

Timelines and Dystopian Imagery: Modernism and Realism in W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles"

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Abstract

This research item explores W.H. Auden's amalgamation of different timelines and dystopian imagery using modernist and realist styles in "The Shield of Achilles". The paper aims to analyze his depiction of societal evolution and human experiences. Auden braids stories of change and existential questions by combining innovative techniques with realistic details. The study deciphers the poem's layered time periods and its method of combining despair and hope while straddling artistic innovation and mid-20th century realities. Auden's dystopian images reflect the era's anxieties, while his modernist approach challenges norms. The research item aims to bring forward the temporal layers, revealing his engagement with linear and cyclical time concepts. The study elucidates tensions between avant-garde creativity and mid-20th century existence. In essence, the goal of this study is to analyze Auden's blending of timelines, dystopian scenes, modern and realistic styles to depict societal experiences, human sufferings including psychologically, materialistically, and lastly existential crisis. It aims to understand his panoramic view combining hope/despair and innovation/reality through close stylistic examination.

1. INTRODUCTION

The two-ply of timelines and dystopian imagery within W. H. Auden's poetic creation "The Shield of Achilles" (1952), portrays a precise vision of realism and modernism. This literary piece of Auden develops profound insight into human existence, where past, present, and future converges. The poem explores various historical eras and futuristic visions, creating a symbiotic relationship between tangible past realities and speculative future landscapes. It presents a conscientious analysis of the human condition resonating across different time periods and ideologies. This research explores the complexities of Auden's juxtaposition of timelines, examining the layers of realism through the lenses of anti-art and modernism. These elements contribute to the enduring relevance and impact of "The Shield of Achilles" in contemporary literature and societal reflection. Written after World War-II, this literary piece reflects Auden's vision on social, economic, and political transformations reshaping the world at that time. It captures the zeitgeist of an era marked by upheaval and change. The poem's tribute to the Greek mythological figure Achilles serves as a metaphor for the disillusionment and disenchantment permeating the modern era.

The rise of modernism, characterized by its rejection of established norms and heightened experimentation, ushered in a new era of artistic expression. Artists and writers sought to capture the

fragmented experiences of a rapidly changing world, often engaging a profound exploration into dystopian landscapes fraught with symbolism and unsettling imagery. The aftermath of World War-II, the rise of totalitarian regimes, and the ever-looming threat of nuclear warfare created a pervasive sense of anxiety and disillusionment. A shift in artistic paradigms became inevitable, as artists and writers sought to convey the profound dislocation and existential struggles of their time.

This research item provides a deep understanding of the temporal complexities and dystopian motifs and also sightsees the fusion of modernist innovation and realist “anti-art” vision. This study contributes to literary scholarship by elucidating how the manipulation of timelines intertwines with dystopian imagery, enriching the comprehension of the broader historical contexts shaping the poet’s narrative.

This research item probes Auden’s innovative temporal structures in “The Shield of Achilles”, examining how modernist techniques disrupt conventional timelines to craft a singular narrative experience. It explores the dystopian imagery’s reflection and critique of mid-20th century socio-political realities and sights the historical and cultural influences behind Auden’s visionary, unsettling vision.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Auden, a prominent Modernist poet, employs a fractured sense of temporality in “The Shield of Achilles”. The poem reflects the dislocation and disillusionment characteristic of the Modernist era. The fragmented depiction of Achilles' shield, with scenes ranging from ancient myth to contemporary war, captures the temporal dissonance inherent in a world contending with the consequences of modernity. Many scholars like Matthew Mutter presented Auden's criticism of magic as a distinction between the order of history and the order of nature that Auden regards as essential to modern self-understanding in his paper titled “The Power to Enchant That Comes from Disillusion: W. H. Auden's Criticism of Magical Poetics” (Mutter, 58-85). Lawrence Normand examined in his paper titled “Modernity and Orientalism in W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6*” 2011, Auden's quest for personal integrity and freedom (Normand, 538-559).

Scholars like Md. Akbar Hossain shed light on Auden's utilization of Greek myths to address various modern themes and issues. These include foiled expectations, the detached aspect of modern art, the relationship between past and present, and the importance of spiritual and moral life for modernists in his paper “Treatment of Classical Myths by the Modernist Poets: WH Auden’s *The Shield of Achilles*” (A. Hossain). Junaid Shah Shabir’s “The Shield of Achilles and the Kashmir Conflict: Panorama of a Territory through a Poem” discusses humanitarian crisis, threat to global peace, political uncertainties, oppression and violence (S. Shabir, 41-56). Olga M Zulich’s paper titled “The Birds and the Beasts in Auden: A Study of the Use of Animal Imagery in the Non-Dramatic Poetry of W. H. Auden from 1934 to 1960” elaborates on several imageries and the aspects of them (M. Zulich). Mateusz Marecki’s “A Debate on the Relationship between Poetry and Politics in W. H. Auden's In Memory of W. B. Yeats and A. Ostriker's *Elegy before the War*”, discusses the socio-political dimensions of Auden's poetry and the debate over the role of poetry in socio-politics (Marecki, 50-58). The poem incorporates dystopian imagery that aligns with the Realist tradition's focus on social critique. Auden paints a bleak picture of a world marked by war, totalitarianism, and the erosion of ethical values. The shield becomes a canvas revealing the harsh realities of the 20th century, showcasing not only mythic scenes but also scenes of modern warfare and political oppression. P.R. Hardie in his paper titled “*Imago Mundi: Cosmological and Ideological Aspects of the Shield of Achilles*”, explores the Homeric description of Achilles' shield as a reflection of society as a whole and human life (Hardie, 11-31). Within the Realist framework, Auden critiques societal and political issues of his time. The poem explores the dehumanizing impact of war and totalitarian regimes, reflecting a Realist concern for the tangible consequences of political decisions on human lives. The juxtaposition of mythological and contemporary imagery serves as a poignant commentary on the persistence of destructive human tendencies across different epochs. Andrew Sprague Becker, in his book *The Shield of Achilles and the*

Poetics of Ekphrasis, explores the roots of Homeric poetry shaping its own reception, and Homer's reaction to a visual image creates his audience's response to a literary description. Becker also enters into a fiercely raging literary debate about the modernist, self-conscious elements of Homeric narrative (Becker, 1-191). Auden's use of language in "The Shield of Achilles" aligns with Modernist stylistic features. The poem exhibits linguistic innovation, with Auden using symbolic and allusive language to convey complex emotions and ideas. The symbolism embedded in the shield becomes a Modernist exploration of the interplay between mythic archetypes and contemporary realities. Karyn M Newton and Rachel Sternberg's article "The Evolution of Achilles in the Visual Arts" depicts the universal side of art one by one (Newton). "Nature and Art in 'The Shield of Achilles' written by author Thomas K Hubbard emphasizes evocative images, exceptional aspects of Achilles' shield (Hubbard, 16-41).

Modernist themes of ambiguity and alienation are evident in Auden's portrayal of a world fraught with moral uncertainty. The poem's structure and language contribute to a sense of detachment and alienation, mirroring the Modernist preoccupation with the fragmented nature of human experience. State evolution, the historical ebb and flow between war and peace reflects in the face of contemporary uncertainties, advanced war machines, and potential decline of the nation-state in Philip Bobbitt's book *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (Bobbitt). Irene JF de Jong expounded on the connections between shield, its depictions and the descriptive techniques, and showcasing scholarly interest in the shield of Achilles in her paper titled "Irene JF de Jong's "The Shield of Achilles: from Metalepsis to Mise En Abyme" (de Jong, 1-14). Jennifer Gagnon conveyed that the shield reflects human struggles and conflicts as fundamental aspects of our existence in her article titled "The Agony of Homer: What is 'The Shield of Achilles' to Us?" (Gagnon, 2011). Stephen Scully's study titled "Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight" addresses the broader narrative involving Achilles and provides realistic perspectives on the poem (Scully, 29-47). Author Stephen Chan's paper "A Story Beyond Telos: Redeeming the Shield of Achilles for a Realism of Rights in IR" illustrates the shields' crafting by the gods, depicts scenes of death and foretelling Achilles' actions, also explores Achilles' heroic yet one-dimensional life, his inevitable fate (S. Chan, 101-115).

The existing scholarship on W.H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" has extensively explored the juxtaposition of modernism and realism, but a significant research gap remains in the nuanced examination of how Auden's innovative manipulation of timelines intersects with his haunting dystopian imagery. Previous research lacks a focused examination of how Auden's innovative use of temporal structures contributes to blending modernist experimentation with realist social critique and anti-art sentiments in "The Shield of Achilles". This research intends to bridge that gap by explicating the symbiotic entanglement between Auden's temporal choices and dystopian imagery, a holistic understanding of the poem's significance within the evolving literary aesthetics of its time.

This research item's goal is to contribute to scholarly discourse on the artistic rigidities between modernist experimentation and realist social critique, mirroring the broader movement's disruption of conventions while incisively commenting on contemporary human strife. The poem's rich dystopian imagery and rich symbolism powerfully contribute to its unsettling, impactful meaning, bringing forward the darker aspects of power, violence, and societal decay. Auden's skilful deployment of war, violence, and power themes across different timelines lays bare the continuity of human brutality and the corrosive nature of unchecked authority.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study has followed a qualitative research approach, employing descriptive and explanatory methods to elucidate the topics at hand. It has aimed to examine and expound upon the thoughts, and human experiences within the textual context. To identify new ideas and views and provide logical explanations about the subject under discussion, this study has been undertaken via a logical interpretation and analysis of the material currently accessible from both primary and secondary sources. By adopting a qualitative methodology, this study seeks to juxtapose Auden's work with key

tenets of Modernism and Realism. The primary source was the poem by W. H. Auden and secondary sources contain books, journal articles, websites etc.

4. TEMPORAL STRATA

In “The Shield of Achilles”, Auden forges an elaborate interstitial temporality that mirrors the fractured nature of contemporary society he aimed to depict. The poem sails through three distinct timelines. Firstly, it depicts the mythical past created by Hephaestus, the God of the forge, smiths, and craftsmen; portrays ancient struggles and the whims of gods. Secondly, it transitions to the present, embodied by Achilles, the son of Zeus, also the strongest warrior and hero in the Greek army; bringing forward the harsh realities of modern warfare devoid of heroism, portraying a world marred by conflict and human folly. And lastly, the near future or the apocalyptic era where human beings are nonchalant about others' sufferings, brutality, and inhumanity. The glimpse into a bleak future stands as a stark reminder of the consequences of unchecked human actions. The poem explores recurring themes, especially its portrayal of war and violence happening repeatedly across different periods. This cyclical concept of time is a common motif found in modernist works. It reflects a feeling of repetition and futility.

Modernist literature frequently seized the disillusionment and trauma caused by the early 20th century, particularly after the destruction of World War I. The endless cycle of human conflict depicted in the poem connects with the modernist preoccupation that certain fundamental challenges persist over time. Apart from the technological advances and societal changes, the poem's depiction of violence repeating itself across eras captures the modernist sense that certain core struggles never truly go away and Modernist writers frequently explored the rigidities between traditional ways of life and modern society. In “The Shield of Achilles”, Auden illustrates the interplay of past, present, and future apocalyptic eras embellish the world literature timeline. On one side is the classical ancient world and on the other is the modern era Auden lived in, by carrying the future eras foreshadow with itself. By entwining these eras together, Auden emphasizes how human societies and individual experiences continually evolve, and the contrast of different timelines to highlight this perpetual state of societal transition and development. The temporal disruption, moving between classical and modern settings, reflects the modernist interest in subjective experiences and the coexistence of diverse timelines. Modernist literature employed symbolism and allegory extensively. The classical past represents ideals and virtues, and the modern setting symbolizes the harsh realities of contemporary society. This symbolic layering adds depth to the poem's exploration of human nature and its critique of modern civilization's flaws, and existential crisis, juxtaposing society's noblest ambitions against its brutal actualities.

Auden used disrupted timelines to realistically critique societal structures in his poem that engage with the bitter mid-20th century realities like the aftermath of World War II, totalitarianism, and rapid technological change. Realist literature is intended to capture the complexities of human experience truthfully. The cyclical shifting between past and present emphasizes the human struggles like war and power competencies recurrence across different eras. This aligns with realism's concern for accurately representing enduring aspects of the human condition. The disrupted timelines led Auden to a dystopian vision of modern society. The mechanized, dehumanized world he depicts reflects fears about totalitarianism, technological dehumanization, and the erosion of human values during that era. The temporal structure captures the sense of Post-World War-II disillusionment and anxieties. Juxtaposing classical heroism with a bleak modern reality speaks to the trauma and defiance's individuals and communities faced.

This temporal disruption contributes to an existential crisis, echoing alarms about loss of meaning in the face of such modern difficulties. The poem deliberately shifts from a mythological Greek setting to a dystopian 20th century world. It opens in the classical realm, describing Hephaestus forging Achilles' shield. This ancient, epic scene filled with Greek mythology contrasts starkly with the subsequent modern depiction. In the modern section, Auden depicts a desolate, dehumanized world of totalitarianism and industrialization. This setting reflects mid-20th century issues like the aftermath of

Timelines and Dystopian Imagery: Modernism and Realism in W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles"

World War-II, the rise of authoritarian regimes, and technological upheaval. Dark imagery criticizes contemporary society; political oppression, mechanized warfare, and loss of human connection. The classical past symbolizes heroism and virtue, contrasted with the modern present symbolizing societal decay and dehumanization. The future era depicts an apocalyptic age of inhumanity, brutality, soullessness and callous indifference to others' suffering.

Auden's exploration of war is timeless; it becomes a universal metaphor for humanity's persistent tendencies toward conflict, and socio-political issues. The tragic present of the modern industrialized, mechanized world brutally repeats the horrors of history. People suffer immensely, dying, crying, struggling just to live another day, while the darkness of war's brutality casts a heavy shadow. Auden lays bare the inherent brutality of war, emphasizing its destructive consequences that echo across time periods. The shield itself reveals the central theme of power, a grim reality and a world under totalitarian rule where individuals are subjugated and stripped of their humanity. The poem does not glorify warfare but shows its ugliest face, the immense human toll, and the layers of power corruption when it is unchecked. Modern society has amplified war's most dehumanizing aspects and the inhumane realities of his contemporary era along with the future eras hold a mirror through the symbols. Auden condemns social systems through his depiction of a society lacking empathy, a scene of an ominous, apocalyptic future. The mechanical and soulless imagery emphasizes the eroding human connection due to advancing technology, political manipulation, lack of empathy, and loss of human dignity. The realist elements in Auden's work ground the narrative in recognizable temporal markers, providing a tangible sense of reality amid the avant-garde styling. The tension between modernist fragmentation and realist grounding mirrors the discord within contemporary society itself, which Auden foreshadowed as the future era or the apocalyptic era in his verses.

5. DYSTOPIAN METAPHOR

The poem richly uses metaphors to represent a dystopian society. This dystopian world reflects totalitarianism and social decay in the mid-20th century. The poem explores themes of power and war. The bleak imagery criticizes dehumanization from unchecked political power. It criticizes eroding liberties and oppression under authoritarian regimes. Auden's vivid dystopian allegories intend to highlight about the dangers of consolidated power, dangers of social control spinning out of control that disconnects from civilizations core values. The dystopian elements depict subjugation and loss of humanity from abuses of power. The obnoxious reality comes from the technology misuse, manipulation, and lack of empathy.

"That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third" (Auden 56)

This line from W.H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" presents a haunting dystopian image. The depiction of violence against children is part of Auden's broader dystopian imagery. This stark scene shows the brutal consequences of unchecked power and societal decay. The violent act serves as a metaphor. It portrays a dystopian world where innocence is destroyed. The vulnerable are harmed by malevolent societal forces. In just a few visceral lines, Auden captures how the moral collapse enables horrific violence and exploitation, especially against the innocent. The poetry transforms this brutal scene into an allegory. It is about the breakdown of core human values when dystopian powers take over. It reminds us of the atrocities that can emerge when civilizations lose their ethical way. The dystopian imagery depicts not just physical harm but psychological wounds on the community. It reflects the breakdown of the social fabric. Power imbalances and eroding ethics enable atrocities. This literary piece of Auden "The Shield of Achilles" highlights how brutality can become normalized in a dystopian society. It echoes the corrosive effects of war and societal decay. This scene examines the grim reality that ethical boundaries break down in dystopian states. Horrific acts of violence can occur, even against the most vulnerable, when true moral order collapses.

The poem shows in vivid detail the devastating consequences of power being abused and misused. The innocent girls who are violated and the tragic deaths of the boys represent damage caused

when authorities lose their moral way. It warns that neglecting the well-being of vulnerable groups can create a culture of violence throughout society. Furthermore, the research item highlights how war dehumanizes people. It shows how war erodes the social bonds that should protect against such atrocities. The violated innocence of the girls depicts abuse of power by authorities. The tragic killings of the boys show misuse of power leading to loss of life. These represent collateral damage when those in power lose their moral compass and guidance. The research item warns that if the vulnerable are neglected and mistreated, it can spread violence through the whole community. Moreover, the poem emphasizes how the dehumanizing effects of war break down the social ties and human connection that normally prevent such cruelties from occurring. It highlights how war erodes the societal bonds and values that should protect society, especially the most vulnerable. The haunting imagery stands as a metaphor for the atrocities that can arise when civilizations abandon ethical principles and human values. It serves as a cautionary tale, reflection on how the unchecked pursuit of power can unwrap the very fabric of social communities. By wielding power without conscience, we risk creating a dystopian reality where interpersonal relationships break down, and violence becomes normalized. In essence, the poem is a powerful reminder of the need for those in authority to govern with empathy, compassion, and a deep commitment to upholding human dignity, lest we succumb to a cycle of brutality that tears society apart.

The poem criticizes societies that prioritize grand displays of power over the well-being of individuals.

“the mass and majesty of this world” (Auden 38)

The shield’s depiction through this line represents that the pursuit of grandiosity can dehumanize people, reducing them to mere masses overshadowed by imposing facades of power.

“plain without a feature, bare and brown” (Auden 9)

The shield’s apocalyptic imagery, in this line of the poem brings forward the consequences of societal neglect and the relentless chase for power. This barren, lifeless landscape symbolizes a future where vitality is stripped away, leaving a society in decay and emptiness.

“an unintelligible multitude” (Auden 13)

The dehumanizing impact of war in this line etched on the shield affectingly. The blurred, indistinct faces represent the loss of individual identity amidst the chaos and destruction of conflict, where people become mere faceless masses. The poem warns against the dangers of prioritizing power and grandeur over human well-being, as it can lead to a desolate, dehumanized society where individuality and vitality are sacrificed for the sake of imposing facades and collective destruction.

“Of any world where promises were kept, Or one could weep because another wept” (Auden 58-59)

This empathetic line with its realistic sense, laments the lack of a utopian world where promises are kept and people empathize with one another’s suffering. This absence hints at a breakdown of trust and fractured social contracts, which are hallmarks of dystopian societies. Under oppressive regimes, promises crumble, and empathy is stifled. By juxtaposing mythic pasts, tragic present, and apocalyptic futures, the poem realistically explores the human condition, and existential crisis. The verses warn of society becoming a dystopia without trust and empathy. They are a reminder of the fact that neglecting promises and empathy risks an oppressive, dehumanizing dystopia. In this dystopia, the network of social fabric breaks down. Losing core values such as trust and empathy lead to a dystopian future where human connection erodes. Oppression slides in by neglecting the upholding promises and empathy.

6. INTERPLAY OF REALISM AND MODERNISM

In the poem “The Shield of Achilles”, W.H. Auden combines elements of Modernism and Realism with the complexities of time and harsh realities. The poem blends avant-garde techniques with gritty realism. It digs into deeper layers of societal issues and the human condition. Through symbolism of

Timelines and Dystopian Imagery: Modernism and Realism in W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles"

the shield, Auden portrays both beauty and harsh truths of the world. The concept of "anti-art" depicts realism. It challenges traditional art boundaries and reflects society's complexities. By juxtaposing different timelines and dystopian imagery, Auden creates a thought-provoking portrayal of reality. The poem sails through the dichotomy between Modernism's innovative styles and Realism's profound exploration of societal concerns. As a result, it captures the essence of the world in all its intricacies. Auden's manipulation of time is a quintessential manifestation of Modernist experimentation. It reflects the avant-garde techniques of modernism. Detailed descriptions of the shield's engravings ground the narrative in tangible, realistic experiences. The shield itself becomes a symbol bridging the abstract and concrete. Its vivid depictions of war, suffering, and political turmoil provide a realist portrayal of harsh realities. The concept of "anti-art" connects with the dystopian imagery. It emerges as a focal point that merges modernist abstraction with realist social commentary. The "anti-art" style's diligent details create a vivid portrayal of a dystopian world. This world is ravaged by conflict, injustice, and the opposite of traditional artistic scenario that only shows the aesthetics but not the harsh realities. With the concept of "anti-art", it mirror reflects the harsh realities, brutalities of modern world through art. The interplay of realism and modernism confronts the dichotomy of form and content. It demonstrates that modernist experimentation can coexist with a commitment to depicting reality.

Both realism and modernism can be identified in the very first verses of the poem.

"She looked over his shoulder / For vines and olive trees, / Marble well-governed cities / And ships upon untamed seas, / But there on shining metal / His hands had put instead / An artificial wilderness / And a sky like lead" (Auden 1-8)

The disappointment when the onlooker gazes at the shield reflects a realistic exploration of human emotions. She anticipated seeing classic, picturesque scenes. Instead, she encountered an "artificial wilderness" (Auden 7). This sense of let-down connects with the realistic human experience of disillusionment. Disillusionment happens when reality is drastically different from what one expected. The departure from conventional imagery, using "shining metal" instead of natural materials, and creating an "artificial wilderness" (Auden 7) align with modernist tendencies. Portraying a manipulated environment and "a sky like lead" (Auden 8) deviates from idealized traditional representations. The use of unexpected and unnatural elements captures a sense of disillusionment and challenges idealized norms, demonstrating both modernist experimentation and realist emotional resonance.

"A crowd of ordinary decent folk / Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke / As three pale figures were led forth and bound / To three posts driven upright in the ground" (Auden 34-37)

This lines upholds the true scenario of a group of bystanders and audience that expresses how disassociated and passive the society is. The modernist element lies in the stark and unflinching description of the bound figures, emphasizing the brutality of the scene. The scene of three figures being led forth and bound to posts is a grim and realistic depiction of a potentially violent or punitive event. The direct, factual, and exact communication of this scenario contributes to the realism context of these lines.

"Neither moved nor spoke" (Auden 35)

This small portion of the poem introduces a modernist perspective of the detachment of the crowd. The emotionless bystanders seemingly alienated from each other and the event they are viewing, as well as their lack of action to intervene or protest, illustrates a modernist artistic commentary on human disconnection and societal desensitization.

"A ragged urchin, aimless and alone, / Loitered about that vacancy; a bird / Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone" (Auden 53-55)

Having rich symbolisms and views of these lines, they evokes urban decay and isolation in the imagery of realism and modernism. The "ragged urchin" (Auden 53) as a symbolic figure represents society's marginalized and dispossessed individuals. Contrasting imagery of a vulnerable bird seeking refuge

from a “well-aimed stone” (Auden 55), thrown in an unforgiving urban “vacancy” (Auden 54) highlights the harsh realities and potential cruelties facing the less fortunate. The urchin’s depiction as “aimless and alone” (Auden 553), affectingly captures a marginalized existence mirroring societal neglect. The poet’s restrained, objective tone in observing these scenes embodies a quintessential modernist detachment. The casual violence and aimlessness ascribed to the urchin align with modernism’s tendency to reflect alienation and disconnect in the modern condition. The symbolic urchin’s resilience emerges as a glimmer of hope amidst desolation through arresting imagery that crystallizes modernist themes of societal fragmentation and human capacity for both cruelty and perseverance.

“That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third, / Were axioms to him, who'd never heard / Of any world where promises were kept, / Or one could weep because another wept” (Auden 56-59)

These lines from the poem “The Shield of Achilles”, depicts the harsh reality of the world, with a child who grew up in an environment where violence and suffering are a norm. It portrays temporal strata and manipulates time by showing the reader the contrast between a child's innocence and the cruel realities he encounters in the modern world. The depiction of heinous acts like rape and violence, presented as “axioms” (Auden 57) to an observer, reflects a stark realism. These are brutal and unfortunate facets of the human experience.

“Who'd never heard / Of any world where promises were kept” (Auden 57-58)

These verses from the poem emphasizes a cynical realism, a lack of trust in the reliability of human commitments. This skepticism aligns with a realistic perspective that acknowledges the betrayal of promises as an unfortunate and prevalent aspect of human interactions. At the same time, the emotional distance of the observer, coupled with the use of the term “axioms” (Auden 57) as self-evident truths, reflects a modernist tendency to present the world through a lens of detached observation and intellectual scrutiny. The notion that the observer implies a fragmented worldview. This aligns with modernist themes of disillusionment, where traditional values and ideals are questioned or shattered, giving way to a more fragmented and complex understanding of the world.

“The thin-lipped armorer, / Hephaestus, hobbled away, / Thetis of the shining breasts / Cried out in dismay / At what the god had wrought / To please her son, the strong / Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles / Who would not live long” (Auden 60-67)

By presenting the essence of war and the consequences that follow, it combines realism and modernism. The characterization of Hephaestus as a “thin-lipped armorer” (Auden 60) with identifiable human traits humanizes and grounds the mythological figure. Thetis’s visceral “cry out in dismay” (Auden 63) upon seeing the fateful shield injects emotional realism, deviating from classical stoicism to delve into a mother’s psychological depths.

“the strong / iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles” (Auden 66)

Portrayals similar to this bluntly capture the warrior’s violent reality and mortality. Collectively, these elements emphasize the impermanence of power and human vulnerability to destructive forces - whether the forged shields of war or the forges of technological advancement embodied by Hephaestus. Auden observes the mythological narrative through a modernist lens of dispassionate objectivity. Paradoxically, he also grounds the story in relatable human experiences of grief, fear, and the fragility of life amidst the harsh chronicles of war. The blend of mythological epics with raw human emotions and modern detachment highlights the poem’s ability to merge realist emotional resonance with avant-garde techniques. The seamless cerebral and visceral integration captures modernity’s dichotomy - an age of progress still grappling with primal frailties and cruelties. His synthesis of disparate styles encapsulates how great poetry can challenge intellectually while mirroring lived experiences.

7. ACHILLES THE MODERN ANTIHERO

Auden reimagines the classical hero Achilles as a complex modern antihero. Instead of celebrating his conventional martial heroism, Auden explores the darker, morally ambiguous aspects of Achilles' character and psyche. The shield meant to memorialize his heroic legacy becomes a haunting representation reflecting grim contemporary realities like war, industrialization, desolation. Achilles emerges not as a glorified champion, but a flawed, tormented figure contending with harsh existential conflicts of the modern human condition. The scenes on his iconic shield shows a dark, fractured world plagued by violence and moral decay instead of glorious conquests. This subverts the traditional heroic paradigm. It serves as commentary on the moral ambiguities and difficult truths that society often avoids confronting. Auden's antiheroic Achilles becomes an everyman by stripping away idealized heroism, a way to explore personal and societal struggles against dehumanizing forces like industrialized warfare. Achilles' internal conflicts mirror broader crises of a disillusioned modern age that has lost its moral bearings. The subversion provokes essential questions about the dangers of blind hero worship, the erosion of values, and the toll of unchecked power and violence. Achilles as a modern antihero crystallizes the tension between idealized virtues and harsh realities that defines the contemporary experience. His flawed, disillusioned heroism holds a mirror to society's failings while emphasizing the need to confront difficult existential questions, reassess norms, and self-reflection.

8. THE SHIELD AS A REFLECTION

Achilles' shield exceeds its physical form to become a profound symbolic canvas reflecting complex modern truths. The ornate imagery adorning its surface paradoxically elevates the mundane into the artistic realm. It also serves as an unembellished, anti-artistic portrayal of realism. The shield's dualistic nature exposes the dichotomy between society's aspirations for idealistic beauty and the harsh grittiness of reality. This juxtaposition raises thought-provoking questions about art's fundamental purpose. Rather than merely imitating surface-level reality, Auden highlights that great art should delve deeper to capture the complex essence of human experiences and critically examine societal afflictions. The shield's vivid, anti-artistic renderings achieve this, presenting realistic vignettes that provoke self-reflection on modern paradoxes.

Symbolically, the shield's traditional protective role takes on added dimensions beyond physical defense. Its mirrored surface brings forward and protects a deeper truth - reflecting contemporary human conditions' intricacies, contradictions, and harsh realities. Each meticulously rendered scene contributes profound societal critique. The juxtaposition of form and function exemplifies how great poetry can challenge conventions. The ornate imagery elevates the shield beyond a mere object into exploring the psychological and emotional dimensions of the human experience. Juxtaposing domestic tranquility with harsh war and despair reflects the paradoxical emotional dissonance and coexisting abundance or desolation defining modern society's psychological landscape. The shield represents art's powerful ability to shape societal perceptions and consciousness.

Simultaneously, the unconventional artistry exemplifies the anti-art movement - rejecting traditional aesthetic norms in favor of unflinchingly realistic depictions of the contemporary world. This aligns with Auden's intention to mirror authentic modern truths, eschewing idealized beauty representations. Through paradoxical juxtaposition of psychological depth and anti-artistic realism, Auden creates a symbolic canvas exploring modern psyche complexities and the existential human condition. The imagery both elevates and demystifies, offering profound insights while maintaining an uncompromising commitment to authentic societal portrayals. By deliberately rejecting idealized aesthetics for unflinching realism, the shield exemplifies the anti-art movement's mission to dismantle norms and confront audiences with uncomfortable truths. The juxtaposition of idyllic scenes alongside graphic depictions of war and suffering on the shield prompts self-reflection. It mirrors fundamental tensions of the human condition - the tug between our lofty aspirations and the harsh realities we face in existence.

The shield becomes a microcosm, exposing the complexities that humanity struggles with on a daily basis. Its dualistic imagery of beauty and brutality strips away veils that obscure the darker aspects of society people often fail to examine. By embracing realism over romanticized escapism, the shield emerges as both a confrontation with multidimensional truths and a study of those truths undergirding our lived experiences. Auden portrayed the concept of “anti-art” on art’s role in fearlessly reflecting the paradoxical world in all its splendor and squalor. The shield illustrates that authentic art can reshape consciousness by mirror reflecting to the refinement of human struggle. Unlike romanticized escapism, realism deals with multidimensional truths.

The political machinations on the shield mirror the era’s rise of authoritarian regimes and manipulative power structures. Auden uses the shield as a medium to critique the harsh socio-political realities of his period. This includes the animalistic brutality of modern warfare and the oppressive regimes with advanced technology and societal shifts. The metaphorical resonance prompts self-reflection on that era’s existential threats to human dignity and freedom. Auden uses the shield as a metaphor to critique the harsh socio-political realities he witnessed - from the animalistic brutality of modern warfare, to the oppressive regimes made possible by advancing technology and societal changes. This metaphorical resonance prompts self-reflection on the existential threats to human dignity and freedom prevalent in that period. Scenes of war, devoid of heroic embellishments, bluntly visualize the brutality of World War-II, stimulating romanticized notions surrounding conflict. By reflecting historical realities, the shield becomes a cautionary tale, urging humanity to confront uncomfortable truths and break free from destructive patterns. Through “The Shield of Achilles”, Auden does more than simply mirror the realities of the 20th century, which was the foreshadowed future timeline in the poem. The poem’s portrayal of humanity’s repeated mistakes denotes a warning, spurring to perceive and break away from the cycles of destructive behavior that have plagued the history.

9. CONCLUSION

W.H. Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles” signifies as an intensive probing of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the human experience. The poem’s dystopian imagery operates as a haunting metaphor for the socio-political turmoil and moral decay that plagued the mid-20th century era Auden inhabited. Albeit Auden’s message extends beyond mere historical reflection. His stirring juxtaposition of mythic pasts, tragic presents, and apocalyptic futures sheds light on the fact that the struggle against dehumanizing forces like war, totalitarianism, and erosion of ethics is an enduring one. The research item emerges as both a cautionary tale about the perils of unchecked power and societal decay, and a powerful exhortation to confront the uncomfortable truths often obscured by romanticized escapism. W.H. Auden’s poem “The Shield of Achilles” blends beauty and harsh reality. It contrasts utopian visions with dystopian ones, just as the shield depicts different scenes. Auden combines avant-garde styles with authentic, tangible elements. He captures the fundamental tensions of the modern era. This was a time of great intellectual progress existing alongside societal injustices and existential struggles. It reflects deeply on why we need empathy, self-examination, and a rethinking of dehumanizing forces that can divide society beyond traditional poetry. The diverse realities of human experience compels to face ugliness while still upholding the dignity everyone shares. The research item does not shy away from harsh truths, yet it finds beauty and meaning midst of contradictions.

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Timelines and Dystopian Imagery: Modernism and Realism in W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles"

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