

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## The Shield of Achilles: A Comparative Study

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**Abstract:**

*The paper aims to analyze Shield of Achilles, an abstract from Homer's Iliad and A Shield of Achilles by W.H. Auden from the perspective of comparative study. Both texts were written in different times and present a perfect portrayal of their times, society, culture and people.*

**Keywords:** Juxtapose, warfare, myth, futile.

The paper aims to analyze W.H. Auden's *A Shield of Achilles* and Homer's abstract of Shield of Achilles in *Iliad* from Comparative analysis. An approach that aims to make contrast and comparisons between two texts from different times and different cultures.

Auden wrote this poem as a direct modern response to Homer's Shield of Achilles which has been described in detail in Chapter 18 of *Iliad*. This poem juxtaposes myth with modernity, classical vitality with hopelessness and glorious warfare with unjust wars. He presents an artificial picture of modern society and dullness that prevailed in the society, first, after industrialization and then after two World Wars. Auden was disillusioned by the futility of modern times and wrote this poem as a critique on social realities.

Auden was born in 1907 and saw two World Wars. He witnessed the change, from pleasure to pain, from serenity to anxiety and from contentment to disillusionment. These events shaped his thoughts and his themes. To understand this poem, it has two to be studied from double historical perspective. First, in context of ancient Greece, as he wrote it in response to Homer's ekphrasis of Achilles Shield and then World War II, whose post-scenario he presents.

During the Trojan War, Patroclus, borrowed Achilles' shield (as his friend, Achilles, was not going to war that day, because of an argument with Agamemnon, over a woman) to scare foes, but Hector took that shield after killing him and Thetis went to Hephaestus, blacksmith of Gods, to create a new mighty shield for Achilles. Hephaestus made a new shield for Achilles and engraved on it nine concentric circles each portraying a different picture. The first and inner most picture he crafted was of earth, sun, moon, sky and constellations. The second circle consisted of two cities; one with wedding and another at battle. Third circle consisted of picture of a field being ploughed for the third time. In fourth circle there was ongoing reaping in king's estate. Fifth circle contained a vineyard with grape pickers and in next a bull being attacked by a lion and few herdsmen trying to beat it off along with their dogs. A sheep farm was engrafted in circle seven and in circle eight a beautiful dancing floor with young men and women dancing on Keats' ephemeral music which he saw on his Grecian Urn. Last circle contained an ocean. These pictures throw a light on the contemporary Greek society and its happy people.

Thetis of Auden when looks for same pictures on the shield. She does not find any but on the contrary she finds dull images filled with tyranny. Nine concentric circles are mirrored in nine stanzas of Auden's poem. He wrote his poem in two forms of stanzas, one with shorter lines and other with longer. Four eight-lined stanzas in ballad form and rhyme scheme ABCBDEFE represented what Thetis wanted to see from ancient peaceful world, as three of them started with "She looked over his shoulder" with shorter lines and five seven-lined stanzas in rime royal form with rhyme scheme ABABBCC represented that she saw instead, a modern hallow world.

Auden published Shield of Achilles in 1952, after the backdrop of two World Wars. In his poem, he entraps the agony and fear of people, and the mother earth as the wasteland, in form of pictures in his modern shield. Hephaestus of Homer engraved pictures, and each picture represented a scene of abundance, of glory, of pious love and brotherhood but hands of Auden's Hephaestus paint quite another scene; of tension, of trauma, of horror and disdain.

In first stanza, she wanted to see gaiety, piety, bounty but what she saw was an "artificial wilderness" and "a sky like lead" that was the result of industrialization and war. War not only caused damage of life and luxuries but also to forests and happiness; nights turned starless and fields became bare and crowded streets deserted, springs changed to autumn. People who witnessed war, never fully overcame it. Virginia Woolf and many other post war writers wrote about people who suffered from depressions after war and ultimately committed suicide. Auden's barren field is contrasted highly with Homer's field that was being ploughed for third time. The abundance and bounties of past now changed to famine, the words used by Auden intensify the situation:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,  
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood  
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down

The picture he portrayed is a post-war scenario; of hunger, fear, blankness that prevailed in the country. Another terrifying picture that Auden presented was:

A million eyes, a million boots in line  
Without expression, waiting for a sign. . .  
They marched away enduring a belief  
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else to grief.

This stanza can be read with Tennyson's The Charge of Light Brigade:

Theirs not to make reply  
Theirs not to reason why  
Theirs not to do and die  
Into the valley of death  
Rode the six hundred.

These lines are also reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984, in which people were not allowed to think or reason, or do anything which they desired. Wars in modern era are fought not with glory and bravery as in ancient times, where issues were first tried to resolved in conversation, and if left unsolved then best warriors from both sides fought and either triumphed or died in dignity. Next engraving which Thetis wanted to see on the shield was of altar but on she finds there an arbitrary spot. Arbitrary spot refers to the concentration camps of the Nazis. First such camp was erected in Germany in 1933 after Hitler became the Chancellor. Another illusion we get from camp is three pale figures being punished. It is a parody of crucifixion of Jesus where sacrifice has been reduced to victimization. Anthony Hecht noted that the men who were being executed were not martyrs but victims.

Thetis again looked at the shield to see pictures of athletes and dancers but again she saw a contrasted picture in which a modern boy aimlessly wandered and lived in such a society where no one kept promises and girls were being raped, no one cared for other and murder was a common folk. This scenario is even now prevalent, morals and values which were once lost have never been regained. In last stanza, Hephaestus hobbled away and revealed the shield to Thetis, who cries out in dismay after seeing horrible imagery, where Achilles was prophesied to die. He lived a short life but lived in glorious way and died as a hero, on the other hand, modern man might live a longer life but their self respect dies in totalitarian society long before they physically die.

Shield of Achilles critiques modern society and its vices by comparing it with Achaean age. The poem is the title work of the collection of poems and this book won U.S. National Award for Poetry in 1956.

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