

Theme of The Shield of Achilles

The theme of The Shield of Achilles gives us a glimpse of the great mythology which involves the classic Trojan War. The lines of the [poem itself are dipped in the mood](#) of the Greek classic; Legos vs. Pathos who are the two main characters who dissent each other views and one's triumph over the other paints a picture of humanity and its everlasting plight. Achilles happens to be the most celebrated Greek warrior who was an important member of the Trojan War. Achilles mother Thetis, takes a look at the shield of his son that hangs from his shoulder and stands as an emblem of valor and courage which reflects the aspects of Greek civilization and was made especially for Achilles by the blacksmith of Gods; Haphaestous, the blacksmith of the Gods. The poignancy of the poem is revealed though the [lines where the Mother](#) looks out;

For vines and olive trees,

Marble well-governed cities

And ships upon untamed seas,

But there on the shining metal His hands had put instead

An artificial wilderness

And a sky like lead.

Through the very lines, the theme of meditation poetry, i.e. [life and its hollowness and futility is justly reflected](#). The very word, “artificial” is used to denote the superficial factor of life. The sky like “lead” is an echo of the frigid, metal like behavior that human beings have adapted to. Thetis, who is the mother of Achilles, personifies Hope because she acts in utmost desperation and wants to save her son before he plunges into the war of death. She also looks at his shield that Hephaestus has forged for protection and hopes to find a sign of strength that she thinks will protect her son from his impending death.

On the other hand, Hephaestus, the blacksmith is projected as an epitome of pragmatism. In the classical tale, he had been depicted as a “thin-lipped armorer” who “hobbled”. Thetis, the mother is a beautiful nymph in the classic tale now seeks “vines and olive trees, marble well-governed cities and ships upon untamed

seas”, symbols of peace and prosperity. Amidst all this, it is Hephaestus who gives her “an artificial wilderness and a sky like lead congregated [by] an unintelligible multitude, a million eyes, a million boots in line, without expression, waiting for a sign” which rings the knell that heralds a furious war.

Thetis then goes on to seek “ritual pieties”, “libation and sacrifice”, which is nothing but an appeal to the ancient deities for guidance and protection of her son. Hephaestus, the shield maker is the one who offers “an arbitrary spot where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)” seemingly in mockery of Thetis’ hope and “three pale figures [whom] were led forth and bound to three posts driven upright in the ground”. **The Shield of Achilles** meaning changes continually with the introduction of an ironic element that serves to conjure a biblical image that draws a tangent to all attempts of assassination.

W.H Auden’s work is also a sharp contrast between a [Mothers vision and what is embossed on her sons](#) shield by the blacksmith.’ (She looks for “vines and olive trees,” “cities,” “ships,” “ritual pieties,” “athletes,” “Men and women in a dance,” etc.). Here, Auden attempts to reverse the narration order of Homer; where he describes the war (“a million boots in line, / without expression, waiting for a sign.”). Then, when he mentions, “a voice without a face” in order to portray the very idea that the cause for the war is justified. There is also a sharp resemblance to Christ’s death as conveyed through the lines; “As three pale figures were led forth and bound/To three posts driven upright in the ground.” They **“died as men before their bodies died.”**

Auden continues his wordplay to depict and pen picture a harsh reality where the tormentors are themselves tormented (“A ragged urchin, aimless and alone, Loitered about that vacancy; a bird Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone/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.) “To please her son, the strong/Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles/Who would not live long”-is perhaps the zenith of all emotions that tears away the magnitude of war that bodes ill and off for one and all.