

## AUDEN'S CONCEPT OF LOVE

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### ABSTRACT

The term love appears in almost every poem of W. H. Auden; however, it should not be understood as an intense personal emotion that unites a lover with his or her beloved. Unlike his predecessors, Auden conceives love as something impersonal and detached. His conception of love evolves gradually through three major phases: love as Eros under Freudianism, love as social bonding under Marxism, and love as Agape under Christian existentialism. Beginning with Eros (sexual love), moving through Marxist collectivism, and culminating in Agape (divine love), Auden presents love as a multifaceted and evolving principle. He redefines love not as mere romantic sentiment but as a profound ethical and spiritual force.

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The term love appears in almost every poem of W. H. Auden; however, it should not be understood as an intense personal emotion that unites a lover with his or her beloved. In a general sense, the term refers to emotional content and is often associated with romantic love, as fostered by poets of different ages such as Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and W. B. Yeats. In most literary traditions, love has been perceived either as a magnetic force (infatuation) between two bodies or as a “gravitational force” between two souls (platonic love).

Unlike his predecessors, Auden conceives love as something impersonal and detached. Consequently, his poetry reflects intellectualism, where ideas and concepts are employed primarily to convey philosophical positions rather than emotional immediacy. His poetry often lacks the intensity, urgency, and emotional spontaneity typically associated with love poetry. As Narsingh Shrivastava observes:

As a result, there is, obviously, a lack of agony, rupture, regret, yearning and passion that we generally find in the love poems of such poets as Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, John Keats, Robert Browning and W. B. Yeats.

In Auden's poetry, love is employed in multiple ways and under diverse influences, leading to varied interpretations. Dennis Davison remarks that love remains a somewhat ambiguous concept in Auden's work:

I don't think that a study of Auden's poems reveals absolutely clear concepts of love. Self-love, Eros, Agape (and the terms themselves are capable of many interpretations) seem much like ready-made concepts imported into poems, rather than conclusions arrived at by the poet after due examination of human behaviour.

However, a survey of Auden's poetic development reveals that his conception of love evolves gradually. Critics such as Justin Replogle and Richard Hoggart note a significant development in Auden's understanding of love from 1927 to 1950.

In the early phase of his poetic career, Auden presents love primarily as a sex instinct, comparable to the dominant theme in the novels of D. H. Lawrence. Influenced by Freudian theory, Auden foregrounds sexuality at a time when, in the Victorian age, the subject of sexual love was considered taboo. With the advent of the twentieth century, Freudian ideas began to influence literature profoundly, and Auden was naturally shaped by this intellectual climate. He interprets love as Eros or libido; however, under the influence of Marxism, he later reconceives love as a form of fraternal and social bonding. According to him, love should not be suppressed; rather, it should transform society, fostering a healthier and more harmonious environment.

Auden's engagement with Marxism marks the second phase of his poetic career. Importantly, it is the philosophical dimension of Marxism that influences him rather than its political ideology. His poetry remains fundamentally psychological rather than overtly political. He emphasizes the role of the human heart in social reform and advocates a reflective, observational approach to understanding reality. During this period, he stresses the importance of right choice and environmental control in shaping human behavior.

In his later phase (1938–39), Auden comes under the influence of Christianity and begins to interpret love as universal love, or Agape. As a believer in God, he elevates love to the level of divine submission, aligning it with the concept of Logos. Influenced by Søren Kierkegaard, Auden perceives the universe as governed by a divine and predestined design. Although human beings appear to exercise free will, their choices remain ultimately constrained by God's

design. Toward the end of his career, his poetry reflects a celebration of life's blessedness, marked by a more affirmative and joyous acceptance of existence.

### **Love under Freudianism**

The period between 1928 and 1933 represents the psychological phase of Auden's poetry, deeply influenced by Sigmund Freud. During his visit to Berlin in 1929, Auden encountered the ideas of the American psychologist Homer Lane. His early poetry reveals a strong engagement with psychological theories, particularly Freudian concepts.

According to Freud, the primary driving force in human life is sexual energy. Auden adopts this view, considering sexual love as the vital force that unites individuals. This life force, when active, is termed the Id. However, when suppressed by social and moral constraints, it becomes destructive, leading to neurosis and psychological disturbances.

In poems such as "Petition", Auden explores the consequences of repressed sexuality, referring to conditions such as "neuralgia," "exhaustion," and other distortions. Similarly, in "The Prologue," love is depicted as a life force with deep psychological implications:

O Love, the interest itself in thoughtless Heaven, Make simpler daily the beating of man's heart...

Freud distinguishes between Eros (the life instinct) and Thanatos (the death instinct). Auden reflects this dichotomy, portraying sexual love as both creative and destructive. In "Our Hunting Fathers" (1934), he presents love as a powerful life force intertwined with individual desire:

Love raging for the personal glory.

Auden challenges conventional morality by questioning why sexual love should remain suppressed or anonymous:

"To hunger, work illegally, And be anonymous?"

Rejecting romantic idealization, Auden critiques traditional love narratives as artificial constructs. For him, love is fundamentally a biological and psychological force that operates within specific conditions and periods of life.

### **Love under Marxism**

Around 1933, Auden's intellectual orientation shifts under the influence of Marxism. This period, lasting until approximately 1940, reflects a transition from individual psychology to collective social consciousness. Economic instability, industrial unrest, and political crises shape his worldview.

Auden redefines love as a social and collective force. Moving from the individual "I" to the communal "We," he emphasizes selfless relationships as essential for social harmony. As Richard Hoggart explains:

Since love can flourish only in relationships, the greatest obstacle to its growth is self-regard.

Auden argues that rational action and social awareness are necessary to address cultural crises. Love, in this context, becomes a means of ethical engagement and social transformation:

Yours is the choice to whom the gods awarded  
The language of learning and the  
language of love...

He acknowledges both the constructive and destructive potential of love:

Love finally is great, Greater than all, but large the hate,  
For larger than man can ever estimate.

### **Love under Christian Existentialism (Kierkegaard)**

In the late 1930s, Auden's thought is profoundly influenced by Christian existentialism, particularly the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. He begins to interpret love through the lens of Christian theology, emphasizing faith, redemption, and divine grace.

Auden embraces the concept of Agape, defined as selfless, unconditional love. This includes both the love of God for humanity and the reciprocal love of humanity for God. He stresses humility, repentance, and spiritual faith:

Let us therefore be contrite but without anxiety...

For Auden, true freedom lies in surrendering to God's will. The sacrifice of Christ becomes the ultimate symbol of divine love. Consequently, human beings are called to practice selfless love toward one another.

### **Conclusion**

In tracing the evolution of Auden’s poetry—from psychological exploration to spiritual affirmation—it becomes evident that his concept of love undergoes a significant transformation. Beginning with Eros (sexual love), moving through Marxist collectivism, and culminating in Agape (divine love), Auden presents love as a multifaceted and evolving principle.

Ultimately, he asserts that perfect love is attainable only within a genuine religious framework. His mature vision integrates earlier influences, placing Freudianism and Marxism within a broader Christian context. As Richard Hoggart remarks:

That hazy concept ‘Love’ contained the beginning of his faith... it gradually assumed supreme importance.

Thus, as a twentieth-century poet, Auden redefines love not as mere romantic sentiment but as a profound ethical and spiritual force. Unlike the Romantics, he presents a modern, intellectually grounded conception of love that seeks to establish a meaningful connection between the individual, society, and the divine.

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