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ABSTRACT

ANGLO-SAXON AND MIDDLE ENGLISH INFLUENCES
IN THE POETRY OF W.H. AUDEN

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This study examines the presence and effect of the influence of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poetry in the poetry of W.H. Auden. Though the scope of this paper embraces both Auden and Anglo-Saxon, the primary focus throughout is upon Auden, and his poetry from the late twenties to the present comes under survey. The examination here of the style, imagery, and themes of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English literature is confined to those aspects which bear on Auden's work.

The influence of the early literature upon Auden is most clearly evident in the poet's use of Anglo-Saxon poetic mannerisms and imagery. The influence of Middle English alliterative poetry, though important, is indistinct from and merges with that of Anglo-Saxon poetry. It is in the technique and imagery of this early English poetry that Auden has discovered his authentic voice, the voice which is so very appropriate to the poet's dominant theme of modern man's spiritually impoverished and unheroic existence.

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Chapter one deals with the biographical evidence for Auden's contact with and interest in Old and Middle English literature. Chapter two, through the discussion of specific poems from different periods of the poet's career, examines Auden's skill in applying and adapting the techniques of Anglo-Saxon poetry. The Anglo-Saxon poetic mannerisms are defined and illustrated as they arise in particular poems. Chapter three describes the presence and evaluates the effect in Auden's poetry of characteristically Anglo-Saxon imagery. The final chapter assesses the overall effectiveness of Auden's Anglo-Saxon voice and the relationship of this voice to the themes for which it is employed.

The Anglo-Saxon poetic mannerisms in Auden's poetry include the patterns of stress and alliteration, the curt, asyndetic syntax, and the high incidence of repetition with variation. Also prominent in both Auden and Anglo-Saxon are archaisms, synonyms, periphrastic compounds, and kenning-like expressions. Auden also frequently employs the grim understatement of Old English poetry. The resemblances of Auden's imagery of folk creatures, war, and exile to Old English imagery are clear from even a casual comparison of the two poetries. Auden's dragons, trolls, giants, elves, and dwarves recall the folklore creatures in

Beowulf, the sagas, and Old English myth and legend. His portrayal of war and heroism is conditioned, at least in part, by the sagas and by Old English heroic poetry. His poetry of exile is remarkably similar to Old English elegiac poetry and to the religious and heroic poetry in which the theme and imagery of exile occur frequently.

The major theme which one finds almost invariably associated with Auden's Anglo-Saxon voice is courage. Society or the crowd lures man to escapism and conformity, while the individual of courage accepts suffering which leads to self-awareness and the recognition of imperfection or personal evil. Courage is most essential in enabling man to make the dreaded leap to religious faith. Auden brings the theme of courage vigorously to life through a skillful handling of Old English poetic mannerisms and imagery. The austerity and muscularity of style and the starkness of the images of monsters, war, and winter supply Auden with a voice highly suited to this theme.

This description of Auden's ancestral voice and its message is not intended to account for all of Auden's poetry. A poet rarely writes in one voice or on one theme. What this study proposes, however, is that Auden's Anglo-Saxon poetry is his more strenuous and successful, and certainly his most original, poetry.