



# A Comparative Analysis Of War Narratives: W.H. Auden And The *Mahabharata*

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## Abstract: -

This study examines the narrative and thematic similarities between the ancient Indian epic the *Mahabharata* and W.H. Auden's poem "The Shield of Achilles," "September 1, 1939," with an emphasis on how they both depict battle. With a focus on the dehumanizing consequences of dogma and tyranny, Auden's poem offers a meditation on the moral deterioration of civilization during the start of World War II. On the other hand, the *Mahabharata* offers a mythical picture of cosmic combat in which mortal fighters must resolve moral quandaries within the confines of cosmic order and divine will. Both narratives examine issues of responsibility, morality, and the effects of violence while having different literary traditions and cultural backgrounds. One learns more about the universal human experience of conflict and the ongoing battle to balance personal morality with the dictates of history and fate via this comparative analysis. The *Mahabharata* and Auden both explore the complexity of human struggle, touching on issues like moral ambiguity, the effects of bloodshed, and the existential crises brought on by battle. The *Mahabharata* and W.H. Auden's war narratives are compared, and the results provide important new perspectives on the moral complexity of war and the state of humanity.

**Keywords:** - *The Mahabharata, W. H. Auden, Morality, War Narratives, Totalitarianism.*

## Introduction: -

Wars have always been common and terrible in human history, and they have left a legacy of stories that try to explain the mayhem and destruction. The depiction of war in literature, from classical epics to contemporary poetry, captures not only the ferocity of battle but also the complexity of human nature and civilization. The epic *Mahabharata* from ancient Indian mythology and the battle tales that W.H. Auden depicted in his poetry, especially in his well-known poems "September 1, 1939" and "The Shield of Achilles," are the subjects of this comparative study. We want to identify the parallels and divergences between Auden's writings and the intricate narrative of the *Mahabharata* concerning war, morality, and the human condition.

One of the greatest poets of the 20th century, W.H. Auden, holds a special position in the annals of literature due to his astute understanding of the social and political challenges of his day. Having been born in 1907, Auden saw personally the turbulent events of the 20th century, such as the emergence of fascism, World War II, and the ensuing existential crisis. His poetry, which frequently addresses themes of love, politics, and the pursuit of meaning in an uncertain world, reveals a profound engagement with the moral and existential quandaries of the modern day. One of Auden's most well-known pieces is the poem "*September 1, 1939*," which was composed right before World War II began. In this poem, Auden grapples with the horrors of war and the moral decay of society, offering a poignant meditation on the human condition. The poem begins with the evocative lines: -

'I sit in one of the dives

On Fifty-second Street

Uncertain and afraid

As the clever hopes expire

Of a low dishonest decade:

Waves of anger and fear

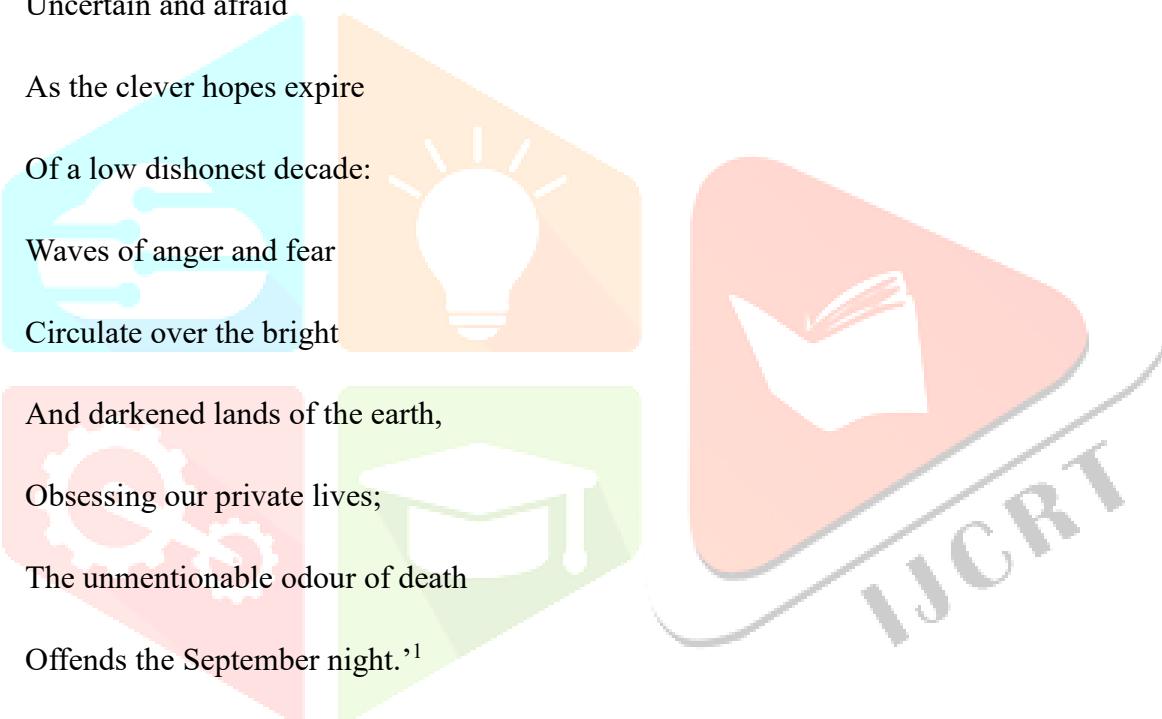
Circulate over the bright

And darkened lands of the earth,

Obsessing our private lives;

The unmentionable odour of death

Offends the September night.'<sup>1</sup>



From this vantage point, Auden's reflection goes beyond the scene at hand and delves into the depths of human understanding and the frameworks of society. He wrestles with the breakdown of moral certainty and the prevailing feeling of disenchantment that characterizes the time. Auden encounters the frailty of democratic ideals and the fragility of human civilization as totalitarian regimes come to power, promising order at the expense of individual liberties. Through his poetic lens, Auden becomes both an observer and a part of the communal struggle for retribution and significance amid the chaos of war and philosophical struggle.

The legendary imagery of Homer's "*Iliad*" is explored in Auden's "*The Shield of Achilles*," another important work that explores the dehumanizing effects of war and the deterioration of moral standards. Auden offers a brutal picture of a society run amok, based on the ancient tale of Achilles and his unbreakable shield. Auden considers the loss of innocence and the betrayal of human dignity in the face of battle, and the imagery of the poem emphasizes the striking contrast between the noble ideals of ancient

fighting and the cruel realities of modern struggle. As Raj Kumar observes in the article entitled ‘A Stylistic Analysis of W.H. Auden’s Poem: “The Shield of Achilles”’: -

It is observed that the poet employs a complex lexis to disseminate the after-effects of the war (an allusion to the Trojan War in which initially Achilles did not participate due to some differences with the leader of the Greek forces, Agamemnon, but the killing of Petroclus, a close friend of Achilles, by Hector had instigated him to do the same).<sup>2</sup>

The *Mahabharata* presents a legendary account of the Kurukshetra War, a major battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two warring branches of the Kuru dynasty, in contrast to Auden’s modernist sensibility. During a cosmic conflict between good and evil, the epic explores important issues of responsibility, morality, and the definition of deity. The *Mahabharata*, which is full of gods, devils, and divine incarnations, is steeped in mythology and the paranormal, in contrast to Auden’s modernist sensibilities. However, the epic’s central themes are age-old human struggles, as mortal soldiers are made to face their mortality and the repercussions of their deeds.

### W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939”: A Reflection on War and Humanity: -

The poem “September 1, 1939” by W.H. Auden is a somber examination of the ethical difficulties associated with contemporary warfare. Auden’s poem, written at the start of civilization War II, encapsulates the existential unease and ethical disillusionment of a civilization plunging into anarchy. Auden depicts the human cost of tyranny with striking images and expressive language, bemoaning the absence of empathy and compassion in a culture driven by hatred and fear. The invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany on September 1, 1939, signaled the start of World War II, a worldwide struggle that would claim millions of lives. As Auden reflects on the rise of totalitarianism and the erosion of human values, he confronts the moral decay of society and the betrayal of democratic ideals. As he writes: -

‘Faces along the bar

Cling to their average day:

The lights must never go out,

The music must always play,

All the conventions conspire

.....

Lost in a haunted wood,

Children afraid of the night

Who have never been happy or good.’<sup>3</sup>

Auden skillfully conveys the general sense of helplessness and despair that permeates society as it faces the impending disaster. In the shadowy interior of the Fifty-second Street pub, faces hold on to the comfort of their ordinary lives while displaying a worn-out acceptance of what is happening. There is a tangible acknowledgment of approaching turbulence and the accompanying impotence in this resignation, which is expressed silently. In the growing gloom of war, Auden's description of a world resigned to its fate is heartbreaking and conveys a sense of melancholy.

The main themes of the poem are the dehumanizing impacts of war and the destructive force of dogma. Auden warns against the perils of unquestioning loyalty to dogma and laments the lack of empathy and compassion in a society driven by hate and terror. The poem's most moving passage is Auden's declaration, 'We must love one another or die.'<sup>4</sup> This striking remark forces readers to consider the moral necessity of empathy and understanding between people in times of conflict by highlighting how vital it is to show compassion and unity. Auden understands that in these trying times, mankind is merely hoping to rise above the atrocities of war and create a more equitable and compassionate society by acting with love and compassion.

He calls for a return to the principles of democracy and individual freedom, urging readers to reject the draw of authoritarianism and the deceptive promises of power. Auden finally celebrates the human spirit's tenacity and the potential of redemption in the face of misfortune, despite the pessimism that permeates most of the poem. The poem "*September 1, 1939*" by W.H. Auden is a potent reflection on the moral difficulties of war and the nature of humanity. As Md. Sharique Haider observes in his article entitled 'Reading Auden's September 1, 1939 as an Anti-War Poem': -

'Auden explodes the myth of collective security with banter and ridicule as the race for rearmament and war hysteria progresses at tremendous speed there and people all over the world suffer from the fear psychosis at the possibility of another world war. Heads of different states now raise futile excuses regarding this phenomenon and blame one another. In the meantime the common people suffer from the result of this grievous mismanagement. Subjected to hunger and seeking underground shelters for protection, they are reduced to the position of children lost in a wood of perpetual despair. For the while they are kept under an illusion of a happy life in bars. Love, universal love alone could serve as a panacea for all these ills, but unfortunately, this lesson was lost upon the war-lords, when they close the last great-war.'<sup>5</sup>

Auden addresses the atrocities of dictatorship and the degradation of human values via his powerful imagery and sharp language, making a moving appeal for love, compassion, and unity in the face of strife. Auden's poem serves as a timeless reminder of the ability of writing to shine light on the darkest recesses of the human spirit, even as the globe struggles with the aftermath of war and the ongoing pursuit of justice and peace.

### Contemplation of Conflict and Human Experience in *The Shield of Achilles*: -

W.H. Auden's "*The Shield of Achilles*" offers a thoughtful reflection on the nature of combat and its effects on humanity as it digs deeply into the core of conflict and the human experience. Auden creates a compelling story that spans time and geography with striking imagery and profound symbolism, provoking readers to consider the timeless themes of violence, power, and the search for meaning in the face of catastrophe. The poem opens with the mythical Greek hero of the Trojan War, Achilles, forging the shield of the god of fire and workmanship, Hephaestus. Auden begins his reflection on the ageless themes of war and human sorrow with a reference to classical mythology.

As the deity imbues the shield with the energy of battle and strife, the picture of Hephaestus laboring over it, "with his hammer and tongs," evokes a feeling of urgency and purpose. The shield itself is described in great depth and symbolism by Auden, illustrating the complexity of battle and its effects on human civilization. Scenes of "marriage and birth, and death" embellish the shield, symbolizing the cyclical cycle of life and the certainty of death. Auden creates a tapestry of the human experience with its complex design, including everything from the horrors of war and devastation to the pleasures of love and connection.

A powerful picture that stands out in the poem is the one that describes 'the mass and majesty of this world, all that carries weight and always weighs the same.'<sup>6</sup> Auden emphasizes the unstoppable passage of time and the permanent essence of human misery via repetition. The burden of human suffering endures throughout the ages, carried by succeeding generations in their search for purpose and salvation. Auden examines the conflict between the individual and society, as well as the battle for dominance, throughout the whole poem. He describes the subject as 'a ragged urchin, aimless and alone,'<sup>7</sup>

### The *Mahabharata*: An Epic of Cosmic Warfare and Moral Dilemmas: -

One of the most complex and well-regarded epics in human history, the *Mahabharata* sets ancient India against the backdrop of cosmic conflict and moral quandaries. The *Mahabharata*, written thousands of years ago, is a work of literature that defies culture and time, providing enduring wisdom on the nature of humanity and the never-ending conflict between good and evil. The Kurukshetra War, a devastating battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two opposing lineages of the Kuru dynasty, is the central event of the *Mahabharata*. Amid a cosmic conflict between righteousness and *adharma*, or wickedness, the epic delves into important issues of morality, obligation, and the definition of deity. As Venu Payyanur writes in his article entitled 'Moral, Ethical, and Life Lessons from the *Mahabharata*': -

'The central storyline of the *Mahabharata* revolves around the conflict between two branches of the Kuru dynasty: the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The primary cause of the war is the dispute over the throne of Hastinapura, marked by jealousy, ambition, and a series of injustices committed against the Pandavas. The epic covers various aspects of human life, including morality, righteousness (dharma), duty, and the consequences of one's actions (karma).'<sup>9</sup>

The *Mahabharata* explores the moral intricacies and intellectual subtleties of fighting, in contrast to typical military narratives, and presents a rich tapestry of individuals attempting to resolve their moral quandaries. The warrior prince Arjuna and the deity Krishna, who is his charioteer, engage in a philosophical discussion in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a sacred scripture found in the *Mahabharata*. In this discourse, Krishna guides Arjuna as he wrestles with his moral commitments on the battlefield by imparting timeless knowledge on the nature of duty, morality, and the path of freedom.

The *Mahabharata* also explores the complexities of interpersonal relationships and the fallout from moral uncertainty. The epic's characters are multidimensional people with both strengths and shortcomings, not just clichés. The characters in the *Mahabharata* are varied, ranging from the honorable and brave Pandavas to the cunning and deceitful Kauravas, all of whom are battling both internal and external influences. The idea of dharma, or moral obligation, is one of the main themes of the *Mahabharata* and provides the characters with guidance throughout. Even amid extreme difficulty, the Pandavas maintain their commitment to dharma and protect justice and righteousness in the face of several injustices and betrayals.

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### **Comparative Analysis: Auden and the *Mahabharata*: -**

W.H. Auden's poetry, particularly works like "September 1, 1939" and "The Shield of Achilles," delves deeply into the ethical dilemmas and moral complexities of modern warfare. In these poems, Auden captures the pervasive existential anxiety and the profound sense of demoralization brought about by the rise of totalitarian regimes. His verses vividly portray how human values and ethical principles are frequently eroded by the destructive forces of political despotism and social upheaval.

In "September 1, 1939," Auden reflects on the onset of World War II, exploring themes of fear, disillusionment, and collective responsibility. The poem critiques the social and political conditions that enable authoritarianism, while also questioning humanity's role in perpetuating cycles of violence and oppression. Auden's famous lines, "We must love one another or die," emphasize the urgent need for compassion and solidarity in the face of moral and societal collapse.

Similarly, "The Shield of Achilles" juxtaposes classical mythology with the brutal realities of the modern world. Drawing from Homer's *Iliad*, the poem contrasts the idealized vision of heroism with the grim, dehumanized aspects of contemporary warfare. Auden uses the imagery of a barren, dystopian landscape to illustrate the loss of moral clarity and the profound alienation that defines modern conflict. Auden's

reflections share an intriguing parallel with the *Mahabharata*, particularly its exploration of moral ambiguity and the cosmic struggle between dharma (righteousness) and adharma (unrighteousness). Like the *Mahabharata*, Auden's poetry confronts the enduring questions of justice, duty, and human frailty.

On the other hand, the cosmic struggle between good and evil known as the Kurukshetra War is mythically recounted in the *Mahabharata*. The epic is still important today because it examines responsibility, morality, and the results of human behavior, even though it was written ages ago. The *Mahabharata* provides significant insights into the nuances of moral duty and the essence of divinity via characters like Arjuna and Krishna. The *Mahabharata* and Auden both emphasize how dehumanizing war is and how devastating dogma can be. The way that Auden characterizes totalitarianism as a betrayal of human principles is similar to how the *Mahabharata* describes how the greed and ambition of the Kauravas led to disastrous outcomes.

‘According to the *Mahabharata*, the rules of dharma are designed to produce good consequences: “Dharma is created for the wellbeing of all creation. All that is free from harm to any created being is certainly Dharma”. Thus, dharmic behaviour tends to produce good consequences. In that case, perhaps krishna has come to earth to restore dharmic behavior, but only because dharmic behaviour is a means to good consequences. If so, then nothing prevents krishna from acting adharmically whenever doing so will produce good consequences.’<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, amid societal change, both stories stress the value of moral integrity and human initiative. Auden's viewpoint stems from the existential anxiety of the contemporary day, but the *Mahabharata* provides a more sophisticated comprehension of cosmic order and divine intent. In the epic, mortals fulfill their responsibilities by divine decree, presenting a cyclical vision of existence. The story is made more difficult by this fatalistic viewpoint, as characters are constrained by their karma and the unchangeable rules of fate.

Comparing Auden's writings with the *Mahabharata* offers important insights into the moral complexity of war and the human predicament. Both stories are concerned with the moral ramifications of violence and the pursuit of meaning in a society ripped apart by conflict, despite stylistic and cultural variances. Auden and the *Mahabharata* provide timeless insights into the enduring difficulties of the human spirit via their examination of responsibility, morality, and the results of human activity.

### **Conclusion: -**

The *Mahabharata* and the poetry of W.H. Auden are juxtaposed to remind us of the ability of literature to transcend cultural and chronological borders and provide deep insights into the human condition. The *Mahabharata*'s examination of responsibility, justice, and the results of human activity is consistent with Auden's moving observations on the moral decline of society and the deterioration of human ideals. Readers are forced to consider the moral ramifications of violence and the difficulties of moral obligation during times of war by both stories.

Furthermore, the comparison of Auden and the *Mahabharata* highlights how literature is still relevant today for addressing the age-old problems of the human condition. The legendary vision of the *Mahabharata* and Auden's modernist sensibility provide contrasting viewpoints on the essence of conflict and humanity. The *Mahabharata* offers a timeless reflection on the cosmic order and the never-ending conflict between good and evil, while Auden captures the existential sorrow of the modern day. Furthermore, the contrast between the individualistic viewpoint of Auden and the cosmic vision of the *Mahabharata* deepens our comprehension of the human condition. The *Mahabharata*'s examination of duty and justice within the context of divine will is consistent with Auden's emphasis on the moral obligation of the individual in the face of political despotism.

The two narratives push readers to examine the moral commitments and ethical conundrums they face, as well as the effects of their choices in a confusing and conflict-filled world. In the end, the comparison of Auden's writings with the *Mahabharata* proves the timeless ability of literature to provide light on the human condition. Through their examination of morality, conflict, and the human condition, Auden and the *Mahabharata* provide ageless insights on topics that cut through all cultures and periods. Readers are asked to consider their position in the continuous tale of human history as they interact with these narratives, which transport them to various historical and cultural situations.

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