

Q. How does Auden contrast the past with the present in the poem The Shield of Achilles?

Or

How does Auden contrast reality and expectation in The Shield of Achilles.

Answer- Wysten Hugh Auden is remembered as one of the best American poets of the 20th century. Even much before the time that the World War II broke out, Auden was engaged in highlighting various loopholes in the political systems of the world which engendered flaws in the social apparatus as well as the economic paraphernalia of any country. The shield of Achilles is a famous image in Homer's Iliad. The shield shows a world of farming, religious ritual, and ordinary life quite different from the world of warfare that takes up so much of Homer's epic. The shield reassures us that there is more to ancient life than the Trojan War and its slaughters and horrors.

Auden has composed this poem, The Shield of Achilles in 1952, when the Western democracies led by America and the Communist countries led by the U.S.S.R were engaged in a dangerous cold war. War planes of both the sides, with atomic bombs, continued flying in the sky over central Europe, all the twenty-four hours for fear of a sudden attack from either side. When the poet composed this poem, war in Korea was in full swing. Being materialistic, the Western culture is dry and artificial. Evidently, here Auden satires the modern warlike world, its culture, and its dangerous situation. In the poem, the poet has in fact represented a vision of modern inhumanity.

Auden, in the poem, makes an imaginary description of what Thetis noticed on the shield of her son. According to Greek mythology, Thetis was a sea-goddess. She was mother of Achilles, the greatest of the Greek heroes in the Trojan War. At her request, Hephaestus, the armour-maker of gods, made an armour, and a shield for Achilles. He also engraved images on the shield --- Vines and olive trees, / Marble well-governed cities / And ships upon untamed seas. Unfortunately, these images do not exist on the shield she views. Here, in contrast to ancient times, war is depicted as total and wholly dehumanizing. It invades every aspect of life, leaving no part of the world untouched. Instead of vineyards and olive trees on this shield, as existed in ancient times, there is only a bare, brown plain entirely devoid of life. Instead of the joy of religious ritual, the woman sees only barbed wire and "ordinary" people viewing an execution. Instead of athletes at games and people dancing, she sees images of rape and two boys stabbing a third. These contrasts with the original shield are jarring.

The reality, says Auden, is that in the modern world, warfare and ordinary life cannot exist side by side as they once could. Modern warfare is contrasted to ancient warfare and comes up short, for it is too brutal. In the last stanza, the poet laments the fact that the modern shield shows a scene so grim. We find out now that Thetis, Achilles's mother, is the "she" who throughout the poem has been looking for the civilized life that balances war. Not seeing it, she "cries out in dismay".

Auden was, as a poet, far more copious and varied than Eliot and far more uneven. He tried to interpret the times, to diagnose the ills of society and deal with intellectual and moral problems of public concern

although his poetry is sometimes bewildering. If the poems, taken individually, are often obscure but they create, when taken together, a meaningful poetic cosmos with symbolic landscapes and mythical characters and situations.

The Shield of Achilles thus, explores the complex relationship between art and war, the past and the present, and the ethical problems that the representation of violence for aesthetic purposes entail.