

Refugee blues analysis essay sample



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The poem laments about the poor conditions the narrator, a German Jew, and his wife has to go through in order to survive from Hitler's anti-semitic policy. This poem is about how everyone denied to help the refugees.

Refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, or persecution. Whereas blues means a song which laments an event that is depressing. Combined together the title talks about the state of sorrow in which a German Jew, who is now a refugee have to live. By combining these two words, the poem talks about the utter state of exile that was experienced by the German Jews during the Holocaust. The poem consists of many references to the same.

Say this city has ten million souls,

Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:

Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

In this stanza, the narrator describes the city they are currently taking refuge in. The narrator describes this city as huge, by using the phrase " ten million souls". He says that there are " souls" living in huge mansions, that is rich men live in luxurious homes, whereas, the poor men have to live in " holes", shabby houses. There is a pun intended on the word " holes", that people lived in shabby house and also under the ground, that is, in grave. The last line of the poem says the injustice the narrator has to go through. Auden has used the form of Blues to write thus poem, in which 3line stanzas are formed, the first two are descriptive, and the third is emotion, or the feeling.

It is interesting how the narrator addresses to someone dear to him throughout the poem, but for some reason does not reveal his or her

identity, we can assume that it is addressed to his wife. In the third line, the narrator tells to his wife that even though this city is home to ten million people, there is not a hole of a place for them to live. This line shows of the feeling of despair as the city refuses to provide shelter for the narrator and his wife, but is home to other ten million people. This entire stanza is written in present tense, showing that the narrator is talking about the current time and place they are taking refuge in. This stanza signifies that even if the city is home to ten million people, it doesn't provide a home as small as a hole for the narrator.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,

Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:

We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

The narrator, in this stanza, talks about the country they previously lived in, that is, Germany. This entire stanza is written in past tense, showing that the narrator is talking about the past, the time and place they previously lived in. The narrator doesn't reveal until the 8th stanza that they are German Jews. So, to make the reader believe that they really had a country, a country which didn't believe discrimination, he tells the reader that if you don't believe me, look on the map, you'll find the country. In the third line, the narrator addresses his wife saying that there may be a country which is theirs, but it is a country where they 'lived' in, they can't go there now because the Nazi soldiers will kill them, their fellow people are after their blood. Interestingly, only the last line of the stanza is in present tense, Auden brilliantly changes the tense of the stanza to depict the suffering of the narrator and other German Jews. This stanza signifies the previous and the

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present conditions of the narrator, how they lived in their country, and how now they can't go back there.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,

Every spring it blossoms anew:

Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.

The narrator then compares and contrasts the lives of an old tree which grows in the village to the old passports. The narrator says that every year, the tree sheds its leaves and withers, but it again blossoms in spring, it 'renews' every year. But, a passport can't renew, it can't blossom again. The irony which lies is that if when they want to renew their passports, but nobody is allowing them to. A tree is capable of renewing itself, but the passports can't. This verse talks about helplessness and injustice to Jews, that even trees can blossom but not passports of Jews, indeed counting them even less than the dead. Auden has compared nature to the identity of a human, a passport, rather the lifespan of a tree to that of a passport. This entire stanza is in present tense, talking about the misery of the refugees. Here, the emotion of helplessness is expressed, that without passports, they can't see that tree blossoming Again.

The consul banged the table and said,

“ If you've got no passport you're officially dead”:

But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

In this stanza, we are shown how the German embassy declines to offer any help. They are not trying to help the refugees. The narrator is told to consider themselves dead if they do not hold a new passport. The irony lies

in the fact that the consul doesn't even want to help them. This entire stanza is in present tense, showing that all these instances are what the Jews had to endure during the Holocaust. The third line of this stanza, gives the feeling of abandonment, that how, the country, the city they are living in, and the consul, refuses to recognise them even as humans. The narrator is being humiliated, declared dead on his face, and he has no where to go. The emotion of helplessness is shown here, the narrator is telling his wife that they are alive, and that they are surviving. The stanza signifies that what Germany thinks of the German Jews, they are considered dead even when they are alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;

Asked me politely to return next year:

But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day?

In this stanza, the narrator goes to a committee which helps the refugees. The committee excuses themselves for a year, and asks the narrator to return after a year. The feeling of abandonment is again expressed in this stanza. First, the embassy refused to help, and the committee excuses themselves for a year. The narrator feels hopeless, and asks his wife, where should they go today, where should they eat and sleep for a year. This stanza, shows the treatment accorded to the refugees by non-Jewish people. This stanza shows how helpless the narrator is, and how everyone declines or delays to help them. This stanza signifies that how a committee which is made for helping the refugees, doesn't help them.

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said;

“ If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread”:

He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

This stanza is about how the country they are currently living in, thinks about providing shelter to the refugees. In the meeting, the speaker of the meeting refuses to recognise the refugees. They blame the refugee for being the reason of their economic downfall. The word ‘ steal’ shows that the country thinks of the refugees as thieves. In the third line, the narrator addresses his wife that the thieves were directed towards them. This stanza again gives of the feeling of abandonment and the narrator is left profoundly helpless. This stanza signifies that what the non-Jewish people think of the Jews, and blame them for being the reason of their country’s economic downfall.

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;

It was Hitler over Europe, saying, “ They must die”:

O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

In this stanza, the weather is used to express the danger and threat narrator has to constantly go through. The word “ thunder” here means the danger or threat. This is an act of foreshadowing, thunder is an expression of danger, and how something inevitable (Holocaust) is about to happen. This stanza is an expression of utter helplessness, from one side, everyone is refusing to help them, and from the other side, their own countrymen are after their blood. In the third line, the narrator addresses to his wife saying that the “ they” is referred to them, and it is their death that Hitler wants. This stanza

signifies that how everyone was refusing to help the refugees, and how from the other side, Hitler wanted to kill them.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,

Saw a door opened and a cat let in:

But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.

In this stanza, Auden has compared and contrasted the treatment given to animals to the treatment given to the Jews by non-Jewish people. The narrator says that he saw a dog, who was taken care of and was made to wear a jacket to prevent from cold. Then he saw a door open, and a cat was let inside the door. The first two lines show that how animals were taken care of, they were allowed to be inside their country, whereas the refugees weren't. This is the stanza wherein the readers are revealed that the narrator is a German Jew. It is interesting that the narrator didn't reveal his identity, maybe to make the readers connect through the problems all refugees have to suffer from. This stanza gives of the feeling of helplessness, the narrator has accepted that nobody would help them, even if people can help the animals, nobody will help them because they are German Jews, the narrator seems to accept that death is certain, and nobody is going to help them. This stanza signifies that how animals were kept more nicely than the German Jews by the non-Jewish people.

Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay,

Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:

Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.

In this stanza, Auden again compares and contrasts the freedom of a fish to the freedom of the narrator. The narrator, standing upon a quay, looks how the fish is freely swimming in the sea, how it is swimming in the freedom, and even though that freedom is just ten feet away, it is so close yet so far. Both the fish and the narrator have limited freedom, this is shown by the words “as if”, because the fish are bound to sea. The narrator then addresses to his wife, that the “limited freedom” is ten feet away, the word “only” expresses that how little the distance is, yet so far. This stanza signifies that the refugees are so helpless, that the freedom of a fish is also seen and admired by them, they at least have sea to swim freely, the narrator doesn't have even hole of a place to feel free.

Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;

They had no politicians and sang at their ease:

They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.

In this stanza, Auden compares the freedom of birds to the freedom of the narrator, and mainly how do they attain that freedom. The narrator talks about how he saw the birds singing at ease in the woods. The word “politicians” is negatively used here, expressing that politicians are the ones who curb freedom, and intended towards Hitler who curbed the German Jews' freedom. The third line of the stanza, is not an emotion, it can be taken as the narrator's reason as to why the birds were at ease. The narrator says that human race has discrimination, politicians to curb their freedom, but the birds, they aren't human race, they have got a say in the decisions about their life. This stanza shows how helpless and hopeless they are now, and it is now set in the narrator's mind that only human race is cruel enough to

order to kill a human community. This stanza signifies the narrator's thinking towards the human race, a thinking which developed due to other humans.

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,

A thousand windows and a thousand doors:

Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

In this stanza, Auden uses the narrator's dream to show the feeling of abandonment. The narrator dreams of a thousand houses, but even in dreams, none of the houses were his. Even his own dreams have abandoned him. This stanza signifies the extent of feeling there is no where to go, nothing to stay for, and not place which can be called theirs, the narrator has lost the hope of even living, they are just surviving.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;

Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:

Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

The last stanza, is used to depict the emotion which the narrator is feeling through weather. A 'plain' is vast, which gives a person endless possibilities and opportunities, but even as the narrator was standing in a place wherein endless thoughts and possibilities can be seen, all he can see and feel is death. The 'falling snow' expresses a dull, cold and harsh atmosphere. These are what the narrator has to live with everyday, a dull life with cold treatment by people and harsh living conditions. This stanza says that how the Nazi soldiers were searching for them, to kill them, how every soldier and any German was after their blood. This stanza signifies that on a place wherein there are endless possibilities, only possibility which can be

seen is death, that ten thousand soldiers are after their blood, and it is only a matter of time before death will compose them, that as the falling snow sticks to ground, so will the bullets in their body.