

## Original Paper

# Justice and Humanity: W. H. Auden's War Writing

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### **Abstract**

*As one of the outstanding representatives of English poetry in the 20th century, W.H. Auden is famous for his profound war poems and his reflection of the context of The Times. This deeply discusses Auden's literary creation during the Spanish Civil War and the Chinese War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and analyzes how his poems reveal the cruelty of war, the complexity of human nature, and the course of history. Through a textual analysis of Auden's masterpieces Spain1937 and Journey to a War, this paper reveals how Auden reflected the far-reaching impact of war on individuals and society through literature.*

*This article synthesizes the research of domestic and foreign scholars on W.H. Auden's poetry. It deeply analyzes the commonalities between war and human nature in Auden's war poems and the impact of war on human nature, revealing the shared vulnerability of war and human nature. Through the portrayal of soldiers' images, it showcases the fear and suffering of ordinary people, expressing sympathy for those affected by war. Auden emphasizes the radiance in human nature. For example, in the In Time of War poem cycle, he depicts the images of Chinese soldiers, and in Spain 1937, his attitude of supporting the anti-fascist war is evident. He pays attention to the sacrifices in war and calls for the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind, reflecting on the cruelty of war. The section on Auden's personality display, especially the influence of his trip to China and Journey to a War on his poetic style, is reflected in the stylistic transformation of the In Time of War poem cycle. In Journey to a War, Auden's personal ideology shifted from Marxism to Christian belief, and this transformation is the result of multiple factors. In addition, Auden's unique portrayal of the Spanish Civil War demonstrates the combination of his political stance and detached attitude. Spain 1937*

*manifests the influence of his early Marxism and the transformation of his ideology and writing style toward a detached attitude.*

**Keywords**

*W.H. Auden, War poetry, Journey to a War, Spain 1937*

**1. Introduction**

W. H. Auden (Wystan Hugh Auden, 1907-1973), as an important poet in 20th-century English literature, is renowned for his profound insights into war and social turmoil. His poems not only record the brutal realities of war but also reflect the interweaving of personal experiences and the historical background of the times. In previous readings and research, many outstanding works have discussed the relationship between Auden and modernism. This thesis aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of Auden's literary creations during the Spanish Civil War and the Chinese War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, analyze how his poems reveal the cruelty of war, the complexity of human nature, and the course of history, and simultaneously explore the inspirations and influences of these works on contemporary society.

This article, divided into three main parts, aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of Auden's war writing. The significance of this article is two-fold. Firstly, it delves deeper into Auden's war literature, focusing on an in-depth analysis of the poems he created on the Chinese and Spanish battlefields. Secondly, by exploring human nature and the fate of humanity in his works, he reveals the unique value of war literature in expressing human common emotions and moral thoughts. It also helps us understand the impacts of war on individuals and society and the complexity of human nature in extreme situations. Additionally, the analysis of Auden's thoughts and writing styles on different battlefields aids in grasping his growth and changes as a writer and offers empirical evidence for studying war's influence on him.

**2. Literature Review**

This article will take the poems of W. H. Auden as the starting point and systematically and comprehensively sort out the relevant literature. On the one hand, it will summarize the main viewpoints and achievements in various research directions and present the rich and diverse interpretive perspectives of the academic community in Auden's poems. On the other hand, it will conduct an in-depth analysis of the advantages and limitations of the current research. Through such sorting and analysis, it aims to further deepen the understanding of the artistic charm and ideological value of Auden's poems and provide a clearer context and reference for the subsequent relevant research.

## 2.1 Research Status

Wystan Hugh Auden (W. H. Auden), one of the important poets in the English poetry circle in the 20th century, has always been the focus of attention in the academic community for the richness, complexity, and influence of his works. However, the popularity and depth of the research on Auden's works are not the same at home and abroad. Therefore, the author has divided it into two parts, domestic and foreign, to summarize the current research status of Auden's works.

### 2.1.1 Foreign Research Status

In terms of foreign research, the article *The Poetics of Existential Nihilism in the Poetry of W.H. Auden* (Labang, Oscar Chenyi, 2014) delves into the theme of existential nihilism in Auden's poetry, highlighting the anxiety and negation of individual lives reflective of a specific historical context. It analyzes several poems, including *September 1, 1939*, and *Miss Gee*, focusing on human suffering, the search for meaning, and the effects of war on individuals, mainly soldiers. Foreign research on Auden is extensive, as seen in works like *Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden* (Smith, 2004), which examines themes of exploitation and isolation in social decline. International scholarship on Auden spans literary criticism, social issues, and existentialism, offering more profound insights into his works' artistic value and cultural significance. Among them, *Exploitation and Isolation in W.H. Auden's The Age of Anxiety: An Existentialist by Mani Bhadra Gautam Perspective* (Gautam, 2024, pp. 189-198) has studied the feelings, fears, and thoughts of individuals in the face of social and economic decline and the loss of structural status, especially the experiences related to exploitation, isolation, domination, and identity issues.

To sum up, foreign research on Auden's poetry is diverse, spanning literary criticism, social and religious issues, and existentialism, highlighting its cultural significance. This article proposes to analyze the similarities and differences in Auden's war poems related to the Chinese and Spanish battlefields, aiming to enrich the understanding of his literature.

### 2.1.2 Domestic Research Status

The domestic status of W. H. Auden's reception and research in China has remained relatively subdued. Although his name first entered the Chinese literary scene in 1937 through the monthly magazine literature, and despite the influence of figures like William Empson and Auden's visit to China, scholarly engagement with his works largely stagnated from the establishment of the People's Republic of China through the Cultural Revolution. Today, research and translation efforts surrounding Auden are still lacking, with only two works *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939) and *Academic Graffiti* (Auden, 1970) receiving significant attention. There is a noticeable absence of systematic research achievements and dedicated monographs on his works.

However, interest in Auden's poetry within Chinese academia has gradually increased in recent years. A notable contribution to this developing field is Haiyan Cai's book, *The Witness of Morality: Auden's Poetic Ethics in the Later Period* (Cai, 2020), which comprehensively examines the characteristics of

Auden's poetry and explores the intricate relationships between the poet, society, and the art form itself. The author highlights that in his early years, Auden perceived poetry as a means to influence people's choices, viewing it as an "intervening art" capable of making a direct societal impact. In contrast, Auden later redefined his approach through self-reflection, regarding poetry not as an "intervening art" but as a "moral guide." This evolution in Auden's perspective is a key insight presented in the book.

Additionally, an earlier article by Cai, *A Review of Auden Studies in the UK and the US over the Past 80 Years* (Cai, 2011, pp. 135-151), summarizes the prominent achievements in Auden studies over the past eight decades in the UK and the US. It identifies three main research areas: the academic impact of Auden's immigration experience on these countries and the exploration of his unique multi-national background by various scholars.

## 2.2 Research Methods

This paper employs three research methods: textual analysis, thematic research, and comparative research. By adopting these techniques, you can look at Auden's works from both a large and a small scale, and figure out the deep meanings of specific images in the poetry. This way, you can look at the similarities and differences between Auden's war poems from different points of view.

### 2.2.1 History Analysis Method

Before conducting the analysis of Auden, the author carried out a meticulous reading and analysis of Auden's literary work, *Journey to A War* (Auden, 1939), by using the history analysis method. For example, in his poem sequence *In Time of War* (excerpt) (Auden, 1939), the sentence *He was chosen to be in a place far away from the cultural center* (Auden, 1939, p. 276) shows that Auden described the cruel reality of the war. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, which was raging when Auden wrote these lines, countless soldiers were dispatched to the frontlines, far from their homelands' relative safety and cultural richness. This historical backdrop helps us understand how Auden described the cruel reality of war, where individuals were uprooted and sacrificed in the name of conflict.

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"Far from the heart of culture he was used:

Abandoned by his general and his lice,

Under a padded quilt he closed his eyes

..."

*In Time of War* (excerpt) (Auden, 1939, p. 276)

From the historical background, China's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression lasted 14 years. During his visit to China, Auden was in the late defensive stage of the war of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. During his visit, Auden once stopped in Hankou, which was the political and cultural center of China at that time. Through historical analysis, we can locate the literary characteristics of a specific period, better analyze the specificity of Auden's poems and the connotations expressed therein, and thus better explore the personality and commonness of Auden in

the Spanish and Chinese battlefields.

### 2.2.2 Thematic Research Method

The thematic research method involves conducting specialized studies on a specific literary form and a hot topic in a particular field. The research focuses on a specific theme. For example, this paper provides a detailed analysis and insights into the theme of “war and humanity”, especially the portrayal of Chinese soldiers and how it reflects human nature. In the poem sequence *In Time of War* (excerpt) (Auden, 1939), Auden not only records his observations but also contemplates the course of human civilization’s development. Through thematic research, we can delve into how Auden handles the relationship between war and humanity in his poems and further explore how this approach reflects his general views on war and his particular attention to specific battlefields.

### 2.2.3 Comparative Research Method

The comparative research method reveals the similarities, differences, and internal connections between two or more objects, phenomena, and concepts through comparative analysis. The research aims to deeply understand the essential characteristics, development laws, and mutual relations of the research object and provide the basis for explaining phenomena, constructing theories, formulating policies, or solving problems through a comparative study of commonalities and characteristics. This article analyzes the commonalities and individualities from the perspectives of the Chinese battlefield and the Spanish War. For example, we carry out relevant data collection and comparative analysis to examine individuality. We can compare the poems *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945) and *In Time of War* (excerpt) (Auden, 1939) to analyze how Auden adjusts his poetic themes and modes of expression according to the historical contexts of different battlefields. In particular, the difference in perspectives between the two poems is notable: the direct involvement in *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945) and the observer’s perspective in *In Time of War* (excerpt) (Auden, 1939) offer readers distinct war experiences.

## 3. Commonality Analysis and Implications of W. H. Auden’s War Poems

The general discussion of Auden’s war poems consist of three main parts. The first point is a detailed discussion of the commonalities of war, including the cruelty of war and the suffering of people in war. The second point focuses on human nature and praises the brilliance of human nature through the analysis of Auden’s description of soldiers On the Chinese battlefield In a time of war and Auden’s anti-fascist experience on the Spanish battlefield. The third point sums up Auden’s shared concern for the fate of humanity.

### 3.1 Commonality Exploration of War

W. H. Auden’s war poems, whether they are *In Time of War* (excerpt) (Auden, 1939), which describes the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, or *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945), created by Auden on the Spanish battlefield, or his works during the war periods that reflect other war scenes, all profoundly reveal the cruelty of war. In his writings, war is depicted not only as battlefields filled with

gunpowder smoke and brutal killings, with blood and flesh flying everywhere, but also as the destruction of human life, dignity, and hope. Auden depicted the violence, death, and despair in war with his delicate writing, enabling readers to vividly experience the horror and ruthlessness of war. Meanwhile, through his war poems and the records in *Journey to A War* (Auden, 1939), people can more intuitively feel the insignificance of human beings and the fragility of human nature.

### 3.1.1 The Cruelty of War

Auden's portrayal of the brutality of war delves deeply into the devastation that war inflicted upon humanity's spiritual realm. Through the images and metaphors in his poems, he demonstrated how war distorted people's minds and plunged them into fear, loneliness, and despair. This profound revelation of the cruelty of war not only made readers have a strong aversion to and condemnation of war but also inspired people's longing for and pursuit of peace. The poem provides the following description, using soldiers as an example:

"Far from the heart of culture he was used:

Abandoned by his general and his lice,

Under a padded quilt he closed his eyes

And vanished, He will not be introduced"

*In Time of War* (excerpt) (Auden, 1939, p. 276)

Through the description of these two sentences, it is not difficult to see that life in war is as trivial as mustard, and individuals are as small as ants in war. At the same time, the indifference between people in the war is also shown, such as the superior's disregard for soldiers, reflecting human nature's distortion and indifference. The word "lice" is a metaphor for the pain and suffering brought by the war to the soldiers, and the phrase "abandoned by his general and his lice" vividly expresses the tragic fate of the soldiers abandoned by their own leaders and the war itself. Similarly, "eyes closed" may symbolize the fighters' helplessness and their desire to escape the cruel reality of war, while "thick quilt" may symbolize their loneliness and isolation, as they are engulfed in the war's importance and cannot escape. The phrase "and then there is no end" further expresses the cruel reality of war; their lives and existence are eventually swallowed up by war and finally disappear without a trace, fully depicting the insignificance of human beings in the environment of war.

Similarly, in *Spain* (Auden, 1945), Auden also depicted the brutality of war. However, in this poem, he mainly employed the technique of contrast. For example, the poet describes in his poem "...Yesterday the prayer to the sunset. And the adoration of madmen. But today the struggle..." *Spain* (Auden, 1945, p. 182). By contrasting "yesterday" with "today", that is, the peace and progress in history with the destruction of war in reality, he highlighted the cruelty of war. At the beginning of *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945), Auden portrayed the peace and progress in history, emphasizing the role of humanity in aspects such as science, technology, culture, and society, like the spread of weights and measures, the development of navigation technology, and the respect for ancient Greek civilization. Then, abruptly,

Auden contrasted the peace and progress in history with the harsh reality of war and its devastating impact on human civilization. Under the influence of war, people in “today” had come to accept death, and dying had become an ordinary thing in their eyes. War had made them numb. Through the contrast between the glorious human civilization of “yesterday” and people’s numbness towards life in “today”, Auden profoundly revealed the brutality of war and its huge impact on human civilization, thus further highlighting the evil nature of war.

### 3.1.2 The Suffering of the People

W. H. Auden and the British writer Christopher Isherwood arrived in China in 1938, during the turbulent period of the full-scale outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. Auden stayed in China for more than four months, traveling through cities such as Guangzhou, Hankou, Xuzhou, and Shanghai. He even went deep into the front lines of the War of Resistance. He witnessed firsthand the cruelty of the war and the heroic resistance of the Chinese people. During this journey, *Journey to A War* (Auden, 1939) presented a true picture of China during the War of Resistance to readers. Without exaggeration or overdramatization, it not only realistically depicted the dark sides of society and human nature but also revealed the true living conditions of the Chinese people at that time. For example, there is such a passage in the book: “Then a woman rushed up and prostrated herself before the officer, wailing and sobbing. The officer helped her stand up, and as soon as she did, the two of them started conversing casually, as if nothing had happened” (Auden, 1939, p. 92). This passage clearly illustrates the hardships people faced during the war. The violence of war could interrupt their lives at any time, as it could break out anywhere and anytime. The detail of “peasants burning an old book” symbolizes the destruction of culture and history by the war, reflecting the upheaval and change of social structure and cultural values during the war. The woman wailing and sobbing in front of the officer shows the despair and helplessness of ordinary people in the war, especially the more tragic situation that females might face. They could lose their families due to the war. At the same time, the detail that “the officer helped the woman up and then they started talking naturally as if nothing had happened” (Auden, 1939, p. 92) shows the contradiction of human nature and the indifference of society. People in the war had to learn to adapt to and accept sudden tragedies in order to survive. The Japanese invasion of China brought great suffering to the Chinese people, as all these phenomena confirm.

In *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945), Auden’s poem also reflects the vulnerability of ordinary people and human nature in the war, as well as the poverty of ordinary Spanish people. Due to the outbreak of the civil war, many families lost their sources of income and lived in extreme poverty. After the outbreak of war, the originally peaceful life was completely shattered, and the people were exposed to violence and danger without any defense. When a city is bombed, residents face the crisis of collapsed houses and lost lives without warning, and ordinary people walking on the streets and resting at home instantly become potential victims of war. Schools and hospitals, which should have been safe places, are also not spared. Children have lost a stable environment for education, and patients cannot receive normal

treatment. The economic collapse has caused people to lose their source of income and their lives to fall into chaos. People who used to rely on work to make a living, faced with factory shutdowns and business stagnation, are unable to support their families' livelihoods, and have fallen from a stable life into the abyss of poverty, highlighting the vulnerability of ordinary people in terms of life and livelihood during war.

In addition, the civil war led to large-scale destruction and casualties. The flames of war devastated many cities and villages. Ordinary people faced the tragedies of home destruction and relatives' deaths or injuries. The poet describes this sentence in his poem:

“And the poor in their fireless lodgings dropping the sheets

Of the evening paper: ‘Our day is our loss’”.

*Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945, p. 183)

“The poor” in this poem points out the group concerned in the poem, and directly describes the difficult living environment of the poor. There is no warm fire, highlighting a bleak and impoverished life scene. The detail that they put down their newspapers also fully shows their helplessness to the external war environment. Some details can be reflected the political struggle between the left and right forces engulfed ordinary people, resulting in many of them becoming victims. The failure of the government's reforms and the dissatisfaction of the old-force military and religious people also made the lives of ordinary people even more difficult. These all illustrate the severe destruction of the Spanish people's spirit and physical condition due to the Spanish Civil War.

### 3.2 Brilliance of Human Nature

Although Auden depicted the cruelty and ruthlessness of war with his delicate writing, the brilliance of human nature is also manifested in the poems he created during the war. This can be seen in both the poem sequence *Journey to A War* (Auden, 1939), created on the Chinese battlefield, and the poem sequences created on the Spanish battlefield. People of different identities also reflect the brilliance of human nature. What is prominently reflected in the records in *In Time of War* (excerpt) (Auden, 1939) is the image of Chinese soldiers bravely fighting in the War of Resistance. In *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945), Auden also eulogizes people from different identities, classes, and countries who fought against fascism.

#### 3.2.1 Image of Chinese Soldiers in the *In Time of War Poems*

Auden's poems imbue the sacrifices in war with profound meanings. Through depicting the life-and-death choices and heroic sacrifices of soldiers and civilians in war, he shows the helplessness and tenacity of human beings in the face of war. In Auden's view, the sacrifices in war are not just the passing away of individual lives but also a profound reflection on the common destiny of mankind.

Auden's poems are filled with sympathy and mourning for the victims in war. With his delicate writing, he depicts the moments of life and death of soldiers on the battlefield, as well as the fear, despair, and perseverance they experienced before sacrificing themselves. These descriptions not only make readers

feel the cruelty and ruthlessness of war but also guide people to think about the far-reaching impacts that war has brought to human society and the destiny of mankind. Meanwhile, Auden also expresses his longing for peace and condemnation of war through his poems, calling on people to cherish peace, oppose war, and jointly safeguard the common destiny of mankind.

In the poem sequence *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939), the eighteenth poem offers the most detailed description of the Chinese battlefield. In this poem, Auden portrays Chinese soldiers as dying alone. In the first half of the poem, Auden presents a picture of the hardships after the war and criticizes those officials who are completely unaware of and indifferent to the living conditions of the front-line soldiers. The war has no bearing on their lives, and they regard soldiers as disposable. He highlights the glorious image of the soldiers who fought for the country's righteousness during the war. Although they are ignored after sacrificing themselves, just as he describes:

“He neither knew nor chose the Good, hut taught us,  
And added meaning like a comma, when  
He turned to dust in China that our daughters”

(*In Time of War (excerpt)* (Auden, 1939, p. 276))

They are unknown in the long river of history, yet they also shine with a glorious light in it. Although Auden once stated that he would not use poetry to engage in politics, these poems still express his respect for Chinese soldiers and his sympathy and support for the Chinese people, fully demonstrating his humanitarian spirit and internationalist spirit.

### 3.2.2 Brilliance of Anti-Fascist Spirit in Spain

During the Spanish Civil War, Auden travelled to the region, and this experience had a profound impact on him. This period not only allowed him to directly witness the cruel reality of war but also prompted him to develop a strong opposition to fascism and deepen his support for socialist ideas.

Auden believed that, although war caused enormous destruction, the kindness and compassion deep within human beings could not be completely erased. Auden's description of “tomorrow” in *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945) reflects this view. A metaphor of “tomorrow”, in his poem, is an era full of hope, filled with the rediscovery of love and art, young poets, bicycle races, and walks by the lake. All of this reflects that even in the midst of war and suffering, people still maintain their yearning and pursuit for peace, culture, and a better life. This is an embodiment of hope and optimism in human nature, encouraging people to strive unremittingly to build a better world.

With the development of his personal artistic pursuits, Auden continued to explore the deep-seated connection between literature and human nature, maintaining the independence and spirit of exploration in his creation. Furthermore, during his time on the Spanish battlefield, Auden served as an ambulance driver. During this period, he witnessed the selfless dedication of too many people in the Spanish War, including anti-fascist international organizations such as the International Brigades. Auden undoubtedly admired and supported the International Brigades at that time. It was also during

this time that, through his communication with these volunteers, Auden deeply understood the importance of the internationalist spirit and the anti-fascist struggle. Thus, Auden wrote the famous poem *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945) during the Spanish Civil War. This poem not only expressed his profound reflection on war and his support for the anti-fascist struggle but also, in this poem, Auden used the cycle of “yesterday”, “today”, and “tomorrow” to show the changes of history and the cruelty of war, demonstrating his anticipation for justice and the future.

### 3.3 Concern for the Fate of Mankind

Among Auden’s war poems, *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939) and *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945) not only reveal the brutality of war but also express deep concern for the fate of humanity. Through the narration and lyricism in his poems, he shows the destruction of war on human society and the threat it poses to the common destiny of mankind. Auden believed that war is an extreme form of conflict in human society. It not only destroys people’s lives and property but also undermines the stability and harmony of society, plunging humanity into chaos and turmoil.

However, Auden did not sink into pessimism and despair. Instead, Auden’s poetry emphasizes themes of concern and optimism about human destiny. He acknowledges the suffering caused by war but believes humanity can overcome such challenges. His focus on the shared fate of humanity showcases his moral responsibility and humanistic care, inspiring readers with hope and confidence in a better future.

When W.H. Auden visited China, he served as a war correspondent. As a result, Western readers often view his book, *Journey to a War* (Auden, 1939), which includes the poem cycle *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939), as a report on the Chinese War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. This poem cycle captures Auden’s experiences during the war and reflects on the evolution of human civilization. For Chinese readers, Auden’s poems provide moral support for their struggle against Japanese aggression, highlighting his remarkable empathy for the Chinese people during this difficult time. Consequently, *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939) is not only a significant work of art but also a historical document that bears witness to the atrocities committed by Japanese forces. The poem cycle played a crucial role in raising awareness of China’s War of Resistance, and its artistic appeal remains strong today. It serves as a reminder for generations of readers to acknowledge and remember those painful memories. Auden’s accounts in *Journey to a War* (Auden, 1939) offer lasting evidence to counter the dishonorable claims and actions of Japanese militarists who seek to distort or deny the historical facts of their aggression against China. As Professor CAI nese battlefield is a concern for the fate of the Chinese people.

Similarly, when Auden wrote *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945) on the Spanish battlefield, he truly witnessed the brutality of war. At that time, with the background of supporting the Republicans, in his poem, he constantly called on people to take responsibility in the face of war, to take action in the present, for otherwise history would be unchangeable and humanity would jointly bear the heavy responsibility of history. And in the poem, he appealed to people “today” to shoulder today’s responsibilities; otherwise,

people “tomorrow” will jointly bear the heavy responsibility of history. Therefore, in these two poems, Auden not only records and emphasizes the impact of these two battlefields on the people of their respective countries but also, through the records in his poems, places them in a broader historical and global context, pointing out that war is a common challenge for all mankind.

It can be seen that W. H. Auden’s war poems are not only a profound portrayal of the cruel reality of war but also a firm pursuit of the ideal of peace and a profound reflection on war. In Auden’s works, war is endowed with multiple meanings: it is an indelible scar in human history, a severe test of human nature, morality, and social order, and at the same time, a powerful impetus for humanity to reflect on itself and pursue peace and justice. Auden expressed his deep yearning for peace through his poems. He was well aware that peace is the cornerstone for the sustainable development of human society and the fundamental guarantee for people’s happiness and well-being. In the shadow of war, Auden called for the advent of peace, hoping that humanity could abandon violence and hatred and build a harmonious world with rationality and tolerance.

#### **4. Individuality Display of W.H. Auden’s War Poems**

Auden’s trip to China was a landmark event in the development of his poetic art. This journey was not simply a writing trip for a task but an important motivation for him to attempt to verify the artistic validity of political writing and to reflect on the true mission of a writer. Under the impact of Chinese culture, Auden’s romantic political delusions turned into disillusionment. He began to distance himself from political writing and then expressed his concern for human society and history through introspective expressions of personal existential experiences. In *Journey to A War* (Auden, 1939), especially in the poem sequence *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939), Auden, with the help of the ingenious “de-Chinese” strategy and by invoking Rilke’s “poetics of praise”, put his concept of the “depoliticized” artistic personality into systematic poetic expression for the first time.

##### *4.1 A Trip to China and the Transformation of Auden in the Journey to A War*

Indeed, before Auden set foot on Chinese soil, his thoughts had already undergone some changes. Professor Yang Guojing mentioned in detail in *The Influence of a Trip to China on the Transformation of W. H. Auden’s Poetry in the Middle and Late Period* (Yang, 2020, pp. 116-139) that Auden was disappointed with his left-wing politics, and the poem sequence *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945) also brought him tremendous distress. Among others, there was Orwell’s questioning and challenge. Orwell believed that someone like Auden, who stayed outside the battlefield, would use such non-moralistic wording. Empson’s ridicule was also a factor. Empson also thought that it was inappropriate for a poet like Auden, who was far away from the battlefield, to publish such incendiary words as in *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945). Therefore, before Auden’s trip to China, he consciously adopted a “de-Chinese” mentality, which could better help him observe the Chinese battlefield and thus carry out a criticism of the war without being limited by national boundaries.

In *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939), Auden indeed incorporated fewer political views, but his emphasis on the cruelty of war and the impact of war on human beings remained unchanged. Of course, he supported the just side in the War of Resistance. He just recorded what he saw and felt in China from the perspective of an onlooker, just like his identity during this visit to China as a journalist who came to record the situation of the Chinese battlefield, which was completely different from his identity during the Spanish Civil War. During the Spanish Civil War, Auden worked as an ambulance driver and engaged in political propaganda in the Republican camp. Therefore, during his stay in China, Auden consistently maintained a “depoliticized” and realistic writing style. Auden’s early identity as a poet was defined by his political writing. However, after witnessing the cruelty of war in the Spanish Civil War, his trust in the left wing collapsed. Auden also began to realize that political interests initiated and broke out most wars. A true poet should respect life, advocate for all causes, oppose war, and strive for an armistice. Therefore, the trip to China undoubtedly gave Auden an opportunity to rethink his political and poetic identities. The work *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939) demonstrates this transformation. In the early poems, most of the descriptions were records, exploring human nature and war, without obvious political inclinations or descriptions that incited emotions. Instead, they were real records of the scenes in China at that time so as to explore higher-level topics, such as human nature. In the portrayal of characters in *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939), Auden’s humanistic feelings of focusing on people and respecting life ran through it all. Different from most war poems, in Auden’s poem sequence *In Time of War* (Auden, 1939), there was no praise or glorification of soldiers and heroism. Auden described the soldiers with a calm writing style similar to “zero-degree writing”, objectively presenting the painful postures of the soldiers who were deeply damaged by the war. This transformation reflects Auden’s shift from his early political stance to a more detached attitude. He no longer simply started from a political perspective but paid more attention to the impact of war on human nature and the general situation of human existence. Therefore, when Auden created these poem sequences, he considered and wrote from a documentary perspective and adopted a more detached attitude.

#### 4.2 Auden’s Conversion of Personal Beliefs

The transformation of Auden’s ideology was a complex process, and his beliefs underwent several changes. The Christian atmosphere of his childhood influenced Auden during the formation of his religious beliefs. New trends of thought like Freudianism and Marxism influenced Auden in his youth, leading him to advocate more for rationality. In his middle and later years, Auden returned to Christianity. The poems Auden wrote on the Chinese and Spanish battlefields reveal the transformation of his thoughts. Before setting foot on the Spanish battlefield, Auden had no religious beliefs. In the 1930s, Auden used many Marxist ideas, but he never fully admitted to being a Marxist nor joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. However, people still regarded him as a supporter of left-wing ideas at that time. In 1932, Auden even compiled a chart correlating political terms with Christian terms, in

which the Communist Party was linked to the force of good, while the capitalist system and the ruling class were linked to the force of evil. This implicitly showed from the side that Auden was anti-capitalist. However, after experiencing the cruelty of war and the ugliness of politics on the Spanish battlefield, it prompted him to reexamine his beliefs and spirit. After he completed *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945), Auden found that the reality was far more complex than he had imagined. Poets like George Oppen's criticism prompted Auden to scrutinize his own beliefs and political stance. Auden later criticized this poem himself, believing that it was morally "dishonest" because he had over-idealized the struggles of the Republican side in it. Especially, the rhetorical devices Auden used were too strong, without fully considering the actual political complexity. Therefore, Auden considered *Spain 1937* (Auden, 1945) to be a "dishonest" poem. Auden's exposure to the Chinese battlefield deepened the transformation of his political and personal beliefs. In *Journey to A War* (Auden, 1939), Auden visited missionaries in China several times. He discovered the power of religion and was especially impressed by the calm and composed behavior of the missionaries in China under difficult conditions. The actions of these missionaries in China had a profound impact on Auden, making him begin to recognize the importance of religious beliefs in personal life. Especially after communicating with many missionaries along the way, Auden noticed that their attitudes towards the Communists were gradually changing, from initially regarding them as bandits to at best having the impression of Robin Hood, who robbed the rich to help the poor, and finally eventually and sincerely realizing the important role they might play in determining China's future development. He also began to realize that political means could not reduce the brutal acts of fascism, and the desolation and loneliness brought to his heart by the alienated world could not be completely saved by psychological methods. Auden's experience in China changed his ideological tendency of "transcending politics", causing him to express support for the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and condemn Japan's aggression even before the start of the Pacific War. After ending his journey in China, Auden immigrated to the United States in 1939 and soon converted to Christianity, which also marked a significant change in his personal beliefs. In the article, Li Liwei senior interpreted Auden's conversion to Christianity in this way. He believed that Auden could discard the obligations of poetry, such as some political colors and critical curiosity, when the American language and the British language were not integrated at that time, and the public register of his poetry was more replaced by his private domain, and the original radical tone turned to peace and purity. Then gradually Auden's faith was converted to Christianity (Li, 2016, pp. 81-82)

Auden began to think about life and social issues from a religious perspective. In his later years, when Auden recalled his religious beliefs, he believes, "Every Christian will experience a transformation from 'we will always believe' in childhood to 'I believe again' in adulthood". Thus, Auden's reexamination of his beliefs on the Spanish battlefield and his experiences in China laid a certain foundation for the transformation of his beliefs.

## 5. Conclusion

W. H. Auden's war poems are not only a profound depiction of the cruel realities of the Spanish Civil War and the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression but also an in-depth reflection on the complexity of human nature and the destiny of mankind. Through an analysis of the commonalities and individualities in Auden's poetic creations on the two battlefields, this article reveals the unique value and far-reaching influence of his works in war literature. Firstly, Auden's poems demonstrate the commonalities between war and human nature. Whether it was the Spanish Civil War or the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Auden depicted, with his delicate writing, the destruction of human nature by war, showing the fear, loneliness, and despair of ordinary people in the war. Meanwhile, he also emphasized the glory in human nature, such as the bravery of Chinese soldiers and the unity and support in the anti-fascist war. These works not only reflect the universality of war but also express deep concern for the community with a shared future for mankind, calling on people to reflect on the cruelty of war and pursue peace and justice. Secondly, the display of Auden's individuality also adds unique charm to his poems. His trip to China and "Journey to a War" had an important impact on his poetic style, making him shift from his early political stance to a more detached attitude and focus more on the impact of war on human nature and the general situation of human existence. Meanwhile, the transformation of Auden's personal thoughts, especially the transition from Marxism to the Christian faith, also deeply influenced his poetic creation, endowing his works with richer ideological connotations and a deeper spiritual pursuit. In conclusion, Auden's war poems not only provide us with a profound reflection on the history of war in the 20th century but also offer important literary resources for us to understand the complexity of human nature and the commonalities of the destiny of mankind. Through the study of Auden's works, we can not only better understand the creative process and ideological changes of this famous poet but also draw inspiration and influence for contemporary society from them, further promoting in-depth discussions on war literature and human nature issues.

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