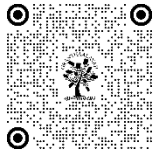


# AUDEN'S CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY: TECHNOLOGY, ALIENATION AND SOCIAL DISCONNECTION

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## ABSTRACT

W.H. Auden, one of the most influential poets of the 20th century, frequently addressed the complexities of modernity in his works. His poetry reveals a profound critique of how technological advancement, alienation, and social disconnection have shaped human experience. Auden's writings often explore the tension between technological progress and the loss of personal intimacy and community. In poems like *The Shield of Achilles* and *September 1, 1939*, Auden presents a world where mechanical efficiency and scientific achievements come at the cost of moral decay and emotional isolation. He critiques the dehumanizing aspects of modernity, highlighting how the pursuit of technological innovation leads to a sense of estrangement from nature, tradition, and interpersonal relationships. This article examines how Auden's treatment of modernity serves as a commentary on the ethical and social implications of technology, and how his poetry urges readers to reconsider the values that guide contemporary life.

**Keywords:** W.H. Auden, Modernity, Alienation, Technology, Social Disconnection, Poetry

## 1. INTRODUCTION

W.H. Auden, one of the most significant poets of the 20th century, stands out for his profound and insightful engagement with the theme of modernity. Throughout his vast body of work, Auden consistently explored the implications of modern technological advancements, societal shifts, and the alienation that often accompanies them. His poetry offers a reflective and sometimes melancholic commentary on the complexities of modern life, particularly focusing on how technological progress, social disconnection, and alienation have shaped the human experience in the 20th century. His works, from *The Shield of Achilles* to *September 1, 1939*, serve as an exploration of the darker side of modern progress, a critique that highlights the dehumanizing aspects of a world driven by efficiency, mechanization, and the loss of personal intimacy.

Modernity, in a broad sense, refers to the societal changes brought about by industrialization, technological advancement, and the transformation of traditional institutions in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is characterized by the rapid development of science and technology, the rise of capitalism, urbanization, and the decline of traditional religious

and moral structures. In literature, modernity often appears as a theme that reflects both the exhilaration and disillusionment that come with living in a rapidly changing world.

Auden's poetry is deeply embedded in the context of modernity. Living through the interwar period, the rise of fascism, World War II, and the early Cold War years, Auden witnessed firsthand the upheavals that marked the 20th century. His experiences shaped his perspective on the alienating effects of modern life, leading him to reflect on how technology, politics, and social changes have altered human relationships and communities. Rather than celebrating technological progress and modern conveniences, Auden's works often critique the moral and ethical cost of these advancements, revealing a deep concern for the erosion of human connection and intimacy in a world dominated by machines and impersonal forces.

### **1.1. TECHNOLOGY AND THE DEHUMANIZATION OF SOCIETY IN AUDEN'S POETRY**

W.H. Auden's poetry often grapples with the theme of technology and its dehumanizing effects on society. Living through periods of rapid technological advancement, industrialization, and two World Wars, Auden witnessed the transformation of the modern world. His poetry reflects a deep ambivalence toward these changes, as he recognized the material benefits of technological progress but also lamented its impact on human relationships, morality, and individuality. Auden's critique of the dehumanizing effects of technology is particularly evident in poems such as *The Shield of Achilles* and *September 1, 1939*. In these works, Auden examines how modern society, driven by technological and industrial efficiency, often sacrifices humanity, morality, and emotional connection in the pursuit of power, control, and progress.

### **1.2. THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES: A VISION OF MECHANIZED REALITY**

One of the clearest examples of Auden's critique of technology and dehumanization can be found in *The Shield of Achilles*. This poem, written during the Cold War era, contrasts the classical, heroic vision of the ancient world with the bleak, mechanized reality of modern life. The shield, traditionally a symbol of individual heroism and craftsmanship, becomes a canvas for a dystopian depiction of the modern world, shaped by technological progress but devoid of human warmth and moral integrity.

The poem opens with the goddess Thetis expecting to see heroic and beautiful images on the shield of her son Achilles, a legendary warrior. Instead, she is confronted with a desolate and impersonal scene:

She looked over his shoulder  
For vines and olive trees,  
Marble well-governed cities  
And ships upon untamed seas,

This expectation of pastoral and heroic imagery, representing a world connected to nature and human achievement, is shattered by the stark reality that Auden presents:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,  
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,  
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,  
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood  
An unintelligible multitude,  
A million eyes, a million boots in line,  
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

The world depicted on the shield is one of totalitarian control, industrial uniformity, and dehumanization. The "plain without a feature" suggests a barren, industrial landscape devoid of natural beauty or individuality. The "unintelligible multitude" is a mass of people reduced to faceless, robotic entities, waiting for instructions in a world where individual thought and emotion have been suppressed. The "million eyes" and "million boots" evoke imagery of militarized regimentation, where people are mere cogs in the machinery of war and industrial society, stripped of personal identity and agency.

In this poem, technology is not celebrated as a tool for human advancement but rather critiqued as a force that depersonalizes individuals and renders them subservient to a larger, mechanized system. The loss of nature, personal freedom, and community is central to Auden's depiction of modernity's dehumanizing effects.

## 2. TECHNOLOGICAL EFFICIENCY VS. HUMAN MORALITY

Auden's vision of technology in *The Shield of Achilles* also explores how the pursuit of efficiency in the modern world comes at the expense of moral and ethical considerations. The dehumanized figures on the shield represent a society where human values have been sacrificed for technological control and military power. This reflects Auden's concern that, in the modern world, technological advancement often leads to the erosion of moral responsibility.

In the poem, the cold, mechanized landscape on the shield contrasts sharply with the emotional and moral complexity of the ancient world that Thetis had hoped to see. The shield's depiction of "barbed wire" and "gangs" suggests a world dominated by totalitarian regimes, where technology is used not to enhance human life but to oppress and control. The machinery of war, symbolized by the dehumanized soldiers, strips individuals of their capacity for empathy, moral reflection, and personal connection.

This critique of technological efficiency is further emphasized by Auden's use of classical imagery. By invoking the myth of Achilles, a symbol of individual heroism and personal moral struggle, Auden highlights the vast moral gulf between the ancient world and the modern, technological age. Achilles' shield, which in Homer's *Iliad* was adorned with scenes of human life, nature, and community, is here replaced with a lifeless, mechanical vision of society, reflecting how technology has undermined the moral fabric of human life.

**September 1, 1939:** The Alienation of Modern Life: Auden's critique of technology and its dehumanizing effects extends beyond war and totalitarianism to the broader alienation experienced in modern life. In September 1, 1939, Auden reflects on the impending outbreak of World War II and the moral decay of society in the face of technological and political power. The poem opens with a scene of urban alienation:

I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-Second Street  
Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low dishonest decade:

The setting of the poem in a crowded bar suggests the isolation and disconnection experienced by individuals in modern urban environments. Despite being surrounded by people, the speaker feels "uncertain and afraid," reflecting the emotional and social alienation that accompanies technological and industrial progress. The modern city, a product of industrialization, is portrayed as a place of moral confusion and disillusionment, where people are disconnected from one another and from any sense of larger purpose.

Throughout the poem, Auden critiques the modern world's reliance on technology and political systems to solve human problems, noting how these forces often lead to greater alienation and moral decline. He laments the rise of totalitarian regimes, which use technology for control and destruction rather than the betterment of human life. The poem's reflection on the "low dishonest decade" speaks to the failure of modern institutions, including technological and industrial advancements, to provide a moral compass for society.

Auden's concern with the dehumanizing effects of technology is also evident in his exploration of how modern life, driven by technological efficiency, undermines personal relationships and emotional connections. The speaker's sense of isolation in September 1, 1939 reflects the broader alienation experienced in a world where people are increasingly defined by their roles in technological and industrial systems, rather than by their personal identities and relationships. The poem suggests that, in the pursuit of technological progress, modern society has lost its sense of humanity and emotional connection.

## 3. THE LOSS OF NATURE AND THE MACHINE AGE

Both *The Shield of Achilles* and *September 1, 1939* reflect Auden's concern with how technology has led to the loss of a deeper connection with nature, further contributing to the dehumanization of society. In *The Shield of Achilles*, the

barren landscape on the shield symbolizes the destruction of nature in the modern, industrialized world. The absence of "vines and olive trees" suggests a world where natural beauty and the harmony between humanity and nature have been replaced by a cold, mechanical reality.

Similarly, in September 1, 1939, Auden's portrayal of the modern city reflects the alienation that comes with urbanization and industrialization. The city, a product of technological advancement, is depicted as a place of moral and emotional disconnection, where people are separated from the natural world and from one another. Auden's critique of modernity is rooted in his belief that the technological and industrial systems that dominate modern life have severed humanity's connection to the natural world, contributing to a broader sense of alienation and dehumanization.

In both *The Shield of Achilles* and *September 1, 1939*, W.H. Auden presents a powerful critique of the dehumanizing effects of technology and industrialization on modern society. His poetry reflects a deep concern with how technological progress, while providing material benefits, often leads to the erosion of human relationships, moral values, and emotional connection. By contrasting the classical, heroic vision of the past with the mechanized, impersonal reality of the modern world, Auden highlights the moral and emotional costs of living in a society driven by technological efficiency and control. His work serves as a poignant reminder of the need to balance technological progress with a deeper concern for humanity, community, and the natural world.

### 3.1. ALIENATION AND THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY IN AUDEN'S CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

A significant aspect of W.H. Auden's critique of modernity is the theme of alienation, which he links to the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and political upheaval. As society became increasingly mechanized and disconnected from traditional forms of community, individuals experienced profound feelings of isolation—both from nature and from one another. In his poetry, Auden often explores this sense of social and emotional detachment, portraying characters who feel estranged from their surroundings and alienated from the people around them.

In his poem *September 1, 1939*, Auden vividly captures this pervasive alienation against the backdrop of a world on the verge of war. Written on the eve of World War II, the poem conveys a sense of moral confusion and disconnection in a society that has lost its ethical bearings. The opening lines, "I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street / Uncertain and afraid," immediately establish a mood of isolation and anxiety, reflecting both personal unease and the larger uncertainties of a world heading into conflict.

The setting of a crowded bar, where the speaker is surrounded by people yet feels no genuine connection, serves as a powerful metaphor for the alienation that Auden saw as a defining characteristic of modern life. Despite being physically close to others, the speaker remains emotionally and psychologically distant, with each individual trapped in their own fears and insecurities. This sense of disconnection mirrors the broader alienation that Auden perceived in modern society, where the advances of technology, urban living, and political turmoil had undermined the bonds of community and shared moral values.

Auden's portrayal of alienation in *September 1, 1939* is not only a reflection of individual isolation but also a critique of the societal structures that contribute to this condition. The poem highlights the failure of modern political and economic systems to foster genuine human connections or provide a sense of purpose. Auden critiques the rise of totalitarian regimes, which use technology and political control to oppress and isolate individuals. He also critiques democratic institutions, suggesting that they too have become ineffective in offering people a meaningful sense of community or ethical direction. In Auden's view, the alienation experienced by individuals in modern society is not merely a personal or psychological issue; it is deeply rooted in the systemic priorities of efficiency, power, and control, which come at the expense of human relationships and moral responsibility.

Auden's exploration of alienation reflects a broader critique of modernity itself. As technology advanced and cities grew larger, individuals became increasingly separated from the natural world, as well as from traditional forms of social connection. The personal relationships and communities that once provided a foundation for ethical and emotional stability were replaced by a more impersonal, fragmented existence. This disconnection is a recurring theme in Auden's poetry, as he grapples with the ways in which technological progress and political upheavals have reshaped the human experience in profound and often damaging ways.

In *September 1, 1939*, this alienation is not only a product of the impending global conflict but also a reflection of the broader disintegration of moral and social structures. The speaker's isolation in the bar symbolizes a world where individuals are no longer bound by shared values or a sense of collective purpose. Instead, they are left to navigate a

society that prioritizes power, efficiency, and control over human empathy and ethical responsibility. Auden's critique of modernity, as reflected in this poem, suggests that the alienation of individuals is a symptom of a much larger problem: a world in which technological and political systems have supplanted the moral and emotional frameworks that once connected people to one another.

By using the setting of a bar—a place typically associated with social interaction and community—Auden emphasizes the contrast between the potential for human connection and the reality of modern alienation. The bar is filled with people, yet there is no real sense of community or solidarity. Each person is isolated within their own experience, reflecting the broader fragmentation of society. This portrayal of alienation is central to Auden's critique of modernity, as he suggests that the advances of technology and the rise of political regimes have created a world where individuals are increasingly disconnected from one another, from nature, and from the ethical principles that once guided human behavior.

Auden's exploration of alienation in September 1, 1939 also reflects his broader concern with the impact of modern political and economic systems on individual identity and relationships. The poem critiques the ways in which totalitarian regimes and industrialized societies use technology and political power to control and isolate individuals. In Auden's view, these systems prioritize efficiency, productivity, and domination at the expense of human relationships and moral integrity. This critique is particularly evident in the poem's reflection on the political failures of the 1930s, a decade marked by the rise of fascism, communism, and the failure of democratic institutions to address the underlying social and moral issues of the time.

The theme of alienation in Auden's work is thus closely tied to his critique of modern political and economic structures. In September 1, 1939, he suggests that the isolation and disconnection experienced by individuals are not merely personal struggles but are rooted in the larger systems of power and control that shape modern life. The poem reflects Auden's belief that the alienation of individuals is a direct result of the dehumanizing effects of modern political and economic systems, which prioritize efficiency and control over human connection and moral responsibility.

### **3.2. SOCIAL DISCONNECTION AND THE BREAKDOWN OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN AUDEN'S POETRY**

In addition to his critique of societal alienation, W.H. Auden delves deeply into how modernity has led to the breakdown of personal relationships. His poetry frequently portrays characters who are not only estranged from society but also from one another, symbolizing the erosion of emotional intimacy and personal connection in a rapidly changing world. Auden uses personal relationships as a microcosm for his broader concerns about the effects of modern life, where technology, progress, and the relentless passage of time undermine the bonds that once held individuals together.

One of the most poignant explorations of this theme is found in Auden's poem *As I Walked Out One Evening*. In this work, Auden juxtaposes the eternal promises of romantic love with the inevitability of disconnection brought on by time and the forces of modernity. The poem begins with the speaker overhearing a lover proclaiming eternal devotion:

"I'll love you, dear, I'll love you / Till China and Africa meet / And the river jumps over the mountain / And the salmon sing in the street."

These extravagant declarations of timeless love reflect an idealized vision of romantic intimacy that transcends time and space. The lover's words seem to defy the constraints of reality, suggesting a belief that love can exist outside of the inevitable changes brought about by time.

However, this idealized vision of love is soon undercut by the voice of Time, which intervenes in the poem to remind the lover—and the reader—of the inexorable passage of time and the frailty of human promises. Time's voice is cold and unfeeling, a stark contrast to the lover's warm expressions of devotion. Time declares,

"But all the clocks in the city / Began to whirr and chime: / O let not Time deceive you, / You cannot conquer Time."

This interjection serves as a brutal reminder that no human relationship, no matter how passionate or sincere, can escape the ravages of time. The lover's promises, though heartfelt, are ultimately futile in the face of Time's relentless progression.

In this poem, Auden is not simply addressing the personal heartbreak that comes with the passage of time; he is critiquing the broader impact of modernity on personal relationships. The cold, mechanical image of "all the clocks in the city" suggests the depersonalizing effects of modern technology and industrialization. The clocks represent the rigid,



impersonal forces of modern life that impose order and efficiency at the expense of human emotion and connection. In a world governed by such forces, even the most intimate and emotional aspects of life—such as romantic love—are subject to disconnection and decay. The poem suggests that modernity, with its emphasis on technological progress and timekeeping, has alienated individuals not only from each other but from the deeper emotional bonds that sustain personal relationships.

Auden's portrayal of the lover's failed promises in *As I Walked Out One Evening* reflects his broader concern with how modern life undermines the authenticity and depth of personal relationships. The lover's declarations of eternal devotion, while sincere, are ultimately hollow in the face of Time's inexorable march. This reflects Auden's belief that modernity has created a world in which personal relationships are fragile and transient, unable to withstand the pressures of time, technology, and societal change. The impersonal forces of modern life—represented by the ticking clocks—erode the emotional bonds that once sustained personal relationships, leaving individuals isolated and disconnected from one another.

Furthermore, the poem critiques the modern idealization of love as something that can conquer all obstacles, including time and change. Auden suggests that this idealized vision of love is incompatible with the realities of modern life, where personal relationships are constantly subject to external forces that undermine their stability. The lover's promises of eternal devotion are ultimately revealed to be a form of self-deception, a refusal to acknowledge the limitations imposed by time and modernity. In a world dominated by technology, efficiency, and progress, even the most intimate and personal aspects of life are subject to alienation and disconnection.

Auden's critique of personal relationships in the modern world is closely tied to his broader concerns about the effects of modernity on human connection. In *As I Walked Out One Evening*, the breakdown of romantic love serves as a metaphor for the larger societal disconnection that Auden observed in the 20th century. The forces of time, technology, and industrialization not only alienate individuals from their communities but also erode the emotional bonds that sustain personal relationships. The poem reflects Auden's belief that modern life, with its emphasis on progress and efficiency, has created a world in which personal relationships are increasingly fragile and transient.

This sense of fragility is further emphasized by Auden's use of imagery in the poem. The image of the clocks in the city serves as a powerful symbol of the mechanical, impersonal forces that govern modern life. The clocks represent not only the passage of time but also the ways in which modern society has become increasingly regulated by technology and efficiency. In such a world, personal relationships are subject to the same forces of disconnection and fragmentation that affect society as a whole. The clocks' incessant ticking serves as a reminder that in the modern world, even the most personal and intimate aspects of life are governed by external forces beyond the control of individuals.

Auden's critique of modernity's impact on personal relationships can also be seen in his broader body of work, where he frequently explores the ways in which modern life alienates individuals from one another. In poems such as *The Shield of Achilles* and *September 1, 1939*, Auden portrays characters who are isolated and disconnected, both from their communities and from their personal relationships. These poems reflect Auden's belief that the forces of modernity—industrialization, technology, and political upheaval—have eroded the sense of community and emotional connection that once sustained human relationships.

*As I Walked Out One Evening* serves as a powerful critique of how modernity has led to the breakdown of personal relationships. Auden contrasts the lover's idealized promises of eternal devotion with the cold, impersonal voice of Time, highlighting the ways in which the forces of modern life—represented by the ticking clocks—undermine emotional intimacy and connection. The poem reflects Auden's broader concerns about the impact of modernity on personal relationships, suggesting that in a world dominated by technology, efficiency, and progress, even the most intimate aspects of life are subject to alienation and disconnection. Through his portrayal of the breakdown of romantic love, Auden offers a poignant commentary on the fragility of human relationships in the modern world, where external forces constantly threaten to erode the bonds that hold individuals together.

### 3.3. AUDEN'S MORAL AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

Throughout his critique of modernity, Auden's work is deeply concerned with the moral and ethical implications of the changes brought about by technological and social progress. He frequently reflects on how the pursuit of efficiency and control, both in politics and in personal life, leads to a loss of moral direction and a breakdown of human values. In *The Shield of Achilles*, for example, Auden contrasts the impersonal, mechanized vision of the modern world with the

heroic, morally grounded world of the past. The poem suggests that in the pursuit of technological and military superiority, modern society has lost its connection to the ethical and spiritual values that once guided human behavior.

Similarly, in September 1, 1939, Auden critiques the moral failure of both individuals and political systems in the face of rising fascism and the outbreak of war. The poem reflects a deep sense of disillusionment with the modern world, where technological progress and political power have failed to bring about a just and ethical society.

In conclusion, Auden's critique of modernity is a multifaceted exploration of the alienation, social disconnection, and moral decay that he saw as inherent in the modern world. His poetry serves as a powerful reminder of the costs of technological and social progress, urging readers to reconsider the values that guide their lives and relationships in an increasingly impersonal and mechanized world. Through his work, Auden challenges us to reflect on the ways in which modernity has reshaped our connections to one another, to nature, and to the deeper ethical principles that sustain a meaningful human existence.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Thus we can say W.H. Auden's poetry offers a profound critique of modernity, particularly in how it alienates individuals both from society and from one another. Through works like *As I Walked Out One Evening*, Auden explores the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, technology, and the relentless passage of time. His portrayal of the breakdown of personal relationships serves as a microcosm for the broader disconnection that pervades modern life. The lover's idealized promises of eternal devotion are shattered by the cold, impersonal voice of Time, symbolizing how modern forces erode emotional intimacy and connection.

Auden's work suggests that the relentless emphasis on technological progress, efficiency, and timekeeping in the modern world has weakened the bonds that once sustained human relationships. The mechanical imagery of ticking clocks reflects the dehumanizing effects of a world where external forces, such as technology and industrialization, dictate the rhythms of life, leaving little room for the deeper emotional and spiritual connections that define personal relationships. Moreover, Auden critiques the modern idealization of love and intimacy, revealing how such ideals are fragile in a world dominated by impersonal forces. His poetry serves as a powerful reminder that personal relationships, no matter how heartfelt, are vulnerable to the pressures of time and the alienating forces of modernity. Auden's critique of modernity is both a lament and a warning, urging readers to reflect on how the forces of progress, technology, and industrialization affect not only society at large but also the most personal and intimate aspects of human life. In a rapidly changing world, Auden's poetry calls for a deeper awareness of the forces that threaten to alienate and disconnect individuals from one another.

#### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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