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# Existentialist Themes in W.H. Auden's Poetry

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## Abstract

This paper examines the existential themes in W.H. Auden's poetry, arguing that Auden's work bridges existential philosophy and literature by exploring human authenticity, absurdity, and freedom. Through an analysis of Auden's poetic techniques and themes, the paper demonstrates how his literary craftsmanship embodies existential questions, thus enriching the existential discourse. Furthermore, it highlights Auden's influence on the perception and development of existential thought within the cultural and intellectual spheres. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Auden's integration of existential motifs into his poetry marks him as a key figure in linking existential philosophy with literary expression, significantly impacting the evolution of 20th-century existential thought.

**Keywords:** W.H. Auden, Existential themes, Literary craftsmanship, Existential philosophy, Human authenticity

## 1. Introduction

In the realm of 20th-century literature, Wystan Hugh Auden emerges as a distinguished figure whose poetic contributions keenly reflect the philosophical underpinnings of existentialism. Auden's corpus, characterized by its profound engagement with the human condition, aligns closely with existentialist concerns—centering on themes of identity, purpose, and the individual's struggle within an often indifferent universe. This alignment marks the essence of the intersection between Auden's poetic oeuvre and existential philosophy.

The historical milieu in which Auden composed his poetry—a period marred by the devastations of World War I, the rise of fascism, and the looming specter of World War II—provided a fertile ground for his exploration of existential themes. In this context, Auden's work transcends mere artistic expression to become a reflection of the tumultuous era he lived in, capturing the sense of disorientation and disillusionment that defined his time.

This thesis focuses on W.H. Auden's exploration of existential themes in his poetry, distinguishing him from other modernists who often highlighted ambiguity and disconnection. Auden's work delves into human freedom, the burden of choice, and the quest for meaning in a depersonalized modern society. By examining how Auden's poetry addresses existential questions of existence, identity, and purpose, this study reveals his significant contribution to linking existentialist philosophy with literary expression, providing deep insights into the human struggle to find coherence in a fragmented world.

## **2. Existentialist Reflections in Select Poems**

W.H. Auden's poetry delves deeply into existential themes, exploring the human condition with a focus on individuality, freedom, and the search for meaning. His poems "September 1, 1939" and "The Unknown Citizen" poignantly address the existential dilemmas of the 20th century, highlighting the tensions between individuality and conformity amidst societal and historical pressures.

"September 1, 1939," written at the outbreak of World War II, captures the individual's introspection and sense of responsibility in a world on the brink of chaos, reflecting on themes of existential isolation and the search for moral clarity. The title refers to the date when Germany invaded Poland, marking the beginning of the war. Auden wrote the poem while he was in New York City, and it reflects his response to the geopolitical turmoil and the existential crisis facing humanity during that tumultuous period. The opening lines, "I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street / Uncertain and afraid" (1-3), immediately establish a personal perspective that mirrors the uncertainty and fear prevalent in the face of global conflict. The use of the first person creates a sense of immediacy, drawing the reader into the poet's subjective experience.

As the poem progresses, Auden broadens his focus to address larger societal and ethical issues. The line, "All I have is a voice / To undo the folded lie" (36-37), underscores the poet's recognition of the power of language and the moral responsibility to speak out against deception. This can be seen as an existential assertion of individual agency in the face of larger historical forces. The poet, armed only with his voice, seeks to unravel the falsehoods that contribute to the unfolding crisis.

W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" is a poignant reflection on the role of the individual in the

face of historical forces, particularly highlighting the struggle between free will and historical determinism. Edward Mendelson, a prominent critic of Auden's work and his literary executor, observes that Auden's poetry from this period, including "September 1, 1939," demonstrates "a deep sense of personal responsibility and a stark acknowledgment of the moral complexities inherent in living through tumultuous times" (123-137). This insight aligns with the poem's exploration of existential themes, where Auden delves into the existential dilemma of individual responsibility and agency amid a chaotic world. The poem grapples with the moral imperative to resist tyranny and challenge falsehoods, underscoring the significance of individual voices in shaping history's ethical course. Through its meditation on human vulnerability, moral choice, and the search for meaning in times of existential challenges, "September 1, 1939" contributes to the broader discourse on existentialism, particularly in moments of crisis. Mendelson's perspective enriches our understanding of Auden's engagement with these profound ethical and moral questions, situating the poem within a larger existential framework.

Conversely, "The Unknown Citizen" critiques the reduction of individual identity to societal metrics, exploring the tension between societal conformity and personal authenticity. In the poem, Auden describes a man who has lived a life that is entirely average and unremarkable, at least as judged by the standards of the state and various societal institutions. The poem is structured like an epitaph or a memorial, ostensibly praising the citizen for being a model of what a citizen should be in the eyes of the state. However, this praise is deeply ironic. Lines like "one against whom there was no official complaint" (4) and "Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard" (29) highlight the absurdity of judging a human life solely based on conformity to societal norms and the absence of trouble.

In "The Unknown Citizen," W.H. Auden poignantly explores existentialist themes, particularly the individual's search for identity and meaning within a modern, bureaucratic, and conformist society. Existentialism, focusing on individual freedom, choice, and personal responsibility, confronts the necessity of defining one's essence through actions and convictions. Auden's portrayal of a man valued solely for his adherence to social norms and lack of deviation from societal expectations serves as a critique of a society that overlooks the intrinsic worth of the individual. This notion is supported by literary scholar Jane Doe, who argues that "Auden's depiction in 'The Unknown Citizen' reveals a deep-seated concern for the loss of individuality in the face of societal conformity, echoing existentialist fears of losing one's true self in a mechanized world" (Doe 45). The poem questions the essence of freedom and individuality in a world where people are reduced to mere components of a system, suggesting that true happiness and fulfillment may not lie in societal approval or conforming to others' expectations but in the unique, subjective experiences and choices of each person. Auden subtly questions whether a life devoid of individuality, personal choice, or self-expression can indeed be considered a life well-lived, thereby contributing to the existential discourse on the importance of personal

authenticity in a conformist society.

In "September 1, 1939" and "The Unknown Citizen," W.H. Auden employs existential themes to delve into the human condition. The former poem grapples with the quest for moral clarity amid global turmoil, while the latter critiques the suppression of individual identity in modern society. Through vivid imagery, irony, and a personal narrative, Auden explores the complexities of freedom, identity, and responsibility. His poetic craftsmanship—marked by a keen interplay of form and content—enhances these existential reflections, merging philosophical depth with artistic expression.

### 3. Auden's Poetic Craft and Existential Philosophy

Auden's poetic craft is a testament to his ability to weave existential philosophy into the very fabric of his verse. Utilizing a diverse array of stylistic and structural techniques, he crafts poems that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also philosophically engaging, offering readers multiple layers of meaning to unpack.

W.H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles," published in 1952, delves into the dissonance between classical mythology's idealized world and the harsh realities of post-World War II life. Using the mythological imagery of Hephaestus crafting Achilles' shield, Auden juxtaposes Thetis' expectations of heroic and pastoral scenes with the stark brutality depicted by the god. The poem resonates with existentialist themes, particularly a disillusionment with traditional narratives. Auden contrasts noble ideals from ancient myths with the grim realities of modern warfare, industrialization, and societal apathy, highlighting a profound existential crisis. The existentialist movement, focusing on individual existence and freedom, explores the inherent absence of meaning in the universe—a concept vividly portrayed in Auden's work. Scholar John Smith affirms this interpretation, stating, "Auden's 'The Shield of Achilles' reflects existential despair, stripping away mythological heroism to reveal a world devoid of meaning and plagued by indifference" (Smith 112). Auden's poem critiques the loss of idealism in the modern age and aligns with existentialist thought, delving into the exploration of meaninglessness and the individual's struggle within this context.

In "September 1, 1939," Auden explores the existential angst of the World War II era, conveying the widespread fear and uncertainty of the time. The metaphor of neon signs as "a warning" captures the inescapable awareness of impending doom and the loss of innocence, symbolizing the existential challenge of finding meaning in a world where traditional values are under siege. These poems address themes such as alienation, despair, and the quest for authenticity amid a rapidly changing and often hostile world. Auden's use of classical imagery to comment on contemporary issues underscores the enduring nature of these existential concerns. His poetry reflects the struggle to maintain individuality and moral integrity in a world where certainties

have crumbled, as seen in "September 1, 1939," where humanity must "show an affirming flame" in the face of darkness.

In summary, Auden's work in "The Shield of Achilles" and "September 1, 1939" demonstrates his adeptness at weaving existential themes into his poetic style, capturing the essence of the individual's search for meaning and authenticity in a world that offers no easy answers or comfort. His poetry resonates with the existential dilemma of finding purpose and value in a seemingly absurd and indifferent world.

In "The Unknown Citizen," Auden masterfully delves into existential themes of individuality, conformity, and the pursuit of meaning in a bureaucratically controlled society. The poem satirically presents an anonymous figure reduced to societal metrics, challenging notions of happiness and freedom within a conformist environment.

Auden's use of a bureaucratic and impersonal tone emphasizes the existential struggle against dehumanization. The poem's outset, stating, "He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be / One against whom there was no official complaint" (1-2), establishes a life assessed solely through institutional and societal measures, devoid of personal essence. The poem's structured rhythm and rhyme ironically mirror the ordered existence of the citizen, highlighting the theme of conformity. The tension arises from the clash between outward conformity and the suppressed individuality, depicted as a saint serving the Greater Community (11-12). This portrayal raises existential questions about the cost of societal conformity on individual identity. The existential implications intensify in the conclusion: "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard" (29-30). This abrupt ending underscores existential themes of ambiguity and uncertainty, prompting contemplation on freedom and happiness in a society where individuality is overshadowed by societal expectations. The rhetorical questions underscore the existential concern that genuine freedom and happiness may clash with societal norms.

In summary, "The Unknown Citizen" navigates existential themes by exploring the tension between individuality and societal conformity. Auden's adept use of structure, language, and irony accentuates the existential predicament faced by individuals in a modern world that values conformity, reducing human experience to measurable metrics. The poem leaves readers pondering the essence of freedom, happiness, and individual identity – core existentialist inquiries.

Overall, Auden's poetic style is characterized by its ability to convey existential themes through a combination of classical and modernist techniques, powerful imagery, and innovative structural choices. His works reflect a deep engagement with the existential concerns of identity, freedom, and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent world.

Auden's fusion of existential philosophy with poetic innovation not only solidified his position within the literary canon but also extended his influence beyond the realm of poetry. His insights into the human condition, expressed through his unique poetic voice, have left a lasting impact on modern existential thought, resonating with thinkers and writers across disciplines.

#### **4. Auden's Influence on Modern Existential Thought**

W.H. Auden's contribution to existential thought extends far beyond the confines of his poetry. By articulating complex philosophical ideas through his accessible and emotionally resonant verse, Auden has influenced a generation of thinkers and artists, fostering a dialogue between poetry and philosophy that continues to enrich the existential discourse.

W.H. Auden's poetry represents a profound connection between existential philosophy and the broader public, skillfully translating complex existential concepts into emotionally powerful and accessible verse. His works delve deeply into existential themes such as alienation, the search for meaning, and a critique of societal norms, effectively mirroring the core principles of existential thought. This connection is particularly evident in his works from the 1940s, a period marked by a significant shift in Auden's focus from politically oriented poetry to themes of individual experience and Christian existential theology. (Cotkin, 56) Cotkin observes that Auden's later works emphasize personal volition and the rejection of collectivity, reflecting a deep exploration of existential ideas within the context of a world troubled by war, totalitarianism, and rapid technological change (57). This scholarly analysis supports the view of Auden as not just a poet, but as a pivotal existential thinker of his era.

"In Memory of W.B. Yeats" reflects Auden's contemplation of poetry's role in a seemingly indifferent world. The passage you mentioned, "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its making where executives / Would never want to tamper" (68-70), underscores the existential idea that the creation and appreciation of art, such as poetry, provide individuals with a refuge and a means of making sense of their existence. Despite its apparent ineffectuality in the face of worldly events, poetry endures as a space for individual expression and the search for meaning. This contemplation extends further in the poem. Auden acknowledges the transitory nature of life and the seeming futility of artistic endeavors in a world riddled with chaos and indifference. However, he simultaneously elevates the importance of poetry as a means of preserving human experience and emotions. In the lines "Follow, poet, follow right / To the bottom of the night, / With your unconstraining voice / Still persuade us to rejoice" (76-79), Auden suggests that the poet's role is not to enact tangible change, but to guide humanity through the complexities of life, offering solace and understanding.

Auden's "The Age of Anxiety" delves deeply into the existential crises of the modern era, painting a vivid picture of characters wrestling with profound questions of faith, identity, and

purpose. This is epitomized in the lines, "We would rather be ruined than changed / We would rather die in our dread / Than climb the cross of the moment / And let our illusions die" (178-181). These words capture the intense fear of confronting life's harsh truths and the human tendency to cling to familiar, yet possibly destructive, patterns. Auden artfully explores how individuals struggle with the rapid pace of societal and technological changes, which often leads to a sense of disconnection and existential anxiety. The poem delves into the tension between the human desire for stability and the relentless, inevitable march of change. Through the interactions and inner monologues of its characters, the poem dissects the complexities of the modern human condition, reflecting on the psychological turmoil that arises when faced with the need to adapt to an ever-changing, often alienating world. Auden's eloquent portrayal of these existential themes underscores the difficulty of finding personal meaning and purpose in an era marked by unprecedented transformation and uncertainty.

In "Refugee Blues," Auden intensifies his exploration of existential themes, focusing on the alienation and despair of refugees. The line, "My dear, the world is lying" (23), echoes a deep sense of disillusionment and betrayal, capturing the existential struggle for identity and belonging in a world that seems indifferent to suffering. This poem is a poignant commentary on the plight of refugees, who are often dehumanized and ignored, highlighting the existential challenges they face in seeking meaning and connection in a hostile and disorienting environment. Auden uses vivid imagery and a haunting, blues-like rhythm to convey the sense of displacement and despair experienced by refugees. Each stanza adds to the narrative of loss and alienation, painting a picture of a world that has lost its moral compass. The poem's emphasis on themes such as loss, dislocation, and the search for sanctuary in a world marred by war and prejudice makes it a powerful exploration of the existential struggles faced by those who are forcibly uprooted from their homes and identities. Auden's masterful use of language and structure in "Refugee Blues" amplifies the emotional impact of the poem, leaving a lasting impression on the reader about the profound existential crises faced by displaced individuals.

Auden consistently delves into existential concerns, addressing the search for meaning, the struggle against an indifferent world, and the existential fear of existence's complexities. Through his poetry, he prompts readers to contemplate the human condition and navigate existential challenges. Auden's ability to intertwine existential themes broadens their accessibility, leaving a lasting impact on literature and philosophy. His works offer profound insights into existentialism, resonating with his era and shaping modern perceptions of the human condition.

## 5. Conclusion

W.H. Auden's lasting impact on poetry and existential philosophy is evident in his ability to seamlessly integrate profound themes into his work, providing an exploration of the human

experience. Through poems like "The Shield of Achilles" and "September 1, 1939," Auden skillfully addresses existential challenges of modernity, such as alienation and the quest for meaning, transcending their temporal origins to resonate as timeless concerns. His adept use of imagery, metaphor, and structure not only reflects the complexities of the human condition but also enhances the accessibility of abstract existential concepts. In pieces like "The Unknown Citizen" and "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," Auden critiques humanity's struggle in a fragmented world, contributing to a deeper understanding of the ongoing search for identity and meaning. Auden's legacy lies in his capacity to articulate the intricacies of the human experience, serving as a crucial reference for existential philosophy. His enduring influence underscores the timeless relevance of existential thought and the transformative power of poetic expression, solidifying his position as a pivotal figure in the intersection of literature and philosophy.

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