



## September 1, 1939

*This poem is included in the section 'Occasional Poems' of the collection Another Time. It is one of Auden's most popular poems, written in response to the outbreak of World War II.*

Wystan Hugh Auden  
*Another Time*  
(1940)

I sit in one of the **dives**  
On Fifty-Second Street  
Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
5 Of a low dishonest decade:  
Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
10 The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship<sup>1</sup> can  
**Unearth** the whole offence  
From Luther until now  
15 That has driven a culture mad,  
Find what occurred at Linz<sup>2</sup>,  
What huge **imago**<sup>3</sup> made  
A psychopathic god:  
I and the public know  
20 What all schoolchildren learn,  
Those to whom evil is done  
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides<sup>4</sup> knew  
All that a speech can say  
25 About Democracy,  
And what dictators do,  
The elderly rubbish they talk  
To an apathetic grave;  
Analysed all in his book<sup>5</sup>,  
30 The enlightenment driven away,  
The habit-forming pain,  
**Mismanagement** and grief<sup>6</sup>:  
We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air  
35 Where blind skyscrapers use  
Their full height to proclaim  
The strength of Collective Man,  
Each language pours<sup>7</sup> its **vain**  
Competitive excuse:  
40 But who can live for long  
In an euphoric dream;  
Out of the mirror they stare<sup>8</sup>,  
Imperialism's face  
And the international wrong.

45 Faces along the bar<sup>9</sup>  
Cling to their average day<sup>10</sup>:  
The lights must never go out,  
The music must always play,  
All the conventions conspire  
50 To make this fort assume  
The furniture of home;  
**Lest** we should see where we are,  
Lost in a haunted<sup>11</sup> wood,  
Children afraid of the night  
55 Who have never been happy or good.

The windiest militant trash<sup>12</sup>  
Important Persons shout  
Is not so crude as our wish:  
What mad Nijinsky<sup>13</sup> wrote  
60 About Diaghilev<sup>14</sup>  
Is true of the normal heart;  
For the error bred<sup>15</sup> in the bone  
Of each woman and each man  
**Craves** what it cannot have,  
65 Not universal love  
But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark  
Into the ethical life  
The dense commuters<sup>16</sup> come,  
70 Repeating their morning **vow**;  
'I *will* be true to the wife,  
I'll concentrate more on my work,'  
And helpless governors wake  
To resume their compulsory game:  
75 Who can release them<sup>17</sup> now,  
Who can reach the deaf,  
Who can speak for the dumb?

All I have is a voice  
To undo the folded lie<sup>18</sup>,  
80 The romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual man-in-the-street  
And the lie of Authority  
Whose buildings **grope** the sky:  
There is no such thing as the State  
85 And no one exists alone;  
Hunger allows no choice  
To the citizen or the police;  
We must love one another or die.

- 1 Accurate scholarship. Studi accurati.
- 2 Linz. Città dell'Austria in cui studiò Hitler.
- 3 imago. Immagine idealizzata.
- 4 Exiled Thucydides. L'esule Tucidide. Storico ateniese (460 ca.-404 ca. a.C.) che fu processato per tradimento e si sottrasse alla condanna con l'esilio.
- 5 his book. Si riferisce all'opera di Tucidide *La Guerra del Peloponneso*, considerata il primo esempio di grande storiografia politica. L'autore vi analizza il problema della fine di una grande potenza come quella ateniese.
- 6 grief. Dolore.
- 7 pours. Versa.
- 8 they stare. Fissano.
- 9 bar. Bancone.
- 10 Cling to their average day. Si aggrappano alla loro giornata media.
- 11 haunted. Stregato.
- 12 The windiest ... trash. Le più ampollose sciocchezze militanti.
- 13 mad Nijinsky. Václav Fomíč Nižinskij (1890-1950), ballerino e coreografo russo di origine polacca che studiò alla scuola di Diaghilev. Colpito da malattia mentale, si ritirò nel 1919. È considerato uno dei più grandi ballerini di tutti i tempi per forza atletica e potenza espressiva.
- 14 Diaghilev. Sergej Pavlovič Djačilev (1872-1929), critico e impresario teatrale russo che contribuì in modo determinante al rinnovamento del balletto.
- 15 bred. Nutrito, coltivato.
- 16 dense commuters. Ottusi pendolari.
- 17 release them. Liberarli.
- 18 To undo the folded lie. Svelare la bugia nascosta.



Defenceless under the night  
90 Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted<sup>19</sup> everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
95 May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.

19 dotted. Punteggiati.

## LITERARY COMPETENCE

### > VOCABULARY

#### 1 READ the poem and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- |   |                               |   |   |
|---|-------------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | useless .....                 | 6 | try to reach .....                        |
| 2 | promise .....                 | 7 | cheap bars .....                          |
| 3 | wishes, wants .....           | 8 | for fear that .....                       |
| 4 | bring to light .....          | 9 | incompetent or dishonest government ..... |
| 5 | surrounded and attacked ..... |   |   |

### > COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

#### 2 READ the first three stanzas of the poem again and answer the following questions.

- Stanza 1.
  - 1 Where is the poet?
  - 2 How does he feel and why?
- Stanza 2.
  - 1 What 'culture' is the poet referring to in line 15?
  - 2 Who is the 'psychopathic god' in line 18?
  - 3 What do the poet and his readers know for sure?
- Stanza 3.
  - 1 How do dictators get the power?
  - 2 What are the consequences of dictatorship?

#### 3 READ stanzas 4-6 again and explain

- the wrongs Auden denounces in stanza 4;
- the condition of man described in stanza 5;
- man's terrible mistake as it is presented in stanza 6.

#### 4 READ the last three stanzas again and discuss

- what the poet wonders about;
- what his task is;
- his attitude towards the state and authority;
- his final wish.



## COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

- 5 SAY** how the poem is organised. Is there a regular rhyme scheme?
- 6 ANALYSE** the language employed in the first stanza and say
- what the atmosphere set by 'the dives of Fifty-Second Street' is like;
  - what the 'clever hopes' of line 4 are;
  - why Auden speaks of a 'low dishonest decade';
  - what 'Waves' and 'Circulate' could refer to.
- 7 PICK** out the words connected with psychoanalysis in the second stanza. What relationship of cause and effect is the poet concerned with? What do 'I and the public' have in common?
- 8 PROVIDE** some examples of the juxtaposition of low and lofty registers in the third stanza. Why is the poet thinking of Thucydides? Where does he find the origin of the 'malaise' of his time?
- 9 FOCUS** on the fourth and fifth stanza.
- 1 Why is the air 'neutral'?
  - 2 Why are the skyscrapers 'blind'? What does their height actually proclaim?
  - 3 How does the fifth stanza reinforce the theme of the previous one?
- 10 LINES** 56-66 deal with the central theme of the poem. In his attempt to find out the origin of the new tragedy the world is going to face, Auden shifts from the political world to the private one. Where are the roots of what he calls 'error'?
- 11 CONSIDER** the figure of the poet in the last three stanzas. How have his collocation and perspective changed since the beginning of the poem? How would you define the tone of the last stanza?

## COMPETENCE: COMPARING AUTHORS

- 12 COMPLETE** the table below comparing this poem to Yeats's *Easter 1916* (→ T90).

	<i>Easter 1916</i>	<i>September 1, 1939</i>
Language		
Theme		
Tone		
Role of the poet		

## COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS BETWEEN TEXT AND CONTEXT

- 13 DISCUSS.** This poem appeared in many of the memorials that sprang up throughout New York City in response to the terrorist attack to the Twin Towers on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. It was reprinted in a variety of newspapers across the country. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky has commented how 'More often than not, the best poems about an event are written long before it happens. ... [They] anticipated, in indelible form, things that many were saying or feeling.' What part of Auden's poem can be re-read in the light of this historical event?