

W.h. auden's
september 1, 1939



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

W. H. Auden's September 1, 1939 appears at first to be a poem preoccupied with war; its title, being a significant date of the Polish-Nazi invasion in World War II, is a preliminary indication of a war-time theme. On the surface, the poem appears to comment on the dishonesty and manipulation of government leading to war and expresses Auden's political opinions about WWII and his skepticism of governmental authority.

The ideas Auden presents of the 'Collective Man' and 'the lie of Authority' suggests that concerning the war, he believes that the people of the world should be more truthful to one another, and that governments are to blame for the deceptions and wars in the world. The actions of governments at the time and their use of wartime propaganda to manipulate the public's perception could be a mirrored image of the way Auden believes he has been made to be judged by society.

Richard R. Bozorth claims that "Auden's poems had private meanings[...] To read with this knowledge is to see that what is true of all writing is acutely so for lesbian and gay writers - that meaning is initiated and elaborated in social settings where truth is very much a matter of what is speakable." When considering the homosexual nature of Auden's social life, a new layer can be found within the poem.

From the outset of the poem there is a theme of isolation; the speaker sits in 'one of the dives/ On Fifty-Second Street', suggesting a certain seclusion and loneliness. America was an impartial country in the Second World War and is described in the poem as the 'neutral air', reflecting its political neutrality during the war. The lonely bar Auden resides in suggests that like

the country that inhabits him, Auden feels he is too separated and alienated within society, which may be due to his conflicting sexuality.

The primary interpretation of Auden's perception of WWII allows him to express his feelings towards the intolerance of homosexuality in society as it could be suggested that Auden believes homosexuals are forced to be kept hidden from the public, the way the government deals with propaganda and censorship during the wartime. The use of light and dark duality throughout the poem could be a metaphor for Auden's attitude towards homosexuality and how it is kept in the 'dark' of society.

The 'waves of anger and fear/ Circulate over the bright/ And darkened lands of the earth' could refer to both the spreading of the war, causing anger and fear to civilians, and the anger felt by people who are unaccepted within society, left to exist within the darkened lands, unexposed to the light of acceptance. Auden insists 'the lights must never go out', in which 'the lights' could represent the acceptance and embracing of homosexuality and thus Auden seeks the light that will allow him to feel accepted within the world.

It appears Auden is communicating that humanity is not only condemned by war, but also condemned by a lack of acceptance of one another. The 'conservative dark' Auden refers to not only presents the darkness of government and its control, but also the darkness of those who cannot alter their opinions on those who are different. The idea that the poem is commenting on the inequality of homosexuals in society coincides with the primary interpretation of the poem because in both instances Auden is using

the poem to speak out against injustices and seek truth and equality either in government or society.

Auden's poem is read primarily as a critique on the dishonesty of government because of the outbreak of war, however, Auden's personal life and the language and references within the poem give evidence to a deeper meaning. By creating a poem with two levels of interpretation Auden is able to speak about two different subjects that he feels very strongly about both of which work together to urge for a more honest and tolerable world.