

"The Shield of Achilles" by W. H. Auden: Art as a Tool of War

In 1952, Wystan Hugh Auden published the poem "The Shield of Achilles." In the poem, Auden focuses on the titular shield equipped by Achilles for his fight against Hector during a battle of the Trojan War, immortalized in *The Iliad* by Homer. However, rather than illustrating the magnificence of the shield itself, let alone the Greek hero, Auden reinterprets the creation of the shield; the stanzas alternate between the forging of the shield by Hephaestus, the blacksmith of the Greek gods, and the anticipatory Thetis, Achilles' mother who requested the shield be made for her son. By examining the scene as though admiring a work of art, Auden designs an *ekphrastic* poem, or the Greek term for a descriptive poem, crafting vivid images to reflect upon the origins of the fabled shield ("Ekphrasis"). Auden's employment of *ekphrasis* coincides with Homer's first use of the literary approach in *The Iliad*, echoing Homer's depiction of the shield through the reimagining. Ultimately, though, Auden closes "The Shield of Achilles" with Thetis reacting in horror toward what Hephaestus has produced, wherein the shield becomes simply another tool that contributes to Achilles' prophesied demise. Thus, Auden employs *ekphrasis* to contrast against Homer's original descriptions, highlighting the disparity of the shield being a work of art, famed for its glory, and the shield being a weapon of war, existing to destroy.

In *The Iliad*, Homer titles Book XVIII as "The Shield of Achilles," showing how the shield first came into creation. Following the death of Patroclus, Achilles is inconsolable; not only was Patroclus a friend and comrade, but Achilles had granted Patroclus his armor, consequently stolen from his dead body by Hector. In John A. Scott's "Achilles and the Armor of Patroclus," the significance of armor in the Trojan War is explored: "We have abundant evidence . . . that the warriors who lived before the age of Homer were honored by the placing of armor at

their burial, and we know that in the ages after Homer such a tradition survived” (Scott 683). Furthermore, it was clear that “the honor of burning these arms or the characteristic implements of the dead was an essential trait of the heroic age,” making the loss of Patroclus’ armor not merely an insult but a dishonor to the whole regiment (683). It is no surprise that, out of revenge, Achilles wishes to return to battle and slay Hector, but without new armor, he is sure to be quickly defeated. Thus, Homer portrays Thetis using her maternal love for her son to evoke the sympathies of the Greek gods, praying for an audience with Hephaestus. Although the blacksmith claims he will be unable to save Achilles from death, Hephaestus does agree to build him armor, “forged to a wonder, / and its terrible beauty will be a marvel to men” (Homer 18.502-3). From there, Hephaestus creates a shield with a myriad of decorations, including visuals of the constellations, a vineyard, and the ocean; herein is where Homer employs *ekphrasis* to paint a vivid picture of the shield’s magnificence, portraying the whole of life itself upon the surface. Its significance as a piece of armor is further highlighted by the loss of Patroclus’ armor that initiated its creation, formed in response to such humiliation.

However, Auden approaches Achilles’ shield with vast contrast. While Homer accentuates the shield’s prominence as a representation of justice, even more than a tool to be used in battle, Auden dismisses the *ekphrastic* symbolism and examines the shield for what it truly is: something to assist in the act of killing. Instead of Hephaestus providing beautiful images, like Homer has him do, Auden portrays Thetis as imagining the wonders of the shield, echoing its original display in *The Iliad* but ultimately ending with dashed hopes:

She looked over his shoulder

For ritual pieties,

White flower-garland heifers,
 Libation and sacrifice,
 But there on the shining metal
 Where the altar should have been,
 She saw by his flickering forge-light
 Quite another scene. (Auden 23-30)

For Auden, the shield of Achilles is a terrible object of destruction, thus earning a description to fit. In response, Thetis “[cries] out in dismay / At what the god had wrought / To please her son, the strong / Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles / Who would not live long” (63-67). As Robert Pack’s “The Idea in the Mirror: Reflections on the Consciousness of Consciousness” points out, “Auden’s description of what [Hephaestus] has forged onto the shield is extensive and elaborate, just as in Homer’s *The Iliad*, but Auden’s . . . imagery on the shield is ugly and depressing” (Pack 60). Although Auden mimics Homer’s original structure, following a similar use of *ekphrasis*, he opposes the glory Homer uses to elevate the shield as a symbol of triumph. While Homer describes the shield of Achilles as encapsulating the world as a means of ultimate power and defense, Auden rejects Thetis’ idealism in order to reveal the true brutality of war.

Works Cited

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