 ‘The Shield of Achilles’ – W.H. Auden (1952)

Resource 14

Background: Homer’s Iliad

Auden’s poem draws on an episode of Homer’s epic narrative poem The Iliad, which depicts the Trojan War between the Trojans and Greeks. In this episode, the Athenian soldier Patroclus, beloved by Achilles, is killed by the Trojans whilst wearing Achilles’ armour. Trojan prince Hector takes the armour, wearing it himself. Achilles swears to avenge Patroclus’ death by defeating Hector, despite knowing that if he rejoins the battle he will die an untimely death. Thetis, Achilles’ mother, hears of this and begs Hephaestos, the divine metalsmith, to make him a new set of armour. Hephaestos forges a breastplate, a helmet, and an extraordinary shield embossed with beautiful classical images of constellations, pastures, dancing children, and cities of men, to protect Achilles in battle.

Auden’s poem

‘The Shield of Achilles’ is divided into three sections, each with three stanzas. In the first stanza of each section the narrative depicts a woman looking over the shoulder of a man as he forges the shield – we later learn these figures are Thetis and Hephaestos, although the allusive title would indicate this to those familiar with Homer’s story. Thetis expects to see images of classical victory, power, peace, prosperity and beauty, yet in Auden’s transformed narrative Hephaestos has adorned the shield not with representations of glory, but of barren desolation, violence and brutality. The imagery is quite dystopic as Auden speculates on post-World War II devastation and what may be to come with ongoing conflict and public apathy.

Activities

1. ‘The Shield of Achilles’ was written in 1952. Consider Auden’s post-World War II, Cold War context and the modifications he has made to Homer’s story. How is the altered imagery on the shield a reflection of his context? Why would Auden choose to draw on The Iliad to tell his story? What comment is he making about the mid-twentieth century? (You may need to conduct a little more research on the story of The Iliad.)
2. Whose point of view is represented through the third person narrator of the poem? What is the effect of using this third person narrative voice?
3. Auden juxtaposes setting in the opening section, where ordered, fertile pastoral terrain and civilised cities in Stanza 1 are contrasted to a desolate and devastated landscape in Stanzas 2 and 3. How does this contrast highlight Auden’s concerns about totalitarian oppression and his society’s ignorance?
4. Analyse Auden’s language used in Stanzas 2 and 3 to characterise the ‘unintelligible multitude’. What impression do we gain of his perspective of his own society through this dystopian imagery?
5. The second section of the poem contrasts ritual and ceremony past to present. How does Auden use contrast in Stanzas 4, 5 and 6 to explore the spiritual emptiness he saw in his time?
6. The third section of the poem focuses on the individual. Powerful athletes and dancers are here juxtaposed to a ‘ragged urchin’, ‘girls’ who are ‘raped’ and ‘two boys’ who ‘knife a third’. Hephaestos ‘hobbled away’ and Thetis ‘cried out in dismay’. How do these characterisations reinforce Auden’s message as he uses the past to speculate on the present?
7. Auden’s closing image of ‘the strong / Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles/Who would not live long’ can be read as a powerful speculation by Auden on his world’s future. How might we read it in this way?
8. How has Auden used form and language to comment on his own world through a speculative narrative?