

## **To what extent do you regard 'The Shield Of Achilles' as characteristic of Auden's work as whole?**

At first glance Auden's poem the 'Shield of Achilles' appears to be focused on the classical world. The poem's classical nature is first indicated by the title- Achilles was of course a famous Greek hero, and throughout the poem there are further classical references, many of which Auden has taken from Book XVIII of Homer's *Iliad*- 'Marble well-governed cities' (l.3), '...athletes at their games' (l.46), 'Hephae stos, hobbled away' (l.61). However, the poem also combines these classical details with the modern world- 'Proved by statistics' (l.17), 'Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot' (l.31). Although there is this unusual combination of classical and modern, the poem can be seen as timeless:

Column by column in a cloud of dust  
They marched away enduring a belief  
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.  
(*'The Shield of Achilles'* ll.21 -23)

Here the army who are 'enduring a belief' (l.21) that they are doing good can be as easily applicable to the modern day (i.e. the situation in Iraq) as to classical times. The timeless nature of the poem can be said to be a characteristic feature as it appears in other poems such as 'Gare du Midi':

...clutching a little case  
He walks out briskly to infect a city  
Whose terrible future may have just arrived.  
(*'Gare Du Midi'*, ll.6-8)

Here we are led to believe that a man is about to unleash a terrible weapon on a city and although the poem was written in December 1938, its prophetic nature allows the poem to be much more in tune with the world's present fears<sup>1</sup>.

The timelessness nature of Auden's poems can perhaps be explained by his underlining of the cyclical nature of human history. Auden implies in 'The Shield Of Achilles' that although the context of war may change through history, the content doesn't; war is frequently irrational:

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<sup>1</sup> It is notable that '1st September 1939' appeared on many websites after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in 2001.

Where logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.  
(‘The Shield of Achilles’, l.22)

Auden’s use of occasional modern day diction (‘statistics’, l.17) allows us to realise that he is also referring to modern day situations. Thus Auden is also implying that humans don’t ever learn from their mistakes; we continue to go to war. Auden also refers to this cyclical nature in ‘September 1, 1939’

Exiled Thucydides knew...  
The habit-forming pain,  
Mismanagement and grief:  
We must suffer them all again  
(‘September 1, 1939’, ll.23-33)

Here Auden is talking of the Athenian philosopher and historian Thucydides who is again underlining that human history will keep repeating because humans do not seem to learn from it:

For the present stalk abroad  
Like the past and its wronged again  
Whimper and are ignored...  
(‘A Walk After Dark’, ll.31-33)

those who ‘whimper’ continue to be ‘ignored’ by those in power and so mistakes continue to be made. Similarly in ‘The Shield Of Achilles’, the ‘strong iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles’ (ll.65-6) is seen as a great hero in classical times because of his warrior status. However, in today’s world the general perception of Achilles would be exceedingly different as violent, warrior-like attitudes to problems are increasingly condemned by today’s society; the response to a “well-aimed stone” (l.55) shouldn’t be to throw a stone back. It is this kind of moral “vacancy”(l.54) that leads warriors to wreak destruction upon society. Consequently it was history’s mistake to celebrate warriors and Auden is implying that we shouldn’t continue to idealise them because they are bearers of havoc and do ‘not live long’ (l.67), and equally don’t allow others to live long either.

The contrast between fantasy and reality is shown in ‘The Shield of Achilles’ when Thetis, Achilles’ mother, looks into the shield:

But there on the shining metal  
...She saw by his flickering forge-light  
Quite another scene.  
(ll.27-30)

Thetis has fantasised about finding a pastoral idyll in the Shield, but what she actually discovers are scenes of horror - 'a weed-choked field' (l.52). Just as in 'Moon Landing', an occasional poem written to mark the landing of Apollo 11 in 1969, the moon itself has been idealised as an amazing, perfect place - 'worth going to see? I can well believe it' ('Moon Landing', l.21). The moon was very much something that many fantasized about visiting. But when the moon is actually seen on the television all the fantasies are shattered because it is no longer a mysterious, idyllic place - 'Worth seeing? Mneh!' ('Moon Landing', l.22) - it has become besmirched by man's presence. It is clear from Auden's poetry that he mistrusts idealistic dreams like those sought by Thetis, for example in 'Epitaph on a Tyrant', Auden criticises the ideal of perfection:

Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,  
...And when he cried the little children died on the streets.  
(*'Epitaph on a Tyrant'*, ll.1-6)

The poem is referring to a dictator whose ideas of perfection, which cause children to 'die on the streets', are another man's nightmares, thus perfection should not always be strove for.

Although like many of Auden's poems 'The Shield Of Achilles' is characteristic in certain features, it is perhaps impossible to outline a characteristic Auden poem. 'The Shield of Achilles' lacks many features that would make it characteristic. For example, poems such as 'Moon Landing' and a 'Walk After Dark' are rife with colloquial ('Mneh' - 'Moon Landing', ll.22) and *recherché* ('Lacrimae rerum' - 'A Walk After Dark', l.30) language, whereas 'The Shield of Achilles' has none, instead the language in the poem obeys the poem's principle of contrast - it alternates between classical and modern language. Therefore it's reasonable to say that there are many re-occurring themes throughout Auden's poems, but not that there are entire poems which are 'characteristic'.