

The Shield of Achilles by W.H. Auden: Critical Appreciation

"The Shield of Achilles" is the title poem in the volume of poems entitled *The Shield of Achilles*, published in 1955. The lyric is divided into three parts, and each part consists of three stanzas. Thus, there are nine stanzas in all. It is a fine lyrical poem in which Auden puts the classical myth of Achilles and his shield to the service of his art as a modern poet to bring out the contrast between the heroic past and the unheroic present. Auden's handling of the myth is dexterous and highly appropriate in underlying the desolation, cruelty and uninspiring barrenness of the contemporary scene.

"The Shield of Achilles" derived its theme from the *Iliad*. Auden represents the Homeric theme in a mock-heroic way, making necessary changes in conformity with the tone. The shield represents imagery in art which the artist displays. The viewer is the people here. The view of life presented is controlled by dictators ruling over multitudes of common men. The ceremonies in Homer are reproduced in a mockery of crucifixion organized by officials and witnessed by people and the act is a deliberate mockery of human dignity.

Thetis searches for the mythical rites in pieties in vain. The sight of three people led to the spot of execution, watched by an apathetic crowd, is a mockery of the situation of crucifixion. The situation that follows the execution is intensely mocking. *A ragged urchin, aimless and alone*

Loitered about the vacancy, a bird

Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,

Were anxious to him, who'd never heard

Of any world where promises were kept,

The world of Homer and the world of the present is put into contrast through the images.

In this lyric Auden has used the mythical technique popularized by TS. Eliot to make his comment on the modern condition. The mythical method consists in juxtaposing the past and the present, with the past serving as a comment, on the present. In order that the parallelism may be effective, Auden alternates the reminiscences of the glorious past of the classical world and its legendary beauty with the contemporary scene which cuts into this past and produces an antithetical and negative effect. The contemporary scene is rendered in terms of military operations and senseless violence with implications of religion and art. Thus, Auden's poem is a carefully balanced and well-integrated whole in which we find more than one level of meaning. The myth has been worked to a deeper significance. In the poem "the shield symbolizes art, an image of the human condition. Auden's version, however, is mock-heroic, contrasting the Homeric description of the life, the modern artist must represent. In the shield Hephaestus (the artist) shows Thetis (the audience), not the classical city, but the plain of modern life on which multitudes are ordered about by totalitarian rulers (a faceless voice reciting statistics through a loudspeaker). Instead of the "ritual pieties", we have barbed wire enclosing an "arbitrary spot" where there is a travesty of the crucifixion being performed by bureaucrats—while "ordinary decent folk" watch, in which helpless individuals are shamefully deprived of human dignity before death. Thus, by using the mythical technique Auden has telescoped whole ages of history within the compass of a small lyric, and commented upon the spiritual decay and solution in the modern age. He expresses emotion directly with simplicity. This poem is unusual in presenting tragedy without comment.

In "The Shield of Achilles", we find a successful example of Auden's use of a conceptual construct instead of direct treatment of experience. Thetis's observation of her son's shield, in expectation of seeing the views of her own design, provides a dramatic context for an objective presentation of the horrors of a world without faith. Auden's mythopoeic imagination enables him to attain a double focus and thereby turn the Homeric legend into a befitting analogy to the post-war world of today. The beauty of the poem lies in the double-edged irony which suggests, on the one hand, a paretic; between the classical world and the present and on the other reveals the contrast between the expectations of Thetis and the reality painted on the shield. Although the intention of the poet is not chiefly the symbolic

painting of landscape, the mode of description is highly suggestive. The picture of "A plain without feature, bare and brown," as also without any sign of vegetation and neighborhood, persists throughout the poem as a contrast to the cherished virtues of the classical city of "vines and olive trees," of "ritual pieties", dances and games.

The Shield of Achilles' is Auden's one of greatest poems: central diction, the normal and logically ordered syntax, the form heightens without hindering the sense, and the rare rhetorical devices are kept strictly relevant to the needs of theme. Though not vocative in the way of most odes, but rather a crisp narrative of vivid scenes and actions, this poem possesses the main features usually associated with the ode: namely, a certain elevation, a sense that the poet is rising above personal matters to speak in a measured responsible way on something of general importance, and the use of a contrasting and comparative method. The legendary shield is presented as a magic mirror, revealing the future as well as the present and showing what is true rather than what is desired.

Auden uses myth as a symbolic metaphor, in that it both concretizes and universalizes. It is unlike history because it is not factual, but like history in that it is explanatory; and it is unlike the novel because it is not mimetic, but like the novel in that it is invented. All these features are to be found here. Auden is enabled to present, in its essence, one of the direct forms of 'the baffle of being': the contrast between the ideas of harmony and humane community, and practices of mass manipulation, moral blindness, and militarism he is able to condense recognizable worlds, as it were, into a timeless metaphor of themselves.

The first three stanzas express the State as organization, the next three the State as Idea (Sublimated into religion and, 'therefore, involving the persecution of heretics) while the last three exemplify the consequences entitled by such a State. More particularly, the detailed revelation remarkably combines plainness with power, largely because of very subtle stylistic effects and very cogent choice of metonymic examples.

Analysis

"The Shield of Achilles" provides a chilling confrontation between love and war. Written in 1952, it was included in his volume of poetry of the same name, which

was published in 1955. The volume won the National Book Award in 1956. It is written in alternating seven-line stanzas of rime royal (ABABBCC) and eight-line stanzas in a ballad format (ABCBDEFE).

The contents of the poem derive from Homer's *Iliad*, an ancient epic poem concerning a key part of the Trojan War. A lot has happened by this point. In book 18, the goddess Thetis, the mother of Achilles, asks the god Hephaestus (Latinized as Hephaestus) to create a shield for son so he can triumph in the war against Troy. Achilles's earlier shield was taken by Hector after he killed Achilles' close friend Patroclus, who had taken the armor into battle thinking that seeing this armor would scare the Trojans (Achilles had stayed out of the fight over a dispute with Agamemnon about a woman). Homer goes into great detail describing the shield that Hephaestus makes; it contains a veritable history of the world in its scenes of pastoral calm, marriage, war, the cosmos, art, and nature.

The poem begins Thetis looking over the armorer's shoulder with disappointment. In each of her three stanzas, employing the repetition "She looked over his shoulder" in the first line, she is hoping to see images of civilization, joy, piety, and peaceful employment of athletic and musical arts. She loves her son and is thinking ahead to what he should be fighting for. But instead she sees images of irrationality, war, wilderness, immorality, injustice, and punishment. The contrast between what Thetis expects and what Hephaestus delivers, what Thetis desires and what the armorer thinks appropriate for Achilles, is stark.

The pattern of hope and disappointment occurs all three times, followed by the concluding stanza wrapping up the point: after all, Achilles is doomed to live a short but heroic warrior's life. Achilles, like people in general, can try to live average but boring lives instead, but Achilles has chosen heroism, and his mother is dismayed.

Critic Scott Horton argues that the poem has contemporary resonance for Auden and his audience, reflecting a warning about the Cold War and the authoritarian warmongering of the 1950s: "Auden is not portraying the tragedies of the last war as such. He is warning of a world to come in which totalitarian societies dominate and the worth and dignity of the individual human being lost. He warns those who stand by, decent though they may seemingly be, and say nothing." This perspective is supported by anachronistic images on the shield. Thetis sees a scene that seems more like one from the Second World War: barbed wire around a military base. Modern war engages "millions" and spreads propaganda through "statistics."

Another allusion on the military base concerns the three people punished. A crowd watches from a distance as three figures are brought forth and bound to three posts in the ground. This scene alludes to the Crucifixion of Jesus between two others, as though the three posts are crosses, and it makes the horrors of war seem more universal. Horton writes, “the anonymous image also displaces the greater spiritual significance of the Christian sacrifice, suggesting that in the modern world such sacrifice has lost its ultimate meaning and that the victims, Christ in particular, have become nameless and insignificant.” Poet Anthony Hecht has noted that the executed men were not martyrs, just victims. One also might see in this image an allusion to the Jews and others killed in Nazi concentration camps.

When Hephaestus hobbles away (in myth he is lame) without comment, the shield is his only statement. He put a mirror up to reality and reproduced it on the “shining metal.” In contrast, Thetis’ “shining breasts” reflect her motherly love, less with reality than with hope. Auden once said, “A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the virtues of beauty, order, economy, and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a horror.” As much as we might strive for the virtues, reality—whether presented by Hephaestus, Homer, or Auden—shows us a different, more distressing world.

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