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UNDERSTANDING AUDEN: THE WORKINGS OF SATIRE AND HUMOUR

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ABSTRACT

Pure humour is not usually accepted as a great work of art. The reason for this is not far to seek. As time changes, our social conventions also go through several changes. A modern man does not see any possibility of entertainment in pure humour. This happens because most of the modern poets are well known for its realistic and sensitive expressions of the despair, disgust and meaninglessness of life. The readers are habituated of it. This is the main reason of the decline of pure humour in modern age. Another reason for it is the inability of pure humour to raise serious matters. W H Auden is important in this context because he has not only produced laughter through his poetry but he communicates important messages for society. His poetry offers the readers food for thought. He has talked about contemporary problems, he has pointed out the hypocrisies and the falsehood prevailing in society but underlying all this, is a vein of humour which tends to get overlooked. Very few have noticed that this 20<sup>th</sup> century poet contains as much humour as he contains pain in himself. His messages are poignant, relevant and useful for society of 21<sup>st</sup> century because from 1920 to the present time, the taboos, conventions and social order are the same. The social order is not only the same but comes forth vigorously in a more corrupted and degraded form.

Auden tried to intermingle irony and satire. He said that poetry is a game of knowledge. Such a poet's concern may be directed to the serious matter. He may also treat it in a light hearted and entertaining way. Auden defines poetry as a "game of knowledge". The definition shows his awareness of the two aspects of poetry – the serious and the entertaining. For such a man all poetry will be to some degree a game of knowledge. Auden created humour with a particular shade of satire, irony, Sarcasm and wit; he also wrote poetry for pure fun and wrote humorous verse including clerihews and limericks.

In this study an attempt has been made to throw light on the different aspects of humour in the poetry of Auden. Sometimes he is heavy with highly philosophic ideas, unable to come out from a literary web and suddenly his imagination runs wild, breaking all barriers of accepted rules. And this is the situation when most of the light verse was written by him.

**Key Words:** Humour, satire, irony, wit, amusement, playfulness, clerihews.

Humour has been a major term in the vocabulary of comedy since the Sixteenth century. Humour is used as an essential element of comedy up to the present Twenty First century. "Comedy is a miscellaneous genre achieved by a plurality of impulses : farce, humour, satire and irony."<sup>1</sup> In the late Seventeenth century it became powerful weapon as it was used for evoking satires but it was the expression of good nature. Shadwell said in a passage that the humourists were "Intended as satyrs against Vice and Folly."<sup>2</sup> It was the duty of a comic poet to project vice and folly before the public as ugly and detestable that make people hate and despise them. The Eighteenth century transformed its nature and adopted it in politics, psychology, philosophy and art. It was in early Nineteenth century that "humour" gained a cosmic significance. The progress of humour grew strikingly. The following lines clearly affirm the superiority of humour.

Design ... Humour ... Wit,  
All three should in the Comic Muse Combine,  
But humour of the three should brightest shine.<sup>3</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, humour and satire, humour and ridicule, were synonymous or intimately related and the clarity of distinctions between wit and humour was not firmly established. Despite all contradictions, the most agreeable representations include both wit and humour in comic perceptions. Humour, which is evoked through satire, wit, irony or sarcasm is changed with a deeper meaning. It has a slower movement. According to Nicholson it is reflective laughter and is caused by the seen forms of the satirical expression, such as wit, irony, sarcasm etc.<sup>4</sup>

In the modern age "wit", "comic", "incongruity", "amusement", "absurdity", "ludicrousness", "ridicule", "mirth", "funniness" and "playfulness" are used in scholarly discussion on the topic because they share some semantic properties with the term humour. In the Twentieth century they have become important aspects of humour. Humour is a most suitable medium because it may conceal malice and allow expression of aggression without the consequence of other overt behavior.

In the poetic works of Auden, it is not possible to separate the elements of satire and irony, though they are two distinct artistic modes. He produced mixed tones of criticism and laughter. He satirised things with an aesthetic purpose. In his comic proposition, Some kind of moral consideration is involved. The sort of intermingling of criticism and laughter in Auden strengthens G. Highet's view "satire is a typical emotion which the author feels and wishes to evoke in his readers. It is a blend of amusement and contempt."<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, satirist and humourist operate upon a common milieu, and take the common stimuli. The satirist and humourist observe incongruity in thought, action and character, but they differ in their approach to the same.

Humourist and satirist frequently hunt together as ironists in pursuit of the grotesque, to the exclusion of the comic. Humour, satire, irony, pounce on it altogether as their common prey.<sup>6</sup>

At certain moments a humourist plays the part of a satirist who can shed tears at the modernization process but cannot check it, though none can mistake the subtle blend of irony and wit which are at work in the literary creations. It has to be noticed that all the satirists use a special kind of language that make their attack felt but the genuine satirists display fastidiousness as well as restraint in the use of it. According to George Meredith:

Satire is a kind of poetry, without a series of actions, invented for the purging of our mind, in which human vices ... are severely reprehended; partly dramatically, partly simply and sometimes in both kinds of speaking ... consisting in a low familiar way... in a sharp and pungent manner of speech ... by which either hatred or laughter, or indignation is moved.<sup>7</sup>

Auden's basic concept of moral and aesthetic leanings, are in fact the result of the influence of Freud and Marx. He chooses a clinical method to convey his message. His poems are not antagonistic to its own diagnoses but the comic method gives them a different coloration. In *The Dyer's Hand* Auden makes his views clear about laughter that it is both our reaction to seeing things as they are and a safety valve against our desire to remain in a magic world of art. In Freudian terms, the laughter is a release of the energy we have been using to suppress what we think we do not want to know about the way things really are with ourselves and with the world. In Bergsonian terms, it is itself a

loosening of our responses so that we may react to the world and continue to evolve. Auden goes on insisting that at the moment of comic release, we are out of time. "While we laugh, time stops and no other kind of action can be contemplated."<sup>8</sup>

Auden diagnoses modern illness in his poems as Eliot does and searches for its cure. He follows his chief mentors of early years- Freud, George Groddeck, Homer Lane, and D.H. Lawrence. The main theme of all these writers, as Auden reads them, is that modern man has lost his capacity for the instinctive life, for the natural love that alone can make human relationship satisfying.

The grounds of Auden's mature interest in an unserious poetic technique become clear in his rationale for such conscious trifling in poetry. In defense of fun he prefers a "European" conception of poetry to the American over seriousness.

American poetry has many tones..., but the easy-going tone of a man talking to a group of his poems is rare; for a "Serious" poet to write light verse is frowned on in America and if, when he is asked why he writes poetry, he replies, as any European poet would, "for fun", his audience will be shocked.<sup>9</sup>

After 1950 Auden's poetry is largely comic. Some poets have a vision of life that can be called comic and others have a comic style. Sometimes a comic style conveys no view of life worth mentioning but this is not true of Auden from his earlier stages of writing. Auden had produced stylistic comic poetry. It is mainly constituted on incongruous usage. It was 1945 that his best poems are molded in a fashion which has a very large vision of human existence. Auden's best comic poetry contains the tragic within it. But he has not given much emphasis on suffering. Auden's comic views have shown speakers talking explicitly about a comic philosophy of life.

For a work of art, style and content both are important. A speaker can tell us about his comic views of life in a voice filled with the sounds, rhythms and vocabulary of suffering, pain and despair. It is also possible that he can tell us about the pain and suffering in a style full of wit and play fullness. When a speaker starts using a style of wit and playfulness, the style itself may well over power the explicit message of the content. This is what has happened in a number of Auden's poems.

#### **His Treatment of Pure Humour**

Auden's love for pure humour reflects in his delights in writing clerihews and limericks. Mostly he has written the humorous, pseudo-bio-graphical quatrain rhymed as two couplets, with lines of uneven length more or less in the rhythm of prose. His skill is fully at work when he composes a witty and elegant statement on whatever subject he chooses. There are thirty flour clerihews in *Homage to Clio*, which can illustrate the kind of *verse de societe* that sometimes results:

When the young kant  
Was told to kiss his aunt  
He obeyed the categorical must,  
But only Just.<sup>10</sup>

John G. Blair correctly remarks on this poem.

The neatness of this little poem lies in its placing of Kant's somber philosophical principle in a relatively trivial though genuine setting of boyish embarrassment. The unexpected shortness of the last line reinforces the humorous incongruity of the abstract doctrine applied in the living situation. Beyond this genially irreverent mocking of pompous intellectualism, the poem can hardly be said to have a serious point. The poet seems to invite the reader to share in the sophisticated fun of seeing what words can do.<sup>11</sup>

Auden has written his clerihews on famous personalities. It raises a smile. Here, laughter is a sure sign of pleasure and aims to amuse the reader. The best of them are quoted here from his "Academic Graffiti" :

Soren Kierkegaard  
Tried awfully hard  
To take the Leap,  
But fill in a heap.<sup>12</sup>

*Homage to Clio* has similarities with *Another Time* in many ways. This is a large volume of poems. There is nothing which can be called new and at the same time it contains nothing that can be categorized as old. The volume is not designed on a well-knit structure. The entire volume is a hodge-podge of odds and ends. It contains limericks, clerihews, thirteen pages of prose and some poems of mixed emotions. "The Aesthetic Point of view" is a nursery rhyme limerick :

As the poets have mournfully sung,  
Death takes the innocent young,  
The rolling in money,  
The screamingly – funny,  
And those who are very well hung.<sup>13</sup>

The poem contains feminine rhymes and is apparently frivolous, hardly worthy of a "Serious" poet. Yet, the poem implicitly condemns the essential frivolity of the aesthetic point of view, which is concerned only with how interesting or striking a situation is.

In his early work, it can be noticed that he has divided his personality in half. Auden himself admits that his personality is divided in parts. Each part a different voice. These voices oppose each other because they are two different parts of Auden's temperament. These voices are labelled by Replogle as voice of the poet and the Antipoet.

Paradoxically his speakers seem more "sincere", personal, and emotional in the high comic poems where Poet and Antipoet perform with all the artifice at their command. Auden's folkish, unsophisticated, plain – speaking Poet with his small ironies, wistful observation, and mild playfulness, simply suppresses too much of the Auden temperament, as well as all his other voices.<sup>14</sup>

Replogle further suggests that Auden's Antipoet is inclined to believe that Art is a small thing. He takes delight in mocking speech, low-brow diction, slangy abuse, jokes and buffoonery. At times Auden praises art and uses the most elegant sort of diction and syntax.<sup>15</sup>

In 1930s, the Antipoet in Auden believed that Art is an escape from life. It cannot mirror the realities of life and nature. He had a doubt that Art was magic and therefore unreal. On the other hand the poet in Auden preferred Art to anything else. If one cannot keep control on Art, it moves further and further away from life. As a poet, Auden keeps himself aloof and superior and clings on to lofty poetic ideas and at the same times the Antipoet in Auden takes delight in coarse chunks of life. The Antipoet mocks, laughs and derides. These situations create contradictions and incongruities in a poem. It is Auden's achievement that his single speakers have whole complex range of different inclinations within themselves. In *About the House* all the poems of consequence are comic; their speakers have a blend of Auden's Poetic and Antipoetic voices. This volume shows that Auden has accepted his role as a comic poet. The comic poems are both more humorous and better than those in *Homage*. "The Geography of the House" from his *About the House* blends some familiar observations about the psychological role of excretion with some ingenious double meanings that lend the poem a comic lightness of touch.

#### **Auden's Use of Satire and Light Verse**

Auden has occupied with the technique of creating satirical humour. It is the device of satirical humour which jolts his audience into a real consideration of themselves and their world. Conventionally, satire is the holding up of human vices to ridicule or attack. One must analyze Auden's use of satire as a strategy to convey instruction and information as well as pleasure and entertainment for doing this we must bring forth the standard against which he measures the object of attack. Auden's search for the satirical standard is based on his own particular bent of mind which demands didactic purposes.

He could express himself readily and naturally through satire more easily. The poems of this period are the most vehement in attacking things as they are Auden's early satire is of the Byronic Sort, insofar as it calls for anything, it demands a whole new world.

"Spain 1937" is a poem which makes contrast between the past and the present. While comparing the past with the present state, Auden satirically attacks the social order.

Yesterday the belief in the absolute value of Greek,

The fall of the certain upon the death of a hero;  
 Yesterday the prayer to the sunset,  
 And the adoration of mad men. But today the struggle.<sup>16</sup>

The poem echoes those the feeling of Auden after his visit to Spain during the civil war. It echoed the sentiment of the people of the decade. Auden was aware that liberal humanism and its allied life style and philosophy came to be threatened since the First World War. If literature and art were not to retire from life, if literature and art were not to retire from life, if liberal humanism was to survive, this was the hour of the struggle:

The Stars are dead, the animals will not look:  
 We are left alone with our day, and the  
 Time is short and  
 History to the defeated  
 May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.<sup>17</sup>

There are poems of a later date, collected in *Another Time*, belonging to the genial category of "light verse" that did not survive that volume. Auden in personal conversation was extremely witty and entertaining. His mind is notable for range and vivacity and he has a natural talent for ballad like poetry treating with airy and flippant satire, subjects as emotionally delicate. His poetry at times seems to be adapted to the style of fun making. His frequent reliance on American slang may limit some of his more recent poems to his non-American readers, just as the English school boy slang in his poems of the non-British readers. Still, the moral seriousness of his poetry expressed through deft and witty verbal play can be apprehended easily by any urban readers. Auden never succeeded in reaching to the wide audience as he hoped he would. He made direct appeal to a large audience in 1936, he was trying to attract the attention of readers and remarked:

Personally the kind of poetry I should like to write but can't is the thoughts of a wise man, in the speech of the common people.<sup>18</sup>

The treatment of his subjects was not suited to the presentation in a popular mode, especially after 1940. He decided to follow the principle that poetry is not propaganda. He continued to work under the virtue of low-brow art. He made his attempts in writing popular light verse and till his later poetry we found his inclination to write with unserious poetic technique. A glance at a few representative poems is sufficient to reveal the genesis of the technique that appears in some measure in nearly all of his poems. Auden tried out to write best light verse form. His range is very wide, from madrigal and the "blues" to the limericks and clerihevs.

.It is true that Auden has been delighted in handling of intensely serious subjects with amusing uses of poetic incongruity. However, his aim is not often simply reductive. Auden's position as he has extended in throughout his poetry that he wanted to project a serious insistence on the possibility of being serious in poetry.

At his mature stage of poetic career, Auden has insisted himself on using unserious comic technique for serious subjects. The content is no doubt serious but it is made possible by him to convey it through a style which suits for a comic purpose. This is of course of paradoxical situation and it is evidently the result of Auden's mature conception of man. It is clear that by 1940 he was convinced that direct sincerity is a pretense which can only lead to self-deception and false hood.

Auden's stylistic pattern always keeps on changing. He combines words and phrases very naturally and his word – technique contributes largely to create humour. After 1935 there gradually emerges in Auden's poetry an inclination to use words and images in an "unserious" way, regardless of how one might categorize the style of any individual poem. In serious themes and subjects, Auden's mature poems must often give the flavor of comic verse. The witty sallies and incongruities may appear at any moment while reading these poems. "Dame Kind" exhibited the unserious technique in pure form:

Steatopygous, sow– dugged  
 and owl – headed,<sup>19</sup>

The poem is richly comic in its choices of words. It has a conversational flow. The subject is serious which is about man's unfortunate subject to the natural drives within him. The technique is not serious.

Unexpected words like "steatopygous," "Carnivore", and "Sow – dugged," are chosen by Auden which recapitulates the unique composition of English art of Greek, Latin and Anglo-saxon roots.

He is a master of the verse forms of the past and of pastiche of ancient love poets or satirists.<sup>72</sup> Of all the twentieth century poets, he would probably feel most at home in the age of Dryden, the age of informed, satiric, gossipy verse. Though for him satire is convenient but in the concluding portion of "Notes on the comic" Auden argues that in twentieth century satire is not a proper medium to express an author's feelings in a powerful way because a satirist and his readers cannot share same views. Readers are having different ideas for a general pattern of behavior and a satirist might be having a difference in his mode of thinking on this matter. In public life the evils and sufferings are so serious that satire seems trivial and the attacks of a satirist are not felt severely by readers. Auden is of view that satire is a kind of comedy though it has difference with comedy.

Comedy, in Auden's understanding of it, would persuade (its readers) to accept the contradictions with good humour as facts of life against which it is useless to rebel.<sup>20</sup>

He took risk to move forward towards the heights and depths in the 20's and 30's and often fell headlong from the one into the other. Then for sometimes he became cautious, adopted safe English poetic styles and seldom ventured far from the middle plains. But he did not belong to that temperament and soon he found himself attached to both the extremes and tried to explore the peaks and the pits.

On these expeditions, he learned to speak all sorts of high and low languages and in the end made the greatest discovery of his career how to speak all of them at once and to make out of their incongruous usage levels a high act that in the very nature of its language carried a profound comic vision of life.<sup>21</sup>

In modern period, there is no poet who has ever touched such wide range of poetic technique or made experiment with words and images to communicate the desired effect.

In the beginning, Auden was not instinctively drawn to an unserious technique. His early work suggest that he took himself as a more serious poet starting about 1935, however, he began the experiments in light verse which proved to be the testing ground for his mature technique. By 1940 he had written many of his songs had tried out music hall satire in his plays, and had worked thoroughly in the popular vein. We might fruitfully digress to consider the seeds of his mature technique as they grew during his most concentrated cultivation of the field of light verse. The appeal for light verse for Auden goes beyond personal pleasure. In the perspective of cultural history he finds that lightness in poetry reflects an intimate relation between poet and his audience. The modern poet who inherits no sense of community with his readers finds himself in a paradoxical situation. His aloofness from society allows him to observe its faults; yet that same isolation makes communication of his insights proportionately more difficult. Auden has made a new pattern he has used lightness as a tool for making the audience more nearer to poets has come out in an expression- 'the principle of poetic unexpectedness'. In the late 1930s lightness means for reacting a large audience. It has also served indirectly to mature his unserious poetic technique. It sanctioned verse forms in which colloquial diction and witty rimes were appropriate. It provided a vehicle for treating serious subjects in an ironically manner.

His manner also varies appropriately with the genre in which he is working whether it is a song, a verse epistle, or an epitaph. He has a habitual way of joining words and phrases, and this may be seen in a broad range of his poems. After 1935, there gradually emerges in Auden's poetry an inclination to use words and images in a non-serious way. However serious their subject or theme, Auden's mature poems often have the flavor of comic verse in which his witty incongruity takes us by surprise.

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