

Teachers' Notes

Curriculum subject: English LiteratureKey Stage: 5Author / Text: W H AudenTheme: Identity: the individual versus the world**Rationale**

Following the First World War (1914–1918), people continued to experience global turmoil and disruption of social order. In this era, psychiatry and psychoanalysis emerged as a new way of making sense of things, a departure from religious doctrine. As a literary response to this myriad of change, W H Auden produced an innovative style of poetry, one that reflected complex states of mind, using expertly compressed language.

This series of activities gives students opportunities to explore the relationship between production and reception in poetic form. They will consider how Auden's mastery of language contributes to the impact and longevity of his work. Students are also encouraged to consider the continued relevance of Auden's themes and how this helps them understand context.

Content

- Poems: 'Lullaby', 'September 1, 1939', 'The Shield of Achilles', 'Funeral Blues', 'Refugee Blues'

Literary and historical sources from the site:

- [Christopher Isherwood, 'Some Notes on Auden's Early Poetry' in *New Verse* \(1937\)](#)
- [W H Auden's journal entry for 1 September 1939](#)
- [The Shield of Achilles, a collection of poems by W H Auden \(1955\)](#)
- [Pope's drawing of the shield of Achilles \(1712–24\)](#)
- [Another Time by W H Auden \(1940\)](#) (includes 'Lay Your Sleeping Head', 'Musée des Beaux-Arts' and 'Funeral Blues')
- [Benjamin Britten's music for *The Ascent of F6*, a play by Auden and Isherwood \(1937\)](#)

Recommended reading (short articles):

- [Auden and song](#) by Valentine Cunningham
- [An introduction to W H Auden's 'Lullaby'](#) by Roz Kaveney
- ['Musée des Beaux Arts', 'Their Lonely Betters' and 'The Shield of Achilles'](#) by John Sutherland

External links:

- [Auden reading 'The Shield of Achilles'](#)

Key questions

- How does Auden's technical mastery of language contribute to the impact of his ideas?
- In what ways is Auden's poetry still relevant in today's global landscape?
- How does knowledge of Auden's many influences, including his beliefs and broad education, contribute to our understanding of him as a writer?

Activities

1) Read the poem 'Lullaby' for sense and make notes on your first thoughts. How do you respond to the title?

- Then read the poem again out loud, this time paying attention to the sounds of the words and exaggerating the movements of your mouth. Add to your notes focusing on the lyrical quality of the language.
- Turn to [Christopher Isherwood's 'Notes on Auden's Early Poetry' in *New Verse* \(1937\)](#). How does this change your understanding of 'Lullaby'?
- Added to the turmoil in his waking world, Auden dreamt of being unfaithful to his lover, Chester Kallman. Find evidence of this in [Auden's journal for 1 September 1939](#). How does this information affect your reading of the poem?
- How does the poetic form enhance or detract from Auden's purpose?
- Read [the article by Roz Kaveney](#) and note anything new which strikes you about the poem.

2) Read the extract from [Auden's journal for 1 September 1939](#) and Auden's poem 'September 1, 1939'.

- What do you notice when you look at these two sources side by side? What technical skills are involved in creating the new poetic work?
- 1st September 1939 was the day the Second World War started. What evidence is there of Auden's strength of feeling as England, his native country, went to war, whilst the USA remained at some distance from active engagement?
- Auden did not write to one particular formula, he experimented with different forms, changing and adapting to explore the artistic boundaries of his desired meaning. In

'September 1, 1939' he presents both a public and private perspective on war. Through your readings probe these contrasts. Can you think of any interesting comparisons with current world conflicts?

- Examine Auden's use of metrical balance in this poem. What patterns do you see in the poem? Why do you think Auden might have wanted to create a sense of visual symmetry?
- Read the poem aloud and listen for the cadence at the end of each line. How does this make you feel? Try a different reading e.g. ending each line on a rising note to experiment with the effect on the tone of the poem.
- One particular 20th-century innovation that Auden favoured was concision. He regularly removed articles (determiners), demonstrative adjectives, subjects, conjunctions, relative pronouns and auxiliary verbs. Explore one or more stanzas trying to identify lines where this technique is being used.
- Revisit [the journal](#) and consider the impact on the reader of Auden's style.

3) Read the poem, 'The Shield of Achilles' and record your initial thoughts. Listen to the recording of [Auden reading his poem 'The Shield of Achilles'](#), annotating a copy of the poem for any stresses you can hear. You will need to listen more than once to 'feel' his reading more securely.

- Once again, in 'The Shield of Achilles', Auden is drawn to the subject of war. By 1955, when this poem was written, the world had moved on but not away from violence. Compare Auden's treatment of these themes in this poem and 'September 1, 1939'. Why might Auden feel that there was still a need for a shield, literally and metaphorically?
- Read [John Sutherland's article on 'The Shield of Achilles'](#). Annotate the article, recording your responses to Sutherland's views.
- As well as the content of Sutherland's article, is there anything about the academic style of the piece that you could emulate in order to raise the quality of your own written expression?

4) 'Funeral Blues' has become an iconic poem for grieving relatives. The title is ambiguous, referring to Auden's love of Blues music as well as suggesting feeling low or depressed.

- Look at [Benjamin Britten's music for *The Ascent of F6, a play by Auden and Isherwood \(1937\)*](#). If you can, follow the music or collaborate with someone who can play from the manuscript. How suitable is the music for the verse? Can you imagine what style or genre a modern artist or musician might choose to interpret this verse drama?
- Compare 'Funeral Blues' with 'Refugee Blues'. What similarities or differences in approach can you see? What contrasts are there between private and public emotion? How do Auden's concerns chime with modern preoccupations?

Extension activities

- Compare 'Lullaby' with 'Funeral Blues'. How does Auden present his thoughts and feelings about uncertainty in relationships? How does this compare poems by other writers on similar themes?
- Write a journal for a week, focusing on a) your response to items in the news; b) your response to personal or local (school/college) events. Try Auden's technique of concision. Consider what is most and least difficult. Discuss with other students where possible.
- You may have come across ekphrastic poetry before, when a writer takes a work of art as a stimulus for their own response. Auden's poem, 'Musée des Beaux Arts' is a response to the Breughel painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. This poem appeared in [Auden's *Another Time* \(1940\)](#). How does it compare with 'September 1, 1939' and 'Funeral Blues', in terms of their dual perspective? Examine the technique employed by Auden, similar to zooming in and out with a camera. How does he encourage readers to feel that they are looking through a window, sharing the writer's persona or perspective?
- Read the article by Valentine Cunningham on [Auden and song](#). Choose key points from this article to cascade to fellow students. Prepare a short blog for this purpose, including advice on how to incorporate this information in a coursework and/or exam essay.