

Treatment of Classical Myths by the Modernist Poets: W. H. Auden's *The Shield of Achilles*

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[Abstract: The pivotal figures of paleo-modernism in English poetry have consistently expressed a profound fervor for the classical mythic world- a world that is deeply real and vivid to them. The appeal of mythic world to these poets is profound and they have sought poetic inspiration from here. Naturally, the subject of myths is predominantly present in the poetry of the modernists. The aim of this research is to show W. H. Auden's treatment of classical myths in "The Shield of Achilles" in relation to other modernist poems. Bearing it in mind, we have focused on the mythic characters especially Thetis, her warrior son Achilles and the master blacksmith Hephaestus, and their role and function attributed by Auden in the context of the 20th century. This inquisitive study will show the multidimensional functions of Auden's exploitation of Greek myths to exhibit several of modern themes/issues- the sense of foiled expectations, the dispassionate side of modern art, the connection (or tension) between past and present, the dire need of a spiritual and moral life for modernists.]

Myths and fantasies are dearest to the poets, especially to the ones of the school of modernism. T. S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden are no exception to it.

The modernists have, among other things, lost the sense of possession. They have lost all meanings in life. Futility, emptiness and nothingness can best describe their poetical world. They have been uprooted from their culture and tradition. But, life, if it is to be lived, can never rest on 'nothing'. Really, culture and tradition make human life worth living and myth is one of the dominant manifestations of culture. In this writing we will attempt to examine how the modernist poet W. H. Auden exploits Greek myths to his purpose of delineating a modern world, and to do so we have chosen his one of the most anthologized poems "**The Shield of Achilles.**"

In "**The Shield of Achilles**" we encounter two worlds: the classical world and the modern world. Thetis, the goddess mother of Achilles, Hephaestus and Achilles represent the classical world. The new shield made by the god Hephaestus symbolizes a modern world that is afflicted with war, violence and dangerous crimes.

Though Thetis is a mythic figure belonging to the Greek mythology, Auden exploits her for his own poetic purpose of delineating a fractured modern world. In the original mythology in Homer's *The Iliad*, Thetis is not found to be lamenting for those who would die in the Trojan War. She is found to be much worried about her son's safety and his premature death- a death that is doomed by God, but here she seems to be worried about the safety of mankind. Auden has transformed Thetis into a different figure that stands for the modern conscience raising its voice against all war and blood shedding. Here

Thetis has become the spokeswoman for the poet himself. Her position against the war gives overtone for Auden's strong stance against all the violence on humanity.

The poem is built on a striking contrast between a mythic world, admirable and appealing and a modern world, repulsive and abhorrent. If Auden described a modern world straightforwardly in exclusion of a mythic world, the picture of that world would not seem that much realistic and effective as it *is* now. Auden, however, has depicted the modern world on the backdrop of a classical world.

In the original shield that we find in Homer's *Iliad* there are scenes of a world that is wonderful and magnificent, a world- that leaves us stunned with all its cultural patterns. The shield portrays a mighty Greek civilization that is based on industry, mutual love, success, happiness and ethical concerns. *Simple pleasure* (my emphasis) is the term that describes that golden world. This Homeric world finds its fantastic outlet in John Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" portraying a world of idyllic beauty, country dance and provincial song, and the rites and rituals. But, while Keats uses the mythic world to show an everlasting contrast between life and art, Auden's use of that world as a backdrop of the modern world even renders the latter more precarious and threatening to the individual human beings. But both poets share one common aspect: they appreciate the ancient classical world.

In Auden's version of the shield made by Hephaestus, the mighty Greek world is hopelessly absent being replaced by a reverse of that world- a world that is stripped of all the magnificence and grandeur.

Throughout the poem we do not see Hephaestus respond verbally. His long-enduring silence draws our attention pointing to his lack of interest in making such a shield. Maybe, he himself is pessimistic about the future of the world.

Auden's use of the imagery is also important that contributes to making a detachment between the two worlds. Some instances of Auden's images for the modern world are: 'An artificial wilderness', 'a sky like lead', 'a weed-choked field'. The opening two lines of the second stanza illustrate the desert-like universe, frightening and terrible:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood, (Line 9-10)

The use of mythological personae is central in Auden's poem. Auden, the modernist poet and a pivotal figure of "Auden Generation", exploits the mythic figures to serve his own purpose of depicting a debased modern world. Certainly, Auden's portrait of these characters differs from that of Homer's and Virgil's. In Homer's *Iliad*, Thetis is a loving mother who is much more concerned about her son's safety and protection though her son is doomed to die in his reentering into the Trojan War. She knows very well that her warrior son can, in no way, be protected by the best quality armor produced by Hephaestus. She does not seem to bother for the sufferings of the humanity; and that renders her a very ordinary mother. But Auden in "**The Shield of Achilles**" quite humanizes her character. The modern Thetis (in contrast to her counterpart in Homer)

extends her love to the wretched and the victimized of the war. In all the four short-line-stanzas, Thetis expects a peaceful and idyllic world only to be disillusioned and frustrated not to find that world. For instance, in the opening stanza, her expectations are the inscription of the scenes of 'vine and olive trees', 'well-governed cities' and 'ships upon untamed seas'. To her shock and horror, she encounters an antithesis to those scenes:

An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead. (Line 7-8)

This kind of thwarted expectation finds an expression in W. B. Yeats's "**The Second Coming**" in which the Christians' expectation of the resurrection of a Christ in modern times is only returned with the birth of a dangerous monster 'slouching its slow thighs' to engulf the humanity. However, Yeats's use of the biblical **myth** intensifies the human condition much more terribly than Auden's use of the Greek myths does.

Thetis, in this respect, embodies the spirit that we see in the members of the 'Auden Generation'- a generation that emerged in the 1930s and gave voice to the ethical and spiritual issues of the times in their writings. Auden's poetry at this point of time had deeply moral and ethical tone. He was seriously concerned with the political and social conditions of the contemporary times. That is why, a number of poems of this times (written around 1940s and 1950s) are labeled as anti-war poems; likewise, Auden got the title 'anti-war poet'. In "**The Shield of Achilles**", Thetis's worry about the bleak and desolate future of the world reflects Auden's vision of the times and its politics. Her concerns are wholly ethical and moral as is asserted by Paul Hendon in *The Poetry of W. H. Auden*:

"Her mind does not go beyond the dichotomy of the pretty and the ugly; she must be shocked into moral awareness. Her demands are simple and absolute." (P. 140)

So Thetis in the poem might function as a mouthpiece of the poet himself. The poet criticizes the modern world through the use of Thetis's figure. However, to see Thetis from one point of view will be a mere simplification of a multidimensional character. In the last stanza, Thetis is horrified to see the accomplished shield:

Thetis of the shining breast
Cried out in dismay
At what god had wrought
To please her son... (Line 62-65)

Thetis's expectations are paradoxical and self-contradictory: she has come to the master blacksmith Hephaestus to make a shield (*to be used in the war*) for her son's protection; at the same time she expects *scenes of peace and happiness* to be engraved on the shield. Another important point to note is: Other than anybody else Thetis has the very knowledge of her son's death ordained by the god; still she urges the god of smiths to make armor for him. This makes the nymph goddess humane and ordinary as mother. Even Auden does not dare alter this universal characteristic of a mother as it may harm the portrait of a true and loving mother rendering it unrealistic.

The popular reading of the poem assures us that Auden's ethical issues, especially his concern for humanity, occupy the prime place. Even in the midst of relishing at myths and rituals, he never forgets the cry of humanity. As Edward Mendelson puts the issue in his "The European Auden":

"As Auden withdrew into the timeless world of ritual and myth, his ethical and political vision was undimmed: while celebrating rituals, he remembers that 'some are abominable', that 'the Crucified has no wish for 'butchery to appease Him.'"

However, Auden's use of myths in the poem gives him amazing scope to define the various roles of artist, their work, and of the audience in the changed context of the twentieth century. Here Thetis stands for a demanding audience with her expectations to see an ideal world to be inscribed on the shield, while Hephaestus plays the role of a dispassionate artist who has little concerns for the fractured modern world. At the same time, the artist is- it seems -doomed to portray the real world to the utter shock and puzzlement of their audience (Thetis). And the shield functions as a timeless work of art. Both Thetis (as audience) and Hephaestus (as artist) are people who can not save the world from devastation. In Mendelson's words this inaction and apathy become clearer: ".....the poem is a deeply unflattering portrait of the reader as the passive, observing Thetis, and of the poet as the indifferent craftsman Hephaestus, each allowing the worst to happen by their failure to protest against it in first-person-speech."

Another aspect linked with the poet's treatment of myth is the adding of the sense of inevitability-what is to happen, will happen; none or nothing can prevent it from happening. Maybe, Auden has drawn upon Greek concept of fatalism. In the characterization of the dramatis personae, we have the manifestation of this theme. So Achilles cannot help fighting, nor can he escape the predestination ordained by God; likewise, his mother cannot but appeal to Hephaestus to make her son a set of armour. At the same time, it so happens that despite her feelings of protest against the probable violence and her feelings of compassion for the distressed and the victimized, she cannot, in practical sense, help those ones. Here her passivity is remarkable and draws our attention. She is full of sympathy and pity for the ones afflicted in the war. So why does not she leap to an action to save them? The answer is, to me, that she *can not*, (my emphasis) really. In the whole poem, we see her lamenting for and being anxious about the bleak times. This is sufficient evidence that perhaps, she herself is doomed to inaction. The same can be applied to Hephaestus who is doomed to making shield for Achilles, no matter whether he (Hephaestus) wants or not. This characteristic apathy and passivity can also be traced in other modernist poets, especially in Yeats and Eliot. In T. S. Eliot's "Wasteland" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", the individual characters are bewildered and hapless in a changed social and cultural milieu. Eliot's protagonist, Prufrock is in a dire need of a love relationship. In stead of dynamic actions we see him hesitate, pause, and linger, eventually never reaching up to the proposal to a lady. His romantic as well as erotic journey ends up with his fantasizing of the mermaids (mythic creatures), singing and dancing in the bottom of the ocean. Many of W.B. Yeats's poems deal with myths and the sense of fatalism is also present here; for example, his "The Second Coming" depicts a world- though horrifying is still bound to

come. By using his concept of history, Yeats makes prediction about the birth of a monster and the advent of a dark era. In the created myth, Yeats attributes an aura of doom: nothing can stand in the way of the monster. So one thing is clear: in handling myths and legends, the modernist poets create a milieu of doom and predestination.

The sense of spirituality is also embedded in the treatment of myths. Thetis's laments are not for a physiologically affected world only; she is also worried about the loss of spirituality from the contemporary world. She fears that a spiritual world is going to be sunk with the advent of the 20th century, a century of grim and bloody events. In Paul Hendon's words:

"The scene Thetis describes is one in which by long literary and iconographic tradition aesthetic qualities signify spiritual ones. Thetis wants transcendent play, human activities elevated to a sublime spirituality." (P. 141)

This is a characteristic fear of the modernists. The graphic description of the monster in Yeats's "The Second Coming" gives it a look of mythic creature sphinx. But this monster is stripped of all grace and glamour, and is reduced to the level of stark and crude physicality- a physicality that is both abominable and horrifying. To note furthermore, this monster comes out as a *Spiritus Mundi* (a spirit of the earth), it is an *earthly* (my emphasis) spirit. The scene as described by Auden in the following lucid language is also a fine example of modernist **Waste Land** lacking any aspect of spirituality:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down, (Line 9-11)

The contrast between the physical and the spiritual is also at the centre in the treatment of myths. Plainly speaking, the mythic world manifests the spiritual and the modern world manifests the physical. Beset with all troubles and traumas, the modern man seeks a shelter in the classical mythic world, a consolation that he is in dire need of. Modern men are found to be striving for meaning in a meaningless and absurd world.

In fine, Auden's treatment of myths serves a good number of functions. "**The Shield of Achilles**" has displayed multiple thematic issues of modernism through the effective treatment of myths. It has eventually become a classic example of 'ekphrasis' poem in modernism.

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