



By Wystan Hugh Auden

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Understanding the Poem

1. The title, 'Refugee Blues' encapsulates the theme of the poem.

Comment.

Answer: Blues are African-American form of ballads that originated by the end of 19th century. They primarily are melancholic and sad and can be called as "the sad black slave's songs". In this Blue Ballad, Auden narrates the suffering of the Jews by Nazis, their persecution, the holocaust, the concentration camps, the rise of Fuhrer and Nazism. The poem revolves around a Jewish couple who escaped the Nazi Germany and emigrated to the United States of America. These refugees now sing this Blue talking of their agony and pain that they have nowhere to go to.

2. What is the poetic technique used by the poet to convey the plaintive theme of the poem?

Answer: Refugee Blues is a Blue Ballad. A form that defines his character. Ballads were popular in Ireland and Britain till 18th century while Blues were popular in African-American that originated at the end of 19th century. Auden, a British migrated to USA, blends the two techniques to bring out this beauty that sings the sorrows and sufferings of Jewish Refugees. The metre used in the poem is the same he used in his poem 'Calypso', written around the same time, 1930s. While Ballads were popular medieval forms of narrative verse while a Blue is a African-American music genre that has a rigid pattern concerning the use of repetitions and a simple rhyme scheme. In the poem, the first two lines of every stanza rhyme with each other, a tercet, while the third line draws a repetitive pattern, with the phrase "my dear" being repeated in every third line giving a unique uniformity to the poem. It is interesting to note that first word of every stanza is a verb. The poem is a first person narrative, in a colloquial and informal language.

3. What do the references to the birds and animals made in the poem suggest?

Answer: Refugee Blues is a melancholic poem that narrates the constant terror that hovers a Jew couple that escapes to America and their ordeal for no one sympathises with them. The constant fear of loss of home and death haunts them. They are unwelcome even to the new found land, America as they accuse them that they will take away their 'bread'. The poet juxtaposes the free birds and animals to the lives of Jews. The freedom that the Dog, Cat or Fish enjoy is not blessed to the Jew couple. They remember the orders of Fuhrer (Hitler) to wipe out the whole Jew race through the holocausts or concentration camps where they were thrust into gas chambers. It is brought out that even animals in America enjoy freedom and are respected; whereas, Jews in Germany have no right to live as per the Nazi regime. The narrator is upset that even a fish who is at the mere distance of 10 feet from the narrator can swim freely in the waters while the narrator is mourning at his and his wife's misery.

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