

English Literature Activities



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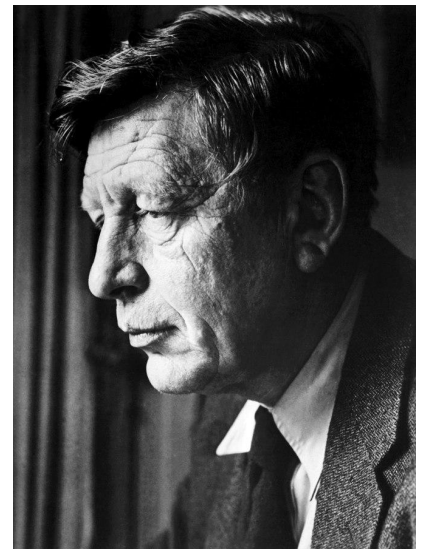
Refugee Blues by W.H. Auden



Read the text about the poet's life and decide if the sentences that follow on the next page are True or False and then correct the false ones:

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907–1973) was an Anglo-American poet known for his intellectual depth, technical skill, and exploration of modern society's complexities. Born in York, England, he grew up in Birmingham and studied at Oxford University, where he became associated with poets like Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood.

Auden's early poetry reflected his concerns with politics, love, and human suffering. His first collection, *Poems* (1930), established him as a major voice in 20th-century literature. Throughout the 1930s, his work became more socially and politically engaged, responding to events like the rise of fascism and the Spanish Civil War.



In 1939, on the eve of World War II, Auden moved to the United States, where his style shifted towards more philosophical and religious themes. One of his most famous poems, *September 1, 1939*, captures the anxiety of war and human vulnerability. Another well-known poem, *Funeral Blues* (popularized in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*), showcases his ability to convey deep emotion with simple, elegant language.

He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1948 for *The Age of Anxiety*, a long poem reflecting on modern existential struggles. His later works focused on themes of love, morality, and faith. Though he spent much of his life in the U.S., he returned to Europe frequently, eventually settling in Austria, where he died in 1973.

Auden's legacy endures in his ability to blend wit, wisdom, and emotional depth. His poetry remains relevant today, offering insight into the complexities of human existence.



1. W. H. Auden was born in Birmingham, England.
2. He studied at Oxford University.
3. Auden's first poetry collection, *The Age of Anxiety*, was published in 1930.
4. His poetry in the 1930s often focused on social and political issues.
5. Auden moved to the United States in 1939.
6. One of his famous poems, *September 1, 1939*, was written about World War I.
7. *Funeral Blues* became well known after being featured in a film.
8. Auden won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Anxiety* in 1948.
9. He spent his entire life in the United States after moving there.
10. Auden died in Austria in 1973.



Now read the poem "Refugee Blues" and do the activities that follow:

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.

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.

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 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.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;

Asked me politely to return next year:



But where shall we go today, my dear, but where shall we go today?

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 poem is about the harsh conditions a group of refugees face when they arrive in a country hostile to their situation. What period does the poem refer to and how can we understand this? What are the elements that show the receiving country is not friendly towards them? How has the poet built dramatic tension and empathy towards the refugees? Write a paragraph expressing your ideas about the poem and its meaning for you. Justify your thoughts:

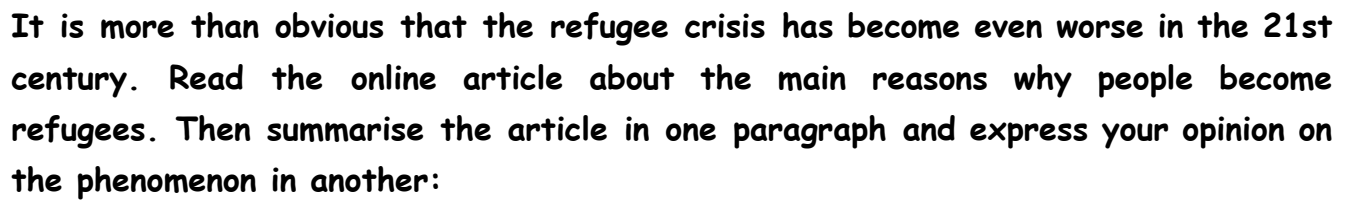


This painting, by the Brazilian painter Portinari, is called "Migrants" and it was made in 1944. In what way do you think it is connected with the poem you just read? Can you find specific elements in the painting to justify your ideas?



Cândido Portinari's 1944 painting, 'Migrants' © Candido Portinari/AGB/Alamy/DACS 2023





This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



“Refugee Blues” by W.H. Auden Teacher’s B2

THE BIOGRAPHY

1. False – Auden was born in York, England, but grew up in Birmingham.
2. True
3. False – His first poetry collection was *Poems* (1930), not *The Age of Anxiety*.
4. True
5. True
6. False – *September 1, 1939* was written about the beginning of World War II, not World War I.
7. True
8. True
9. False – Although he moved to the U.S., Auden frequently traveled to Europe and eventually settled in Austria.
10. True

THE POEM

What period does the poem refer to and how can we understand this?

It is during or after WWII because of the reference to Hitler and the German Jews

What are the elements that show the receiving country is not friendly towards them?

Phrases from the poem: 1) Yet there's no place for us 2) The consul banged the table and said, "If you've got no passport you're officially dead"- 3) Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said; "If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread"- 4) they weren't German Jews - 5) A thousand windows and a thousand doors: Not one of them was ours - 6) Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro: Looking for you and me.

How has the poet built dramatic tension and empathy towards the refugees?

All the negative treatment they receive and the despair they feel is magnified with the repetition of some phrases. The speaker paints a vivid picture of a world that offers no refuge to those who have lost their homes and countries. Each stanza paints a different picture of exclusion and rejection.

THE PAINTING

The plight of the refugees is evident both in the poem and the painting, the despair on their faces showcases the human cost of war and persecution.



[W. H. Auden](#) (1907 – 1973) was a British-American poet. Auden's poetry is noted for its stylistic and technical achievement, its engagement with politics, morals, love, and religion, and its variety in tone, form, and content. **(information from Wikipedia)**

The poem “Refugee Blues” was written in 1939

The image of the poet comes from Wikimedia Commons

[Candido Portinari](#) (1903 – 1962) was a Brazilian painter. He is considered one of the most important Brazilian painters as well as a prominent and influential practitioner of the neo-realism style in painting. **(information from Wikipedia)**

The painting “Migrants” was made in 1944

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/migrants/0wG7L0YeJ3zfQ?hl=en>

The online article in from the organisation Global Citizens

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/>



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