allowed to visit all the beautiful and exotic places around the world. However there is a contrast at the end of the poem. The beggars' state what is most likely the wish of the "legged people" and especially, the nobility: "And every one-legged beggar to have no legs at all". This is the climax of insensitivity and human indifference. This is equivalent of recommending the elimination of the less privileged people in our society. Humans could be described as having hearts of stone.

When we look at "Musee des Beaux Arts," we see the same unfeeling attitude. The poem opens with the statement that "The old Master" understood very well the human position on suffering and the non-chalant attitude of others as one suffers:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a
Window or just walking dully along.

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This stance is maintained throughout the first stanza of this two-stanza poem. The general impression here is that there is suffering and that it is routine and universal, and that while one suffers other people do not care. In the second stanza a specific example is given. Icarus falls to death from the sky while everybody and everything carries on as if nothing serious happened. In fact, the poet gives an example of someone who may have heard the splash made by fallen Icarus but did not care at all:

... the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry
But for him it was not an important failure;

even the sun noticed but did not care. (This is an indictment against nature and God for the insensitivity displayed). The poem ends on a note that really summarizes the whole of human feeling at the plight of other human beings:

.. .and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.
How steely, how unfeeling and how insensitive!

When we turn to "The Shield of Achilles" a new dimension is added to this human indifference. This leads us to where one could say that humans are wicked and destructive in addition to being insensitive. Auden presents us with a situation where "she" (Thetis) looked over Achilles' ("his") shoulder in the hope of seeing beautiful and profitable things, but instead sees desolation:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown
No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
and soldiers waiting for the command to attack:
A million eyes, a million boots in line, *
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Next we hear "a voice without a face". This is a good portrayal of insensitivity. Then we are introduced to a "ragged urchin's" axiom: That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third.

Finally, we are told that the urchin had never heard
Of any world where promises were kept
Or [that] one could weep because another wept.

Auden, characteristically, is showing us this as the picture of the world that we live in: a world that is absolutely insensitive and indifferent to the plights of people. He is saying that it is a dangerous world.

This is similar to what our own late Ken Saro-wiwa says in "Were you There" although in a different circumstance. In his poem Saro-Wiwa says that if

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you were there to witness all the atrocities of the Nigerian civil war, you would not be happy at the radio account of the victor and the vanquished. So both Saro-Wiwa and Auden are considering human indifference which produces many horrible consequences among which is war, according to Saro-Wiwa.

It is situations like this that Cox (408) described as a "vision of modern inhumanity" as he discusses "The Shield of Achilles." According to Cox (398), "...there is a constant atmosphere of military campaigns, conspiracy, and intrigue, that is continually slipping back into the world of scouting."

And this is a total reflection of heartlessness and inhuman indifference (Remember, in military campaigns, it is humans that are the targets however one looks at it.) Still talking about Auden's poetry, Ogungbesan and Woolger (109) commenting on "Refugee Blues" say that:

although the poem deals specifically with Jews
during the thirties and forties, it has a general relevance:
the fact that hatred and killing on the ground of race and
religion is still with us.

It makes sense to say that it is only human indifference that could generate the kind of hatred and killing that is described in the poem, "Refugee Blues."

Capitalism and the "Pain of Living"

The third cause of "pain of living" depicted by Auden in his poetry is capitalism. This is a political economic policy which, according to Auden is insensitive to the plights of people. Auden presents in "The Watershed" (2094-95) a situation where everything from human to grass is destroyed: the "grass" is "chafing", the "washing floor" is "dismantled", an "industry" is already "comatose", an "engine" is "ramshackle", "many" are already "dead" and the soil is "poor". A place like this naturally cannot sustain life. The question that naturally rises to the lips is, "what is the cause of this kind of desolation?" The answer is equally supplied in the poem. Pointers to it are the "tramline" the industry (although comatose, at its coming it destroyed the environment), the "ramshackle engine" and finally their human counterpart: "stranger."

Although we are presented with a situation where the stranger is advised to turn back and go home, it is clear that he has wreaked the destruction that has affected everything and person. These are the hallmarks of capitalism: tramline, industry, engine, and strangers. Capitalism is a philosophy that enjoins one to make and amass wealth at the expense of other people. It is a philosophy that celebrates the "cult of self."

A philosophy such as this, therefore, must naturally cause pains to the people. This is the philosophy which Auden fought fervently. It is important to remind ourselves here that Auden was the leader of the left wing poets of his time (*Everyman Encyclopedia*). This, of course, means that he was an advocate of communism and welfarism.

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Conclusion

From the above it is clear that the causes of "pain of living" are many and varied. They include futility of life, human indifference and capitalism. These could ultimately be anchored on two remote cause: God and man.

Auden was a poet and he saw the practice as an effective avenue for airing his views and beliefs. Yes, he saw poetry as an effective avenue to solving the problems of society, or at least proffering solutions to them. He was a psychoanalyst of the human society, and as such employed poetry as a kind of therapeutic measure to solve the problems of man. He had no doubt at all as to the possibility of poetry performing the function. Thus, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* states:

The notion of poetry as a kind of therapy performing function somehow analogous to the psychoanalytical remains fundamental in Auden.

It is in the analysis of Auden's duty to society that *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* also presents him as a man who:

... tried to interpret the times, to diagnose the ills of society and deal with intellectual and moral problems of public concern, and a man who carries out ... a diagnosis of the ills of society and the psychological and moral defects of the individuals who constitute it....

A man so great and deep in his concern for the plight of the human race could have examined no other themes than those discussed above. This, of course, does not mean that he had no other concerns. One of such is the landscape, which he treats symbolically; and mythical characters and situations. These were always put to use towards the realization of his themes.

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