

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Auden (1907-1973) *Poems* (B, 2689-2704)

W.H. Auden was educated at Oxford, and brought up into a thriving but rebellious London literary culture, with friends like C.Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice, all of whom were reshaping British poetry. His observations of WW II, and of the social injustices pursuant on the Depression in Britain, led him (like most of his closest intellectual friends) to support the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, and for a long time to espouse the politics of the far left. All his life, however, Auden was a practicing Anglican, and by the end of his writing career his humanism and love of peace had increasingly taken on the guise of religious suggestion. He gives back a complex, multi-styled reflection of his time.

Question: What marks Auden's poetry off from that of other modernist poets like Hardy and Yeats?

It will be noted that Yeats died in 1939, the year of the outbreak of WW II. Hardy died ten years earlier. Although both writers were increasingly pessimistic, as they aged, neither of them had the special pressure of a global war to factor into their pessimism. Auden's life segued directly into the inter-war years of the 30's, then into the Great War itself, and fully into the Cold War. If you look through the Auden poems in the Norton Anthology you will see that almost all of the included pieces deal somehow with the Second World War, or with the collateral damage done by it. The Age being ushered in, during the period of World War II, has been called the Age of Anxiety, and I believe you can feel the force of that Age in Auden's work, as he sits "in one of the dives/on Fifty-Second Street/Uncertain and afraid..." *Is Auden, then, more pessimistic than Hardy and Yeats?*

Comparative Literature:

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