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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Auden's Portrayal of the Modern Wasteland in "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts"

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| ABSTRACT

This study intends to show W.H. Auden's unique portrayal of the Modern Wasteland by using two of his famous poems, "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts". Whereas the wasteland is a center of spiritual hollowness and cultural dryness for T.S. Eliot, Auden views it as a man-made construct and a site of social, moral and psychological decay. By using a qualitative approach and detailed textual analysis, the study shows that Auden's wasteland operates in two different ways. In "The Shield of Achilles", the wasteland is shown as a landscape that is harsh, bureaucratic and militaristic, where individuals are stripped of their identities and violence is normalized by faceless authority figures. On the contrary, in "Musée des Beaux Arts", the wasteland is shown as a part and parcel of everyday life where ordinary citizens are accustomed to comfort and routine and remain indifferent to others' sufferings. The study concludes that the modern wasteland is not merely a physical place but exists in each and every modern human being's mind.

| KEYWORDS

Wasteland, Auden, Moral Decay, Human Suffering, Indifference

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### 1. Introduction

The twentieth century is a period of significant social, political and cultural changes. Among those changes, spiritual uncertainty among humans is a predominant one. Owing to skepticism among modern men, the concept of "wasteland" gains prominence among the 20<sup>th</sup> century poets.

According to Cambridge Dictionary, a wasteland is "an empty area of land, especially in or near a city that is not used to grow crops or built on or used in any way". Denotatively, a wasteland is a piece of land barren in nature. The most famous utilization of this concept is found in T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. Eliot goes beyond the denotation of "wasteland" and propounds a unique concept of "wasteland". He depicts a wasteland as an area that is spiritually and culturally hollow. In his wasteland, human beings are physically alive but spiritually dead. He chooses London as the epitome of wasteland.

Similarly, W.H. Auden, a prominent English poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century highly famous for his unique portrayal of modern human condition, borrows Eliot's concept of wasteland and takes it to another dimension. Whereas Eliot's wasteland shows spiritual and cultural decay, Auden's wasteland shows social, moral and psychological decay in modern society. Auden emphasizes moral indifference, political violence and the failure of humanity to react to

suffering with empathy. Auden shows a civilization that is devoid of moral foundation and human sensitivity (Kirsch, 2005).

Two of Auden's famous poems, namely "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts" depict Auden's own concept of wasteland effectively. In "The Shield of Achilles", Auden draws a sharp contrast between the grand expectations of classical civilization and the harsh realities of the modern world. "The Shield of Achilles" presents a world devoid of compassion, justice, and human dignity, thereby exposing the decay of moral order in the twentieth century (Fuller, 1998). The wasteland depicted in it is beset with violence, cruelty and moral disorder.

Likewise, "Musée des Beaux Arts" shows the nature of human sufferings and our society's indifference to others' sufferings. Keeping the paintings of Pieter Bruegel to the forefront, Auden depicts how ordinary people remain unaffected by others' sufferings. The poem shows that modern individuals have become emotionally blank and spiritually numb, which further deepens the sense of wasteland in contemporary life (Beach, 1971).

This study intends to examine Auden's vision and portrayal of the wasteland in these two aforementioned poems. Moreover, it will show social, moral and psychological decay among modern humans through the exploration of the concept of Auden's wasteland. Through an analysis of "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts", this study attempts to prove that Auden's wasteland goes beyond physical ruin and reveals a deep crisis of human civilization and consciousness.

### **Research Objectives**

- i) To show Auden's concept of wasteland reflected in "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts"
- ii) To show how Auden's wasteland shows social, moral and psychological decay in modern society
- iii) To show that Auden's concept of wasteland takes Eliot's concept of wasteland to another dimension

### **Research Questions**

- i) How does W. H. Auden explore the concept of wasteland in "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts"?
- ii) How do the poems show social, moral and psychological decay in modern society?
- iii) How does Auden's wasteland differ from Eliot's?

## **2. Literature Review**

The use of the concept of the "Wasteland" can be viewed as a tool to explore the spiritual, psychological and physical decay of the twentieth century. While T.S. Eliot used this concept through a lens of mythic fragmentation and theological drought in 1922, W.H. Auden converted the wasteland into a distinctly social, political, psychological and moral phenomenon. In his opinion, the wasteland is not created by God. Rather it is a man-made construction stemming from the absence of empathy, morality and humanity.

This literature review shows how researchers analyze Auden's reconstruction of the concept of wasteland in two of his famous poems "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938) and "The Shield of Achilles" (1952).

### **i) What is the "Audenesque" Wasteland?**

Scholars agree that Auden's wasteland is highly political, psychological, and moral by nature.

Edward Mendelson (1981), a leading Auden expert, shows that while other poets wrote about grand and mythic ruins, Auden wrote about the mundane and humdrum facets of modern life. His wasteland is replete with normal citizens, office workers and government officials who are just trying to pass their days and lack enthusiasm.

Monroe K. Spears (1963) argues that Auden's wasteland shows life in the "machine age". In other words, Audenesque waste land is highly mechanical by nature. Love, proper communication and caring for others have no values in this world.

**ii) "Musée des Beaux Arts": The Wasteland as an Emotionless Site**

"Musée des Beaux Arts" written before the World War-II uses a famous painting (*The Fall of Icarus*) to show a quiet but harsh truth. The truth is that terrible sufferings are always present in human life and the rest of the world just does not pay attention to them.

**How a Wasteland is Created by Indifference**

<b>A Huge Tragedy Takes Place</b>	<b>The World Goes on</b>
Icarus drowns in the sea because of falling from the sky.	The ploughman continues farming.
	The expensive ship continues its sailing.

**iii) The Ordinary Nature of Sufferings in "Musée des Beaux Arts"**

In "Musée des Beaux Arts", Icarus drowns in the sea due to falling from the sky. The shocking thing is that the farmers working there remain unaffected by this tragedy and an expensive ship sails on without paying heed to this incident.

Stan Smith (1985) writes that this poem is a proper representation of "middle-class wasteland." Human beings lead their lives following their routines, remain busy making money and try level-best to lead a comfortable life. They have no time to look at the sufferings around them.

Arthur Kirsch (2005) notes that Auden is showing in "Musée des Beaux Arts" how real life operates. Even the important or painful events occur in "dirty corners" while everyone else is busy eating or opening a window (in short, doing other things).

In this poem, the wasteland is an area where people remain unaffected by the sufferings of others. It seems that remaining unaffected by others' sufferings is chosen by them willingly.

**iv) "The Shield of Achilles": The Modern Desert-Like Situation**

If "Musée" is about people being indolent and indifferent, "The Shield of Achilles" written during the Cold War deals with something much darker in tone: how modern governments and military machines actively take emotion away from humans.

Auden rewrites a prominent scene from ancient Greek mythology where a magical shield was made for the warrior Achilles by Hephaestus. In the original Greek myth, the shield was adorned with scenes of dancing, harvests, and city life but in Auden's version, the shield shows a hopeless and menacing modern landscape.

**v) Existence of Crowds instead of Communities depicted in "The Shield of Achilles"**

Lucy McDiarmid (1984) points out that the healthy communities of the past are completely dead in this poem. Instead of a town working together, Auden shows a large and faceless "multitude" of soldiers and citizens standing in a barren field. They are just waiting for a voice who will tell them what to do on a loudspeaker.

John Fuller (1998) highlights how lifeless the environment of the wasteland is. The poem describes a world with "no blade of grass" and "no feature." It seems like a post-atomic desert and shows the minds of the people living in it as vacuums.

**vi) The Lost Generation portrayed in "The Shield of Achilles"**

At the end of the poem, a poor and ragged street kid is shown. He does not have any knowledge about art, love or sympathy because he is born in this wasteland.

According to Richard Davenport-Hines (1995), this boy highlights the victory of the modern wasteland. The victory lies in the fact that children who belong to this modern generation have completely lost their morality. Violence and cruelty are common for them as they are accustomed to observing these phenomena around them frequently.

**vii) The Decay of Civic Space in Modern Society**

Homer’s original shield in *The Iliad* depicted an entire universe replete with fresh human life—dances, weddings, harvests, and judicial assemblies. Auden replaces this lively community with a featureless and administrative emptiness.

Lucy McDiarmid (1984) shows how Auden shows the complete death of the *polis* (the self-governing civic society). McDiarmid notes that the "white flower-garlanded heifers" and "ritual pieties" anticipated by the goddess Thetis are completely replaced by an "artificial wilderness" and a "sky like lead." The traditional community is replaced by an "unintelligible multitude"—a dehumanized mass of soldiers standing in a barren field, void of individuality and waiting only for orders from a faceless loudspeaker.

John Fuller (1998) shows that the "plain without a feature, bare and brown" with "no blade of grass" serves as a physical portrayal of a society devoid of both natural grace and cultural heritage.

**viii) The Rationalization of Violence**

Auden’s critique deepens as he introduces the bureaucratic devices dominating this post-war society.

Mendelson (1999) analyzes the shocking lines where "a voice without a face" proves by statistics that some cause is just. Mendelson argues that this is Auden’s ultimate denunciation of the modern political scenario. The wasteland is run by abstract data, lifeless rhetoric and cold statistics that make human slaughter normal. The "ordinary decent folk" who watch three figures bound to posts for execution do not intervene as their morality has been completely destroyed by institutional logic.

Richard Davenport-Hines (1995) draws the readers’ attention to the "ragged urchin" who appears at the end of "The Shield of Achilles". This boy who throws stones at birds belongs to a world where "girls are raped" and "two boys knife a third". It shows the final stage of the wasteland. The final stage is the normalization of violence and atrocity. The boy has no knowledge of a world where promises are kept or where tears have deep values.

**ix) Comparison of the Two Wastelands**

Feature	"Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938)	"The Shield of Achilles" (1952)
<b>The Setting</b>	A busy and normal world (ships sailing, dogs walking, people skating)	A completely empty and barren military landscape
<b>The Human Problem</b>	<b>Indifference:</b> People remain unfazed by others’ sufferings as they are busy.	<b>Cruelty/Emptiness:</b> People have completely lost their empathy for others.
<b>Who is in Charge?</b>	Regular citizens and merchants performing their humdrum daily jobs	Faceless bureaucrats, dictators and loudspeakers
<b>Overall Mood</b>	Sad and pessimistic	Horrible and apocalyptic

To modern scholars, Auden’s vision of the wasteland is a warning. He believes that the "desert" is not a place outside of us. Rather it happens within all of us when we stop caring about other people, avoid taking part in our communities and let governments or machines dictate our morals.

Existing studies on W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts" mainly deal with themes of war, suffering and human indifference. The fact is that limited studies explore these poems through the utilization of the concept of the Audenesque Waste Land. Most scholars show Auden's Modernistic style without exploring how he sees the Waste Land differently from T. S. Eliot. Furthermore, comparative studies of these two poems as proofs of Auden's vision of the Waste Land remain insufficient. For this reason, this study intends to fill this gap by examining how both poems show moral decay, fragmented lifestyle and emotional coldness in the modern world.

### **3. Methodology**

This study follows a qualitative research approach depending on close textual analysis of W. H. Auden's poems "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts". A comparative analysis is conducted to identify how Auden's representation of wasteland is different from that of Eliot. Relevant books, journal articles and critical studies have been used as secondary sources to show Auden's vision and portrayal of the wasteland in these poems.

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

Auden's depiction of the modern wasteland in "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts" is unique. The traditional wasteland is marked by physical barrenness, whereas Auden's wasteland is moral, political, psychological and spiritual in nature. Through his portrayal of a unique wasteland, Auden shows a twentieth-century world which is marked by violence, alienation, lack of sympathy and empathy and the decay of moral values.

#### **i) The Wasteland as a Centre of Moral and Spiritual Desolation**

For Auden, the wasteland is not merely a geographical condition. Rather it is a moral and spiritual reality. In "The Shield of Achilles", the landscape on the shield is "bare and brown". This is shown in the following lines-

"A plain without a feature, bare and brown,  
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood."

This bare and brown feature highlights that the landscape is devoid of vitality, community and hope and shows a civilization that has no moral foundation and ideals. The poem implies that modern society has become spiritually sterile owing to war, political oppression and the mechanization of human life. The wasteland should not be treated merely as a physical setting. Rather it is a reflection of the loss of humanity.

Similarly, "Musée des Beaux Arts" depicts a spiritual wasteland through the indifference of society towards human sufferings. Auden uses a deliberately flat, matter-of-fact vocabulary in "Musée des Beaux Arts" to show what critics call the "banality of suffering" (Kellman, 2022). Auden shows that human beings have lost compassion and empathy to such an extent that they do not care for others' sufferings. The continuation of ordinary activities during moments of suffering symbolizes the moral destruction of modern civilization.

#### **ii) War as a Primary Source of the Modern Wasteland**

The findings reveal that "The Shield of Achilles" directly shows the association of the wasteland with war and violence. The poem replaces Homer's heroic vision of civilization with images of nameless soldiers, barbed-wire landscapes, and institutionalized atrocity. This is evident in the following lines-

Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood  
An unintelligible multitude,  
A million eyes, a million boots in line,  
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

The soldiers are expressionless and mechanical. This suggests the dehumanization of individuals within modern political systems. Auden shows warfare not as a site of heroism but as a force damaging culture, morality and human dignity.

The imagery on the shield shows the harsh historical realities of the twentieth century, particularly the devastation originated from the Second World War and the rise of totalitarian regimes. The poem implies that modern warfare has transformed civilization into a wasteland where individuals have been reduced to statistics and instruments of power. Thus, the wasteland emerges as an area of unchecked violence and political domination.

### iii) Human Indifference as a Form of Wasteland

An important finding of the study is that Auden identifies human indifference as one of the most destructive elements of the modern wasteland. In "Musée des Beaux Arts", suffering occupies a petty position in human life. In reference to Bruegel's paintings, especially the depiction of Icarus's fall, Auden shows how extraordinary suffering often goes unnoticed because ordinary life continues unhindered.

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

The ploughman, the ship, and other figures in the painting remain busy with their daily activities despite the tragic death of Icarus. This indifference symbolizes the failure of society to respond to human pain. Auden suggests that modern civilization has normalized suffering to such an extent that empathy has become rare. As a result, the wasteland is portrayed not only as a place of destruction but also as a condition of emotional and moral numbness.

### iv) Alienation and Dehumanization in Modern Society

Another important finding is Auden's portrayal of alienation as a defining characteristic of the wasteland. In "The Shield of Achilles", individuals are shown as emotionally detached. The faceless soldiers and silent crowds symbolize the loss of individuality in modern society.

The poem also portrays bureaucratic and technological systems as forces that destroy human agency. People are no longer presented as free individuals but as passive participants in structures of violence and control. This dehumanization helps significantly to develop Auden's wasteland vision by creating a society in which natural human relationship is a rare possibility.

### v) The Wasteland as a Site of Moral Crisis

The study further reveals that Auden's wasteland is basically a site of moral crisis. Both poems highlight humanity's inability to uphold moral responsibility. In "The Shield of Achilles", cruelty and oppression are normalized, while in "Musée des Beaux Arts", suffering is ignored. These conditions reflect a civilization that has forsaken its moral duties toward others.

### vi) Auden's Distinctive Vision of the Wasteland

The findings highlight that Auden's wasteland is different from Eliot's. While Eliot emphasizes spiritual barrenness, Auden focuses on social, moral and psychological decay.

As a result, Auden's wasteland has a strong ethical and political dimension. It does not merely diagnose cultural decay but is also a denunciation of human behavior and social institutions. The poems suggest that the modern world becomes a wasteland because human beings fail to practice compassion, responsibility and moral judgment.

Together, the poems show Auden's profound concern with the ethical condition of modern human condition and his belief that the greatest threat to civilization is not physical decay but the loss of empathy and morality. Actually

the waste land is simultaneously a structural nightmare of the post-WWII political machine ("The Shield of Achilles") and an internal, ethical failure of the individual ("Musée des Beaux Arts") (ResearchGate, 2024).

## 5. Conclusion

This study finds that W.H. Auden has portrayed the modern "wasteland" uniquely in his poems "The Shield of Achilles" and "Musée des Beaux Arts". While earlier poets like T.S. Eliot sees the wasteland as a place of spiritual hollowness and lost myths, Auden makes the wasteland earthly in nature. He proves that the modern wasteland is not created by God or nature. Rather it is created by humans who have lost their ability to empathize, lead a moral life and care for one another. In short, humans have lost humanity in this modern wasteland.

Auden shows this loss of humanity in two different ways:

- **The Political Machine:** In "The Shield of Achilles," the wasteland is a cruel world dominated by faceless governments and military machines. Here, people lose their individuality and become just numbers or soldiers waiting for orders from "a voice without a face". They consider violence and cruelty completely normal.
- **Everyday Indifference:** In "Musée des Beaux Arts," the wasteland is calm and domestic. It takes place in ordinary life where regular people choose to remain indifferent to the pain of others so that they can stay comfortable and follow their daily routines.

Ultimately, Auden's poems act as a serious warning for the modern world. He shows us that the truest and most dangerous "desert" is not a physical place of destruction. Rather the wasteland exists in our own minds and hearts. The indications are that we stop being empathetic, remain indifferent to human sufferings and let systems destroy our morality.

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