September 1, 1939

SUMMARY

I'm sitting in one of the cheap dive bars on 52nd Street in New York City feeling uncertain and afraid, as my hopes of a better time fade in the face of this decade's true nature: degraded and untruthful. Rushes of anger and fear are sweeping across countries all around the world and consuming the inner thoughts of everyday people. The terrible implication of death and war hangs over this September night like a bad smell.

History and scholarship can help explain the origins of this horror to the 15th century with Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation—which has right up until today twisted and rotted Germany's entire culture. Look to what happened at Linz (i.e., the birth of Adolf Hitler) and how his youthful influences made him into a psychopathic, power-hungry dictator. For I and everybody else know what all children learn at school: people who are harmed and bullied harm and bully others in return.

The exiled Greek general Thucydides understood what rhetoric can reveal about the state of democracy, and about what dictators are like—all the garbage they spew until their indifferent deaths. Thucydides analyzed it all in his book—how dictatorships edge out knowledge and reason, how the societies that dictators rule over become used to suffering, how poor governance and sorrow leave their mark. And now we must suffer all those same societal ills all over again.

Here, in this supposedly neutral country, the towering skyscrapers use all their might to present a facade of unity and democracy, but this high-minded rhetoric is just a cover-up. How long can people live under this pretense of a beautiful but false ideal? Eventually they look at themselves in the mirror and see their government's actions—imperialism and war—staring right back at them.

Other people sitting at the bar would rather hold on tight to the normality of their everyday lives—for the lights to stay on, the music to keep playing, as though nothing's wrong. All around us, the conventions of daily life work together to make this fortress we're living in feel like a home, preventing us from seeing where we really are—lost in haunted forest—and who we really are—vulnerable people afraid of the world's evils, who are neither as happy nor as innocent as we'd like to believe.

The meaningless propaganda championed by so-called Important People is not nearly as indecent as our own desires. What the ballet dancer Nijinsky wrote about his lover Diaghilev is true for everyone. The fundamental human flaw is that we all want what we cannot have: love for ourselves and ourselves only, rather than universal love that benefits everyone.

Out of the repressed muddle of their feelings and into moral life come everyday people, repeating their daily promises as they head off to work in the morning: "I will not cheat on my wife. I will apply myself harder at work." And above them, the so-called people in charge continue playing at governance, as their roles dictate they must. Who can free all these people? Who can be heard by those who don't want to listen, or speak on behalf on those who won't express themselves?

The only thing I have to offer is my own voice, but with that voice I can pierce through the lie embedded in society—the alluring lie that everyday people have absorbed, the lie that the government holds all the power. The truth is that "the State" as people think of it doesn't exist, and that none of us are powerless individuals. Don't all of us—citizens and authorities—experience hunger the same way? We must care for one another, or die divided.

Helplessly ignorant, most of our world sits in a vulnerable daze. Even so, all around, pinpricks of unexpected hope shine wherever those committed to justice connect with one another. Oh, may I, though I am just another human made of desire and dust, and stricken by the same cynicism and worry, do the same, and support their hope with my own voice.

THEMES

STATE AUTHORITY VS. INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Throughout “September 1, 1939” the speaker denounces the fascism taking hold abroad, which “darken[s] the lands of the earth” and has “the unmentionable odour of death.” The poem’s condemnation goes beyond fascist *government*, however, as the speaker also lays the blame at the feet of individual people for the “evil” that their governments carry out. In fact, the speaker insists, because governments are made up of imperfect individuals, it is necessary for everyday citizens to question their governments’ motives and authority. In the poem’s view, the idea of a unified, benevolent state working on behalf of its people is an illusion—and it is vital that people learn to see through this illusion to avoid become complicit in the state’s wrongdoings.

The poem immediately links the outbreak of war in Europe to individual people whose decisions, past or present, have shaped the fate of nations (in particular, Germany). It starts with implicit references to the rise of fascist Germany, which has the speaker feeling “uncertain and afraid.” And though the poem is firmly rooted in this moment, it traces the origins of “the whole offence” all the way back to Martin Luther, the 15th-century

leader of the Protestant Reformation, before connecting it to another individual, a "psychopathic" man born in "Linz"—Adolf Hitler. These references show how individual people have played an outsize, damaging role in influencing societal behavior. In doing so, the poem undermines the idea of the state as some sort of infallible, intangible entity that exists separately from people themselves.

From there, the poem sets about deconstructing the notion of a state or nation dedicated to the common good. The speaker pokes holes in the idea of "the strength of Collective Man," or a government that exists to serve its citizens, even in a supposedly safe, comfortable, or "neutral" country like the United States (in which the poem is set).

The notion of a government working on behalf of its people, the speaker argues, is but a "euphoric dream." In other words, language of strength and unity is an "excuse" covering up the fact that every government exploits its citizens' trust and ignorance in order to do harm. In reality, the speaker insists, every individual must confront "Imperialism's face"—or the actions of their government—in the mirror.

Thus, though people are inclined bury their heads in the sand and "cling to their average day," the speaker exhorts readers to look instead at who they really are: "children afraid of the night / who have never been happy or good." Once people have reckoned with their true role in current events and the shaping of history, the speaker argues, they will be able to see through "the lie of Authority," or the mistaken belief that somebody else, somebody higher up, is the one really pulling the strings.

The poem therefore ends by arguing, somewhat paradoxically, that people must identify as *individuals* even as they recognize their power as a *group*. "There is no such thing as the State," the speaker declares, and, at the same time, "no one exists alone." It is up to each person, in other words, to contribute to the common good. Otherwise, each individual is guilty of being a mere "face along the bar," distracted into ignoring or even colluding with governmental "evil[s]" like those going on in Europe. Put more poetically, in the poem's most famous line: "We must love one another or die."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-99

LOVE, CONNECTION, AND JUSTICE

In the poem's most famous line, the speaker declares, "We must love one another or die." The speaker consistently argues for the benefits of human connection, rejecting the all-too-human impulse to desire "not universal love / but to be loved alone." It's far better for society, the speaker argues, for people to acknowledge that "no one exists alone," and with that knowledge, to connect with others who are "Just." Only by overcoming selfishness and working together, the speaker insists, can people keep the "affirming flame" of hope and love burning bright. To put it bluntly, human survival itself depends on love.

The first half of the poem is largely concerned with "evil" and all the ways in which society enables bad actors and wrongdoing to flourish. Dictators spew worthless "rubbish," for example, that drives away rational, enlightened thinking. Evil also begets evil, the speaker argues, implying that some "huge imago"—or early influence—shaped Hitler into a cruel, power-hungry dictator. There is also the more subtle but no less damaging "blind[ness]" of people in places like the United States, who "cling to their average day"—that is, go about their regular lives—while avoiding the harsh reality of war overseas. Through these examples, the speaker identifies and condemns people's selfishness and seeming indifference to brutality. Human beings are all guilty of the same sin of self-absorption, the speaker says, which allows evil to go unchecked.

At first, the speaker seems at a loss for how to combat this problem. He laments that most people are self-centered, indifferent, or disempowered by society—metaphorically "deaf" and "dumb." But in the following stanza, the speaker identifies a solution: "All I have is a voice." Despite describing this solution as meager, the speaker also admits that this "voice" can help "to undo the folded lie" of fascism, complicity, and "Authority."

What's more, that voice is not alone: "dotted everywhere" are "points of light," which "flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages." In other words, the speaker's voice, though singular, is one of many such singular voices, lighting up the darkness. When these voices are able to connect, they "show an affirming flame" that helps combat the "negation and despair" described earlier in the poem. In sum, poems like this one, and other messages of love and hope, serve as a way to "love one another," and thus keep justice alive in the face of evil.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-8
- Lines 12-33
- Lines 59-66
- Lines 75-77
- Lines 78-88
- Lines 91-99

THE REPETITION OF HISTORY

Though "September 1, 1939" was inspired by and takes place during the events of 1939, it explicitly connects that moment to others from the past. Citing the ancient Greek philosopher Thucydides, the speaker draws parallels between the rise of fascism in the 20th century and similar antidemocratic forces throughout history. The poem's denouncement of fascism thus clearly links the suffering of the

modern era to that of the past, arguing that people have made the same mistakes before, and, unfortunately, seem doomed to repeat these historical patterns and "suffer [...] again." In short, the speaker argues that history repeats itself.

The speaker insists that the "low dishonest decade" he is currently living through can be understood by looking to the past, saying, "Accurate scholarship can / unearth the whole offence." In other words, looking back at what previous historians and scholars have written sheds light on the present. In this case, the speaker looks to "Luther," the 15th-century religious reformer, and traces his impact in "driv[ing] a whole culture mad" all the way up to "what occurred at Linz"—the birth of Adolf Hitler.

The speaker again looks toward the past for guidance when citing Thucydides, an ancient Greek general and historian. The speaker specifically references Thucydides's writings on "Democracy, / And what dictators do," implying that Thucydides's insights into anti-democratic politics in his own time apply equally well to 1939. According to the speaker, the hallmarks of fascism include "the elderly rubbish [that dictators] talk," "enlightenment driven away," a society stricken with "mismanagement and grief," and people grown accustomed to "pain"—all of which were first documented by Thucydides in the fifth century B.C.E.

Yet despite the scholarship that clearly identifies the qualities and outcomes of a dictator, "we must suffer [these ills] all again," the speaker laments. Though *he* keenly spots the parallels between the past and present, most people "cling to their average day," ignorant of or indifferent to the warning signs of anti-democratic forces.

Importantly, the poem and speaker do suggest that certain stalwart individuals—"the Just"—can help fight back against these anti-democratic forces. The speaker himself claims that his "voice" can help "undo the folded lie, / the romantic lie in the brain" to which authoritarianism appeals. All the same, the poem closes by declaring that the world of 1939 is "in [a] stupor" and "defenceless," since most people are doing nothing to prevent the rise of fascism—thereby enabling history to repeat itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 12-33
- Lines 45-55
- Lines 78-82
- Lines 89-94

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

I sit in ...
... low dishonest decade:

"September 1, 1939" opens by establishing its setting. The poem's title alludes to a major event: the Nazi German invasion of Poland, which is now remembered as a tipping point in the outbreak of World War II. The first two lines, however, indicate that the poem's physical location is many miles away from the invasion. It is set instead in a "dive" bar "on Fifty-second Street" in New York City (where the poet was living at the time).

These opening lines also introduce the poem's speaker, a first-person voice who describes not just his location at the bar, but also his emotions as he sits there: "Uncertain and afraid." Following this forthright admission, lines 4 and 5 clarify the cause of the speaker's uncertainty, and also shed light on the poem's central concern: the rise of authoritarianism.

As the speaker sees it, the "low dishonest decade" of the 1930s, which bore witness to the rise of fascism across Europe, is about to "expire" (or end), and along with it, any "clever" but naive "hopes" that the speaker (and others) may have had for a better, less frightening time.

In keeping with the poem's dark themes, the language of these opening lines also helps create a foreboding atmosphere right from the start. A strong current of sibilance runs ominously through these early lines, in words like "sit," "second," "street," "uncertain," and "dishonest," while the alliterative /d/ sounds in "dishonest decade" create a steady drumbeat of fear. Lines 3 and 5 rhyme as well (despite the poem's overall lack of a consistent rhyme scheme) thus further linking the emotions of the speaker and the terrible times he is living in through the matching sounds of "afraid" and "decade."

LINES 6-11

Waves of anger ...
... the September night.

Lines 6-11 of the poem continue to elaborate on the reasons behind the speaker's fear and uncertainty. Using vivid imagery, the speaker describes the rise of fascism in Europe via metaphors that draw on the natural world—waves, light and dark, strong smells—as if to suggest that the earth itself is decaying or deteriorating. The "odour of death" is both a metaphor and a reference to the speaker's growing sense that war and death are literally approaching.

All these "waves of anger and fear" are not natural, the speaker implies, but rather deeply bound up in human affairs. The shared /l/ sounds in "lands" and "lives" underscore how deeply embedded the speaker's feeling of dread truly is, invading both public spaces (people's countries or "lands") and private ones (their regular "lives").

The end of the stanza uses assonance (for instance, the long /i/ sounds in "bright," "private lives," and "night") and consonance (such as the sharp /t/ sounds in "circulate," "bright," "private," "September" and "night") to create a claustrophobic, ominous

feeling as well.

By the close of the first stanza, the poem has covered a great deal of ground, summing up in just 11 lines the current events of the day and the speaker's prescient sense that as bad as the 1930s have been, what is about to follow will only get worse.

LINES 12-15

Accurate scholarship can ...
... a culture mad,

The second stanza of the poem looks back at Germany's history in order to understand how the issues of 1939 arose in the first place.

Rather than rely on his own perception of what's happening, the speaker points readers to "accurate scholarship," suggesting that experts in history and culture can help "unearth the whole offence [...] that has driven a culture mad." The implication here is that the crisis at hand—that of rising fascism—is the result of something much deeper than current events.

Indeed, the speaker states that the roots of this cultural rot may date back hundreds of years, to Martin "Luther," the 15th-century religious reformer whose Protestant Reformation transformed German and European history. This is a grave idea, implying that something is deeply broken—"offen[sive]"—at the center of German culture.

The enjambment across these first four lines of the stanza is crucial to conveying the scope and horror of the speaker's realization. The poem pulls readers forward in a rush as the lines sprawl down the page. The fragmentation here (the way that the sentence is chopped up into different lines) also helps capture how the speaker haltingly works his way through the complex and frightening idea that most of German history has led up to this one terrifying moment of September 1, 1939.

Interestingly, however, the speaker never once explicitly names Germany in this stanza, nor does he directly define "the whole offence" as he perceives it (apart from the ideas explored earlier in the poem's first stanza). In other words, despite his citation of "accurate scholarship," the speaker himself is not particularly precise here; only the explicit allusion to "Luther" (together with readers' knowledge of the date referenced by the poem's title) helps pin the reference down and clarify the subject at hand.

LINES 16-22

Find what occurred ...
... evil in return.

The second half of the second stanza continues the process of sorting though the causes behind the "whole offence [...] that has driven a culture mad"—that is, the reasons why Germany has taken an authoritarian turn. Having already traced the issue's roots back to the 15th-century and Martin Luther, the poem now pivots to the present day, in 1939. "Find what occurred at Linz," the speaker suggests.

Linz is a city in Austria, and certainly a lot of things have occurred there over the course of European history! But in the context of the poem, the speaker is alluding to the birth and youth of Adolf Hitler, who grew up there.

The lines that follow then reference Jungian psychoanalysis (that is, psychoanalysis in the style of the famous Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung). The speaker suggests that a "huge imago," or negative parental influence, "made / A psychopathic god" out of young Hitler, resulting in the power-hungry dictator who rose to prominence throughout the 1930s and, on September 1, 1939, had just invaded Poland.

However, the speaker seems not to fully *believe* in psychoanalytic theory. Instead, in lines 21-22, he offers a simpler explanation:

> Those to whom evil is done
> Do evil in return.

The speaker is essentially comparing Hitler's psychopathy to schoolyard politics, saying that his behavior can be explained by the same rule that governs most schoolchildren's behavior: when a child is harmed or bullied, he often harms and bullies others. This statement is also a subtle allusion to the First World War, which Germany lost, resulting in punitive social, economic, and military measures under the final peace treaty. The implication is that Hitler, having felt that "evil [was] done" to him and his country, is now "do[ing] evil in return."

Fittingly, however, given the childish metaphor, the language here takes on a singsong cadence, rhyming "learn" and "return" and repeating (and inverting) the phrase "evil is done" (making this moment an example of the poetic device antimetabole). All this helps to emphasize the speaker's simpler, more matter-of-fact explanation for on how Hitler came to be.

LINES 23-28

Exiled Thucydides knew ...
... an apathetic grave;

The poem jumps back in time yet again, abandoning the specifics of Nazi-era Germany in order for the speaker to unpack authoritarianism more broadly. Once again, he turns to "accurate scholarship" as first described in line 12. This time, however, the scholar specifically cited and alluded to is "Exiled Thucydides," an ancient Greek general and historian.

Thucydides, claims the speaker, "knew all that a speech can say / About Democracy, / And what dictators do." In other words, as far back as the fifth century B.C.E., Thucydides was documenting the type of "speech," or rhetoric, that extinguishes democracy and gives rise to dictatorship.

Thanks to Thucydides, the speaker can pinpoint such rhetoric

as "elderly rubbish," a scornful way of describing propaganda and disinformation. No matter that these dictators often ultimately find themselves in "an apathetic grave"—or that their deaths go unmourned. These lines are explicitly condemnatory of dictators and authoritarians, and the damage they do through language.

These lines also make clear that while the times may change, the patterns of history and the tactics of people who shape history do not. Taken together with the stanza that precedes this one, the poem has clearly begun to hint at a cycle of history that appears doomed to repeat: the rise and fall of authoritarian thinking and governing.

This cycle is emphasized linguistically in these lines through consonance and alliteration. Note the mixture of heavy /d/ sounds, hissing /s/ sibilance, and sharp /t/ and /k/ sounds throughout the passage:

> Exiled Thucydides knew
> All that a speech can say
> About Democracy,
> And what dictators do,
> The elderly rubbish they talk
> To an apathetic grave;

The mixture of these sounds makes the lines feel biting and bitter. The popping /p/ sounds of "speech" and "apathetic" and the /b/ sound of "rubbish" add to the effect.

Also note the repetitive syntax of the line "all that a speech can say." This is an example of polyptoton, which both mimics and mocks the repetitive nature of fascist propaganda.

LINES 29-33

Analysed all in ...
... them all again.

The third stanza concludes by continuing to allude to and assess what the ancient Greek general and historian Thucydides had to say about democracy and dictatorship. Specifically, lines 29-33 unpack what Thucydides "analysed [...] in his book": the various warning signs and outcomes of authoritarian rule.

These lines make effective use of asyndeton, piling each fresh horror on top of the next to paint a bleak picture of what life looks like under fascism:

> The enlightenment driven away,
> The habit-forming pain,
> Mismanagement and grief:

These are among the most specific and pointed details in the poem, very clearly outlining what the speaker (and poet) expect from tyrannical government: the repression of rational thought, "pain" and suffering on a consistent basis, mismanaged government, and "grief," or sorrow. Though they are introduced here in relation to Thucydides and ancient Greece, the speaker ultimately concludes that tyrannical warning signs are present in 1939—and thus their outcomes must also be expected: "We must suffer them all again."

In other words, history repeats itself. The language in these lines emphasizes this point, most pointedly through the end rhyme of "pain" and "again" in lines 31 and 33. In addition, these lines contain a heavy helping of consonance and assonance. The lines' repetitive sounds (such as the long /ay/ vowels of "away" and "pain") emphasize the repetition nature of history.

LINES 34-39

Into this neutral ...
... Competitive excuse:

The fourth stanza of "September 1, 1939" once again shifts focus—this time back to New York City, where the speaker is currently located. In a long, run-on clause (making up just the first half of the stanza's one sentence) the speaker assesses his surroundings.

Using architecture as a metaphor, the speaker interrogates the idea of New York City—and the United States more generally—as a paragon of democratic success. U.S. citizens believe in "the strength of Collective Man," or the power of unified democracy, as embodied by the striking skyscrapers who "use their full height" to proclaim their nation's strength. But the speaker believes these grand words and buildings are just an "excuse" covering up the reality on the ground.

The skyscrapers take on symbolic resonance here. They project an image of national unity and government authority, but this image is an illusion, the poem argues. In fact, the towers overshadow the people who live within and beneath them, thus enabling those people to carry on "blindly," assuming that they are protected by democracy (or "the strength of Collective Man") without actually putting in any effort to uphold its ideals. In sum, the speaker isn't buying this show of successful democracy.

The reference to "neutral air" also alludes to, and subtly denigrates, the U.S.'s deliberate neutrality in the growing European conflict, despite pressure from both sides to get more involved. Americans' prioritization of neutrality and comfort is, in the speaker's view, akin to "blindness," and a leading reason that its people are being hoodwinked into trusting their government to act benevolently on their behalf.

LINES 40-44

But who can ...
... the international wrong.

In lines 40-44, having questioned the idea of a strong and unified American democracy, the speaker then insists that its citizens must eventually come to terms with reality. After all,

"who can live for long / In an euphoric dream," he asks rhetorically, explicitly comparing the supposedly safe, secure, and "neutral" cocoon of American society to a blissful fantasy.

Once people have woken from this dream, the speaker suggests, they will realize that their idealized country is in fact guilty of wrongdoing on an international scale. What's more, so are they. In the lines that follow, the speaker lays the blame for governmental misdeeds at the feet of individual citizen themselves—who look into the mirror and see "Imperialism's face / And the international wrong" staring back at them.

What this metaphor suggests is that individual citizens are not as individual as they think, but rather are complicit in their governments' actions. On their own, each person may prefer to "live [...] in an euphoric dream" and ignore those actions, but in reality, every person is part of the group of citizens that together makes up the nation as a whole. And eventually, people must confront the truth—that their government exploits their trust and ignorance in order to do harm—in the same way they confront their own reflections in the mirror.

LINES 45-48

Faces along the ...
... must always play,

The fifth stanza opens by describing the politically ignorant or indifferent people who populate the poem and the world of 1939. The speaker describes them as "Faces along the bar," implying that some of them are right there beside him in the dive bar on 52nd Street. Unlike the speaker, however, they are not mulling over the situation in Europe. Instead, the speaker says, they "Cling to their average day"—to their normal, ordinary lives.

In other words, most people have distracted themselves with the performance of their daily lives instead of paying attention to the mechanics of power operating all around them. The choice of the verb "cling" suggests a certain tension or ferocity—hinting at the theme of selfish individualism that runs throughout the poem.

The mention of "lights" and "music," meanwhile, suggests this ordinary life as a kind of frivolous performance. This metaphor of life as a kind song-and-dance show, combined with the neat end rhymes of "day" and "play," lends these lines a light, tuneful air.

Similarly, the parallelism of "The lights must never go out" and "The music must always play" captures the routine quality of these people's lives. In short, the language of these lines mimics the very frivolity that the speaker is condemning.

LINES 49-55

All the conventions ...
... happy or good.

The poem continues to pierce the bubble in which so many people have taken shelter from the political reality of their lives. That shelter, in fact, is daily life itself, as the speaker points out via metaphor.

In this metaphor, society as a whole is a "fort"—a place that keeps people protected, or imprisoned. The "conventions" or customs of everyday life are personified as scheming together to disguise this fort, making it seem as cozy as a "home."

No wonder then, if even this narrow and confined society can be made to seem comfortable, that people have trouble understanding what's really going on around them—are unable, as the poem puts it, to "see where we [really] are, / Lost in a haunted wood."

But though they may see themselves as innocent of their countries' political plots, this is a mirage, the speaker insists—as false as the fairy tales alluded to here via both the imagery of haunted forests and children being scared of the dark. The rhyming, assonant, and consonant language here plays up that fairy tale quality as well (note the shared sounds of "wood" and "good"; "we," "see," and "we"; "lest" and "lost").

The speaker is saying that living in the "fort" of every day "conventions" allows most people to feel "happy" and "good"—to believe themselves innocent of any wrongdoing and free from responsibility for their circumstances. It may seem a preferable state to being "afraid," but the speaker here suggests that society would be better off if instead everyone recognized that they are in fact complicit in their societies' behaviors—that they are people "who have never been happy or good."

Note the plural pronoun here ("we"), which indicates that the speaker sees himself as part of this same population: vulnerable and frightened, like "children afraid of the night." The implication is that *everyone* feels this way, that everyone has been tricked by government and society into feeling more secure than they really are. All the more reason, then, for everyone to wake up to the reality of how the world works, and, most importantly, their roles within it. Only then, the poem argues, might individuals make collective change.

LINES 56-61

The windiest militant ...
... the normal heart;

The sixth stanza opens with a return to political propaganda, which it describes as "The windiest militant trash / Important Persons shout." The ironic capitalization of "Important Persons" tells readers exactly how the speaker feels about these so-called VIPs—that is, he does not think their words have much worth at all.

Even so, in line 58 he makes an interesting comparison, suggesting that even this "trash[y]" propaganda is less "crude," or indecent, than "our wish." Once again, as in the preceding stanza, the speaker here groups himself together with the rest of humanity. He turns to another allusion, however, to illustrate

this universal wish that regular people share:

> What mad Nijinsky wrote
> About Diaghilev
> Is true of the normal heart;

Vaslav Nijinsky was a ballet dancer in turn-of-the-century Russia, and Serge Diaghilev, a ballet and opera producer, was his lover. In the diaries Nijinsky left behind, he describes a romance turned sour, in no small part because Nijinsky married a woman and ended their relationship. The possessiveness, jealousy, and retribution that ensued—Diaghilev did his best to ensure Nijinsky would never work as a dancer again—is what the speaker here refers to as "true of the normal heart," or in simpler terms, a universal human emotion. In other words, the speaker is pointing out that selfishness is a trait all people share.

LINES 62-66

For the error ...
... be loved alone.

The speaker continues to elaborate on the universal emotion of selfishness that the first half of the stanza described as both "crude" and "normal." He begins by calling it an "error" natural to all men and women. Here the speaker makes implicit allusion to original sin, saying that this "error" (this selfishness) is something so inherent to people that it is "bred in the bone" of every human being. The alliteration of "bred" and "bone" underscores the idea that this selfishness is a basic part of human nature.

At the same time, the speaker narrows the broad selfishness of human beings to the more specific, still all-too-human desire "to be loved alone." He pits this selfish desire for individual love against "universal love," or a love dedicated more broadly to society at large. He also insists that such individual love is impossible—a "crav[ing]" that people "cannot have."

These lines get to what the speaker believes is the heart of the issue that the poem has been unpacking from the start. What people *want* is selfish and individualistic, like Diaghilev's intense desire for Nijinsky's love, as alluded to in the lines above. What society *needs* is a more universal love instead, a love that benefits everyone. But because people spend all their time pursuing the former, (which can never, the speaker argues, be obtained) the latter is impossible to achieve as well. No wonder, then, that bad governments and power-hungry dictators flourish, given everyone's singular, obsessive focus on themselves rather than on society as a whole.

The poem's language here hints at this cyclical pattern in which individual selfishness ultimately results in exploitation by the powerful. Note the parallelism ("each woman and each man") and repetition (of "love" and "loved"). The language feels circular and inescapable.

LINES 67-74

From the conservative ...
... their compulsory game:

In the seventh stanza, the speaker focuses on city life as a way to further illustrate the broken, selfish society that the poem has been describing. Here, the speaker compares the everyday people who allow authoritarianism to thrive to "dense commuters," rushing in and out of the city without paying attention to their surroundings.

When they do bother to come up "from the conservative dark / Into the ethical life," or to probe their values and society more deeply, they still end up focused on themselves—repeating narrow, personal mantras:

> "I will be true to the wife,
> I'll concentrate more on my work,

Meanwhile, the "helpless governors," or power-players of government, "resume their compulsory game." The use of "game" as a metaphor for politics, capitalism, and social control speaks volumes about how the speaker and the poem believe those in charge view their roles. It's no more than a game to them—despite the vast implications their decisions have other their citizens and countries as a whole.

Importantly, however, in the speaker's view, these governmental powerbrokers are as powerless as the people they rule over. He describes them as "helpless," equally trapped by the broken but "compulsory," or mandatory, systems of false democracy as everybody else.

LINES 75-77

Who can release ...
... for the dumb?

Lines 75-77 reflect an important shift in the poem, as the speaker turns from analysis of the situation at hand—the rise of fascism and the outbreak of war—to a search for a solution. To mark the moment, the poem uses both anaphora and aporia.

The anaphora—or repetition of "Who can" at the start of three successive lines—is perhaps the most noticeable of the poetic devices at work here. It captures the dire nature of the speaker's plight and his desperation to find a way to reach the people who have been disempowered, rendered speechless, or simply made indifferent to the broken society in which they live. In addition, the repetitive structure of his lament emphasizes the speaker's isolation in those concerns. He is casting about for somebody, anybody, and coming up short.

In addition, the use of aporia (and more specifically rhetorical questions) also helps to underscore the speaker's desperation and isolation. After multiple stanzas shrewdly analyzing and dissecting the crisis at hand, the fact that even a learned man like the speaker, who has quite thoroughly diagnosed the

reasons that fascism is growing stronger overseas, finds himself faced with doubt and overwhelm provides these lines with their poignancy.

The use of aporia here also gives readers a chance to think of their own solution—to ask who can reach out to the uninformed masses, or speak on behalf of those who lack the ability to express themselves.

Finally, these lines allude to the Bible, specifically Proverbs 31.8, which pushes people to speak up on behalf of those who cannot. This allusion elevates the stakes of the poem, suggesting that the fight to stop rising fascism is as important as biblical events.

LINES 78-83

All I have ...
... grope the sky:

In response to the searching questions at the end of the previous stanza, these lines present a possible solution. The speaker presents his voice—perhaps even this very poem—as the antidote to "the lie of Authority" that he has been dissecting and criticizing over the course of the poem.

Using vivid imagery, the speaker describes this lie as "folded" and "romantic," perhaps for the first time sympathizing with the urge to give in to that part of "the brain" that wishes to believe in "the sensual man-in-the-street," or the everyman without societal power or responsibility. The poem also once again links "Authority," or the illusion of a strong and benevolent government, with "buildings [that] grope the sky."

The return of these symbolic skyscrapers serves as a reminder of the foundational issue at the core of the poem and this stanza. This is a battle over who will win the hearts and minds of everyday people: the "Authority," which relies on propaganda and grandeur to hoodwink their citizenry into complacency and complicity, or the "voice[s]" like that of the speaker (and the poet), which seek to "undo" this falsehood and open people's eyes to the reality of their political circumstances.

LINES 84-88

There is no ...
... another or die.

The second half of the eighth stanza is perhaps the most famous portion of the poem. The speaker, having just realized that his poetic voice has the power to counter authoritarianism, grows ever stronger in that voice, and declares:

> There is no such thing as the State
> And no one exists alone;
> Hunger allows no choice
> To the citizen or the police;
> We must love one another or die.

These lines are radical. The claim that "There is no such thing as the State" boldly undermines the idea of the state, or government, as some sort of infallible, intangible entity that exists apart from and above citizens themselves.

At the same time, however, the subsequent declaration that "no one exists alone" serves as an important reminder that though there is no all-powerful government, there *are* collective entities that move societies on a large scale. These entities are not governments, but rather groups made up of distinct people whose individual actions add up into collective efforts. In other words, each individual person in any given society contributes to the common good (or bad, depending on their choices).

The speaker hopes, however, that people will make good choices. In fact, he believes the world is in such a dire state that there is very little choice at all—he metaphorically compares the rise of fascism to famine, stating that "hunger allows no choice / to the citizen or the police." In other words, things are so bleak that both everyday people and those in power have no choice but to band together for protection and survival. As the speaker puts it, in the poem's most famous line: "We must love one another or die."

Later, W.H. Auden came to believe this line was "dishonest." Looking back years after writing the poem, and after the horrific destruction of World War II, he revised the line to read, "We must love another *and* die." In other words, he no longer believed that a citizenry committed to the common good could protect one another. Nevertheless, even this altered line suggests that love, or human connection, is fundamental to society.

LINES 89-94

Defenceless under the ...
... Exchange their messages:

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker zooms back out to the perspective that opened the poem by considering the world as a whole, which he describes as "defenceless under the night" of fascism, and lying "in stupor," or in a daze. In these first two lines, he makes clear that he has no illusions about the deep danger the world faces, and the responsibility it holds for the coming catastrophe.

Nevertheless, the speaker is not entirely without hope. In line 91, the word "Yet," introduces an important alternate perspective:

> Yet, dotted everywhere,
> Ironic points of light
> Flash out wherever the Just
> Exchange their messages:

This metaphor, which compares the human connection of people working for justice to "points of light" that "flash" in the darkness, suggests that all hope is not lost. Ironically, the

speaker says, despite the bleak situation, there are still people "dotted everywhere" doing their best to fight back. When these voices are able to connect, they enable "the Just," a metonym that stands in for the collective individual members of society countering authoritarianism, to work together against the selfishness and ignorance that the poem decries.

Importantly, this fight and connection is described through the imagery of people "exchang[ing...] messages," which recalls the earlier moment when the speaker identified his voice as a possible solution to the appeal of authoritarianism. Once again, it is language—voices, messages, words—that is best suited to counter the "elderly rubbish" of fascist rhetoric and propaganda introduced much earlier in the poem as a source of evil and wrongdoing.

LINES 95-99

May I, composed ...
... an affirming flame.

Last but not least, in lines 95-99, the poet explicitly groups himself voice with "the Just / Exchang[ing] their messages" in the fight against authoritarianism. It's a pivotal moment, signaling that the speaker understands that his voice, though singular, is one of many such singular voices, lighting up the darkness.

The poem presents this moment of identification and epiphany in a form that resemble a hope or a prayer. This serves as a subtle reminder of the poem's unique setting and perspective—looking forward from the cusp of conflict to the long road ahead—as the speaker offers up a wish to "Show an affirming flame." In other words, the speaker wants to add his voice to the hopeful chorus of "the Just."

Notably, and as befits the poem's clear-eyed view of the crisis, the speaker, though hopeful, is not full of unbridled optimism. In these final lines, he puts himself down slightly, moderating his wish by describing himself as just another powerless human being, made up of desire (Eros is an allusion to the Greek god of love and lust) and "dust" (perhaps a reference to the biblical idea of human beings coming from and returning to "dust"). What's more, he knows that he is also weighed down by "negation and despair" (and so do readers, having just waded through many stanzas of this despair!).

Nevertheless, the speaker's hope still prevails. He hopes that in the face of this despair, he may nevertheless "show an affirming flame." This symbol of the flame, which represents human connection, love, and resistance, belongs to the same metaphorical family as the "points of light" used just a few lines above to describe others fighting for justice. It also alludes to light and flame as a universal symbol of hope, as well as a New York-specific symbol of freedom from oppression (as embodied by the Statue of Liberty).

Ultimately, therefore, the poem ends by suggesting that though the speaker may feel alone, he is one of many such "flames," lighting up the darkness. Similarly, these lines suggest that this poem is one of many such messages of love and hope, which will hopefully serve as a means of society learning to "love one another," and thus keep justice alive in the face of growing evil.

SYMBOLS

SKYSCRAPERS

The poem's skyscrapers represent authority—or, perhaps more accurately, the way that the state projects an *image* of authority and power. They are linked in the poem to the way that governments, like towers, cast a shadow from on high over the people who live beneath them, enabling those people to carry on "blindly" while assuming the people in charge hold all the power.

Skyscrapers first appear in the fourth stanza (though their presence is suggested as early as the second line, when the speaker locates himself and the poem "on Fifty-second Street"—an allusion to New York City and its unique skyline). The buildings themselves, however, don't come into play until line 35. Here, the speaker interrogates the "neutral air" of New York and the United States, which enables Americans to ignore the war brewing overseas in Europe.

The speaker personifies the skyscrapers, described first as "blind" and then as deliberately "us[ing] their full height" to make a proclamation, or statement of power and unity:

> Into this neutral air
> Where blind skyscrapers use
> Their full height to proclaim
> The strength of Collective Man,
> Each language pours its vain
> Competitive excuse:

The skyscrapers' physical strength and grandeur are meant to project a social strength—that of "Collective Man," or of unified democracy.

But the speaker swiftly undercuts this idea, calling it a "vain competitive excuse." The skyscrapers, through their height and majesty, may make the "euphoric dream" of an ideal democracy *appear* like reality, but that dream only prevails because most people are too busy "cling[ing] to their average day[s]" to reckon with reality.

Later in the poem, the speaker once again deconstructs the skyscrapers' suggestion of strength and power, this time using his individual voice to pierce through what he calls "the lie of Authority." In line 83, the speaker links skyscrapers with this lie, stating that while buildings belonging to the powerful may "grope the sky," nevertheless "there is no such as the State."

Despite the hierarchy, strength, and unity suggested by towering architecture, in fact the state of the nation is really determined by the individuals who live beneath them.The personification here ironically reinforces this idea; the skyscrapers present an image of authority separate from regular people, but in fact they're just buildings.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "On Fifty-second Street"
- **Lines 34-39:** "Into this neutral air / Where blind skyscrapers use / Their full height to proclaim / The strength of Collective Man, / Each language pours its vain / Competitive excuse:"
- **Lines 82-83:** "the lie of Authority / Whose buildings grope the sky:"

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Light and flame in the poem symbolize hope, resistance, and connection. Darkness, it follows, represents ignorance and oppression. Ordinary people live in "the conservative dark," the speaker says in line 67, and are "Defenceless under the night," lying "in stupor." In other words, the speaker believes that the average person goes about their life in a sort of ignorant daze, believing themselves to be powerless and thus tuning out the suffering of others. It's also no coincidence that the speaker begins the poem on a "September night," implying that the "odour of death" wafts over a land whose citizens are metaphorically asleep—their eyes shut to the growing danger creeping in all around them.

Glimmers of hope appear at last in the poem's final stanza, when the speaker suggests that the force capable of countering the evils of fascism is human connection. The speaker refers to the voices of those who speak out against authoritarianism, or in support of love and hope, as metaphorical "point[s] of light," which "flash out wherever" those fighting for justice connect.

Then, in the poem's final lines, the speaker offers a final hope or prayer that he (and his poetic voice) may number among that group:

> May I, composed like them
> Of Eros and of dust,
> Beleaguered by the same
> Negation and despair,
> Show an affirming flame.

Echoing the others' "points of light," the speaker's "affirming flame" clearly links the speaker with their just cause. The use of a flame as a symbol for hope in the face of fear, and freedom in the face of oppression, is a potent one, recalling other powerful and symbolic flames—such as the one carried by the Statue of Liberty, a fitting allusion given the poem's New York setting.

But the stanza makes clear that these lights and flames are "dotted everywhere," connecting anyone the world over who refutes the "negation and despair" of fascism and chooses hope instead.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "The unmentionable odour of death / Offends the September night."
- **Line 30:** "The enlightenment driven away,"
- **Lines 52-54:** "Lest we should see where we are, / Lost in a haunted wood, / Children afraid of the night"
- **Lines 67-68:** "From the conservative dark / Into the ethical life"
- **Lines 89-90:** "Defenceless under the night / Our world in stupor lies;"
- **Lines 91-94:** "Yet, dotted everywhere, / Ironic points of light / Flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages:"
- **Lines 95-99:** "May I, composed like them / Of Eros and of dust, / Beleaguered by the same / Negation and despair, / Show an affirming flame."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used sparingly in "September 1, 1939," which for the most part is informal and conversational. When alliteration does show up, then, it packs a subtly powerful punch, helping link together the poem's language and themes. For example, take a look at these lines from the first stanza:

> I sit in one of the dives
> On Fifty-second Street
> [...]
> Of a low dishonest decade:

Here, the sibilance of "sit," "second," and "Street" immediately initiates a hushed, ominous tone—fitting for the poem's discussion of dark themes such as fascism and authoritarianism.

Soon after, the repeated thudding /d/ sounds of "dishonest decade" helps further evoke, on a linguistic level, the dark atmosphere that the poem is describing—one of "anger and fear." The alliteration of "dishonest decade" hammers home the speaker's disappointment and disgust with the time he is living through. (Note that /d/ sounds also appear in "dives," "darkened," and "death" and add to the stanza's power, though these are perhaps a bit too far apart to characterize as true alliteration.)

Throughout the poem, alliteration continues to be used in this fashion—not in every line or every stanza, but certainly in major

moments, in order to more fully evoke or emphasize the ideas and feelings being described. Take, for example, the hard /c/ sound that alliterates in "Collective Man" and "Competitive excuse." This sharp sound draws readers' attention to these phrases, and also links them together. This makes sense, given that the speaker argues that those impressive skyscrapers—buildings that seem to embody the power of "Collective Man"—are really just a facade, an "excuse" to distract regular people from the truth of their lives.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "second Street"
- **Line 5:** "dishonest decade"
- **Lines 21-22:** "done / Do"
- **Line 25:** "Democracy"
- **Line 26:** "dictators do"
- **Line 37:** "Collective"
- **Line 39:** "Competitive"
- **Line 40:** "live," "long"
- **Line 43:** "Imperialism's"
- **Line 44:** "international"
- **Line 48:** "music must"
- **Line 49:** "conventions conspire"
- **Line 50:** "fort"
- **Line 51:** "furniture"
- **Line 52:** "Lest," "we," "where we"
- **Line 53:** "Lost," "wood"
- **Line 62:** "bred," "bone"
- **Line 64:** "Craves," "cannot"
- **Line 67:** "conservative," "dark"
- **Line 69:** "dense," "commuters come"
- **Line 71:** "wife"
- **Line 72:** "work"
- **Line 75:** "release"
- **Line 76:** "reach," "deaf"
- **Line 77:** "dumb"
- **Line 81:** "sensual," "street"
- **Line 94:** "messages"
- **Line 95:** "May"
- **Line 96:** "dust"
- **Line 98:** "despair"
- **Line 99:** "affirming flame"

ALLUSION

There are many allusions in "September 1, 1939"—to German history, World War II, ancient Greece, the Bible, fairy tales, and more.

The most obvious of these is the poem's title. For those who know their history (or were paying attention to current events during that same year, when the poem was published), the title is a pointed reference to the day Hitler and the German army invaded Poland, leading to the outbreak of World War II.

Germany and Hitler are crucial touchstones for understanding other major allusions in the poem as well. In the second stanza, the speaker refers to:

> [...] the whole offence
> From Luther until now
> That has driven a culture mad,

In many ways the language here is quite vague; what "offence" exactly is the speaker referring to, and which culture is being driven mad? The answer comes from unpacking the allusion to "Luther"—a.K.a. Martin Luther, the 15th-century religious reformer who helped lead the Protestant Reformation that transformed European and German history. The speaker here is insinuating that these reformations were also responsible for driving German culture "mad," contributing to a societal "offence" that has continued to develop "until now," into the crisis of 1939.

The next line elaborates on this crisis by instructing readers to "Find what occurred at Linz." Linz is a city in Austria, and, taken together with the poem's title, this is implied to be a reference to Adolf Hitler. Born in the city of Linz, Hitler is further alluded to here as "psychopathic" and power-hungry as a "god."

In the following, third stanza, the historical allusions change eras dramatically, as the speaker hearkens back to "Exiled Thucydides," an ancient Greek general and historian. Thucydides is today remembered for helping establish rigorous, evidence-based historical record keeping, as well as for being banished for protesting anti-democratic actions by fellow leaders in the ancient city-state of Athens. Rather than relying on readers to be familiar with Thucydides' work, however, the speaker instead explicitly describes the topics Thucydides wrote about, and implies that they apply equally well to the events of the 1930s as they did to the politics of the fifth-century B.C.E. "Exiled Thucydides knew," the speaker says, "what dictators do."

Later, in lines 59-61, the speaker makes another allusion when he says:

> What mad Nijinsky wrote
> About Diaghilev
> Is true of the normal heart;

Who is Nijinsky, who is Diaghilev, and what do they have to do with World War II? By this point in the poem, the speaker is speaking more generally about the human condition. To do so, he alludes to the passionate but doomed turn-of-the-century romance of Vaslav Nijinsky, a ballet dancer, and Serge Diaghilev, a producer of opera and ballet. Their romance ended when Nijinsky married a woman, and Diaghilev tried to end Nijinsky's career in retaliation. (Nijinsky later ended up in a mental institution, hence the reference to him as "mad," but his diaries

describing their relationship survive.) The lines that follow this allusion—"each man / craves [...] not universal love / But to be loved alone"—help unpack the reference more deeply, by alluding to the love lost between them, and extrapolating from this one instance of heartbreak a universal tendency of human beings.

There are some biblical allusions in the poem as well:

- In line 62, "the error bred in the bone" might be an allusion to the Christine doctrine of original sin—the idea that people are born sinful. Selfishness, the speaker is saying, is something innate to human beings.
- Lines 76-77—"Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?"—then refer to Proverbs 31.8. This verse exhorts people to speak up on behalf of "the dumb," or those without a voice. By echoing the Bible, the speaker's lament takes on grander proportions, thereby implying that the speaker's battle against fascism is every bit as epic and world-shaking as those at the center of the Bible.
- Lines 95-96 ("May I, composed like them / Of Eros and of dust,") allude to a verse from Genesis: "till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Also note that "Eros" here is a reference to the Greek god of love and desire.)

Finally, the "affirming flame" referenced in the poem's final line might be a reference to the Statue of Liberty—a representation of democratic ideals, who famously holds a giant torch in her hand.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-15:** "the whole offence / From Luther until now / That has driven a culture mad,"
- **Lines 16-18:** "what occurred at Linz, / What huge imago made / A psychopathic god"
- **Lines 23-32:** "Exiled Thucydides knew / All that a speech can say / About Democracy, / And what dictators do, / The elderly rubbish they talk / To an apathetic grave; / Analysed all in his book, / The enlightenment driven away, / The habit-forming pain, / Mismanagement and grief:"
- **Lines 53-55:** "Lost in a haunted wood, / Children afraid of the night / Who have never been happy or good."
- **Lines 59-61:** "What mad Nijinsky wrote / About Diaghilev / Is true of the normal heart;"
- **Line 62:** "the error bred in the bone"
- **Lines 76-77:** "Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?"
- **Lines 95-96:** "May I, composed like them / Of Eros and of dust,"
- **Line 99:** "Show an affirming flame."

ANAPHORA

"September 1, 1939" contains one instance of anaphora. It does not occur until late in the poem, at the very end of the seventh stanza, when the speaker laments:

> Who can release them now,
> Who can reach the deaf,
> Who can speak for the dumb?

Having spent most of the poem examining the causes and costs of authoritarianism, as well as the reasons why so many people remain ignorant of or indifferent to these dark political times, the speaker here appears to give in to despair. The successive repetitive structure of his lament not only captures the speaker's deep concerns, but also emphasizes the speaker's isolation in those concerns.

Again and again, he calls out for someone else who feels the way he does, someone who can "reach the deaf" and "speak for the dumb," or "release" people from their stupors, and finds no one. The assonance in these lines (that repeated long /ee/ sound in "release," "reach," and "speak") draws further attention to the speaker's plight. The fact that these lines also allude to the Bible (specifically Proverbs 31.8; see this guide's entry on "Allusion" for more) gives this plea an extra weight or solemnity, further emphasizing the tragedy of the speaker's (and society's) plight.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 75-77:** "Who can release them now, / Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?"

ASSONANCE

Moments of assonance, like moments of alliteration, appear sparingly, but help draw readers' attention to specific moments and images when they do. Take lines 5 and 6, for example, which repeat the long /ay/ sound:

> Of a low dishonest decade:
> Waves of anger and fear

The repetitiveness of these lines' sounds evoke the repeated "waves" of despair that wash over the speaker. A similar thing happens in lines 10-11, where the assonance of the short /eh/ sound subtly evokes the persistent presence of death: "death / Offends the September night."

Assonance can add a kind of rhetorical flourish to the poem's language, making it feel more traditionally poetic and lofty. That's certainly the case in lines 35-39, where strings of

assonant sounds add energy and insistence to the speaker's description of skyscrapers:

> Where blind skyscrapers use
> Their full height to proclaim
> The strength of Collective Man,
> Each language pours its vain
> Competitive excuse:

In heightening the poem's language here, the sudden increase in assonance also subtly reflects what the speaker believes the skyscrapers themselves do: dazzle and deceive the public into putting their faith into capital-A Authority.

Assonance and consonance also create brief moments of rhyme in the poem, discussed in the "Rhyme Scheme" section of this guide.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sit in"
- **Line 2:** "Fifty"
- **Line 5:** "decade"
- **Line 6:** "Waves," "anger"
- **Line 9:** "private lives"
- **Lines 10-11:** "death / Offends"
- **Line 11:** "September"
- **Line 20:** "learn"
- **Line 21:** "to whom"
- **Line 22:** "Do," "return"
- **Line 28:** "grave"
- **Line 30:** "away"
- **Line 31:** "pain"
- **Line 35:** "blind skyscrapers"
- **Line 36:** "height," "proclaim"
- **Line 37:** "strength," "Collective"
- **Line 38:** "language," "vain"
- **Line 39:** "Competitive excuse"
- **Line 43:** "Imperialism's"
- **Line 44:** "international"
- **Line 52:** "we," "see," "we"
- **Line 53:** "wood"
- **Line 55:** "good"
- **Line 73:** "wake"
- **Line 74:** "game"
- **Line 75:** "release"
- **Line 76:** "reach"
- **Line 77:** "speak"
- **Lines 97-98:** "same / Negation"
- **Line 99:** "flame"

ASYNDETON

Each of the stanzas in "September 1, 1939" consists of one very long sentence, so it is no surprise that many of them contain many examples of asyndeton. For example, look to the poem's third stanza, in which many aspects of dictatorship are listed one after the other without any coordinating clauses to join them:

> [Thucydides] Analysed all in his book,
> The enlightenment driven away,
> The habit-forming pain,
> Mismanagement and grief:

Asyndeton speeds up the list to creates a piling up effect, suggesting that the perils of dictatorship go on and on.

Asyndeton also appears when the speaker seeks to mimic the internal thoughts of regular people in lines 71 and 72 ("I will be true to the wife, I'll concentrate more on my work"), or when he elaborates upon his own thoughts, as in lines 95-99:

> May I, composed like them
> Of Eros and of dust,
> Beleaguered by the same
> Negation and despair,
> Show an affirming flame.

The speaker strings the clauses here together into one sentence, with asyndeton helping convey the urgency with which each thought comes rushing after the next.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "darkened lands of the earth, / Obsessing our private lives;"
- **Lines 13-18:** "the whole offence / From Luther until now / That has driven a culture mad, / Find what occurred at Linz, / What huge imago made / A psychopathic god:"
- **Lines 26-27:** "what dictators do, / The elderly rubbish they talk"
- **Lines 29-32:** "Analysed all in his book, / The enlightenment driven away, / The habit-forming pain, / Mismanagement and grief:"
- **Lines 47-51:** "The lights must never go out, / The music must always play, / All the conventions conspire / To make this fort assume / The furniture of home;"
- **Lines 52-54:** "Lest we should see where we are, / Lost in a haunted wood, / Children afraid of the night"
- **Lines 71-72:** ""I will be true to the wife, / I'll concentrate more on my work,""
- **Lines 95-99:** "May I, composed like them / Of Eros and of dust, / Beleaguered by the same / Negation and despair, / Show an affirming flame."

APORIA

Not only do lines 75-77 contain anaphora and allusion, they are also an excellent example of aporia:

Who can release them now,
Who can reach the deaf,
Who can speak for the dumb?

The speaker is using aporia as a way of proving a point. Though the anaphora of these lines lends them a strong air of desperation, the fact that the following line ("All I have is a voice") immediately answers the questions posed above suggests that the speaker is not nearly as desperate as he at first sounds.

Nevertheless, the speaker's uncertainty rings through loud and clear. This tells readers more about the crisis at the center of the poem, showing that even a learned man like the speaker, who has quite thoroughly diagnosed the reasons that fascism is growing stronger overseas, finds himself faced with doubt when confronted with this crisis. The use of aporia also gives readers a chance to think of their own solution—who *can* reach out to the uninformed masses, or speak on behalf of those who lack the ability to express themselves? That the speaker's answer is ultimately to rely on himself, almost entirely alone against forces of authoritarianism, makes this moment of uncertainty and fear all the more significant and compelling.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 75-77:** "Who can release them now, / Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?"

CONSONANCE

Like assonance, consonance is one of the subtle sonic devices that "September 1, 1939" uses to add emphasis to certain moments, connect ideas, and evoke the poem's themes and imagery through sound.

For example, the sibilance at the start of the poem creates a hushed, tense atmosphere (bolstered by the muffled /f/ consonance):

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:

In the same stanza, the thudding /d/ sounds in "odour of death / Offends" draws attention to the heaviness of all the death that hangs over "the September night."

Consonance, like alliteration and assonance, can effectively turn up the volume on the poem, and it does so in moments when the speaker describes the meaningless "rubbish" that authoritarian rulers spew. Take lines 23 to 28, where shark /k/ and /t/ sounds mix with heavy /d/ and hissing /s/ sounds to create an intensely bitter tone, as though the speaker is spitting out these words:

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;

Something similar happens in lines 56-57, where the mixture of /t/, /sh/, /s/, /p/, and growling /r/ sounds again reflect the speaker's frustration and anger with dictators' propaganda:

The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout

Consonance can have the opposite effect as well, softening the poem's language in certain moments. Note, for example, the combination of sibilance and gentle /dz/ sound in "the Just / Exchange their messages"—imbuing this image of hope with gentleness and serenity.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sit"
- **Line 2:** "Fifty-second Street"
- **Line 3:** "Uncertain"
- **Line 4:** "hopes expire"
- **Line 5:** "dishonest decade"
- **Line 8:** "And darkened lands"
- **Line 10:** "odour," "death"
- **Line 11:** "Offends"
- **Line 23:** "Exiled Thucydides"
- **Line 24:** "speech," "can," "say"
- **Line 25:** "Democracy"
- **Line 26:** "dictators do"
- **Line 27:** "elderly," "talk"
- **Line 28:** "To," "apathetic"
- **Line 33:** "must suffer them"
- **Line 35:** "blind skyscrapers"
- **Line 36:** "full," "proclaim"
- **Line 37:** "Collective"
- **Line 38:** "language"
- **Line 39:** "Competitive excuse"
- **Line 40:** "can live," "long"
- **Line 42:** "mirror"
- **Line 43:** "Imperialism's"
- **Line 48:** "music must"
- **Line 49:** "conventions conspire"
- **Line 50:** "make," "fort," "assume"
- **Line 51:** "furniture," "home"
- **Line 52:** "Lest," "we," "see," "where we"
- **Line 53:** "Lost," "haunted," "wood"

- **Line 56:** “windiest militant trash”
- **Line 57:** “Important Persons,” “shout”
- **Line 58:** “wish”
- **Line 62:** “bred,” “bone”
- **Line 64:** “Craves,” “cannot,” “have”
- **Line 65:** “universal love”
- **Line 67:** “conservative dark”
- **Line 68:** “ethical life”
- **Line 69:** “dense commuters come”
- **Line 70:** “morning”
- **Line 71:** “true to,” “wife”
- **Line 72:** “concentrate,” “work”
- **Line 73:** “wake”
- **Line 74:** “resume,” “compulsory game”
- **Line 75:** “can release”
- **Line 76:** “can reach,” “deaf”
- **Line 77:** “can speak,” “dumb”
- **Line 79:** “undo,” “folded lie”
- **Line 81:** “sensual,” “street”
- **Line 84:** “State”
- **Line 85:** “no one,” “exists,” “alone”
- **Line 87:** “citizen,” “police”
- **Line 89:** “Defenceless under,” “night”
- **Line 90:** “world,” “stupor,” “lies”
- **Line 91:** “dotted”
- **Line 92:** “light”
- **Line 93:** “Flash,” “Just”
- **Line 94:** “Exchange,” “messages”
- **Line 95:** “May”
- **Line 96:** “Eros,” “dust”
- **Line 97:** “same”
- **Line 98:** “Negation,” “despair”
- **Line 99:** “Show,” “affirming flame”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is a major source of momentum and meaning-making in "September 1, 1939." Because nearly every stanza consists of a single run-on sentence, enjambment is a crucial part of the poem's structure, with the vast majority of lines continuing on to the next without any pause or punctuation mark.

The poem's intense enjambment helps to capture the meandering and anxious tone of the speaker's thoughts, as he "sit[s] in one of the dives / On Fifty-second Street / Uncertain and afraid." The way the speaker's concerns spill over from one line to the next emphasizes his spiraling sense of worry and unease, such as this moment at the top of the second stanza:

> Accurate scholarship can
> Unearth the whole offence
> From Luther until now
> That has driven a culture mad

This sentence does not necessarily need to be broken up into four separate lines, but the fact that it is—and that no punctuation helps guide readers through the thought—emphasizes the way that the speaker, as he nurses his drink at the bar, haltingly works his way through the complex and frightening idea that most of German history has led up to this one terrifying moment of September 1st, 1939.

Additionally, the poem's use of enjambment signals its modernist qualities. Rather than follow a traditional poetic form, "September 1, 1939" instead, in keeping with the modernist movement, seeks to capture the qualities of real human speech, and enjambment plays a large role in shaping that everyday tone and affect.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “dives / On”
- **Lines 2-3:** “Street / Uncertain”
- **Lines 3-4:** “afraid / As”
- **Lines 4-5:** “expire / Of”
- **Lines 6-7:** “fear / Circulate”
- **Lines 7-8:** “bright / And”
- **Lines 10-11:** “death / Offends”
- **Lines 12-13:** “can / Unearth”
- **Lines 13-14:** “offence / From”
- **Lines 14-15:** “now / That”
- **Lines 17-18:** “made / A”
- **Lines 19-20:** “know / What”
- **Lines 21-22:** “done / Do”
- **Lines 23-24:** “knew / All”
- **Lines 24-25:** “say / About”
- **Lines 27-28:** “talk / To”
- **Lines 34-35:** “air / Where”
- **Lines 35-36:** “use / Their”
- **Lines 36-37:** “proclaim / The”
- **Lines 38-39:** “ vain / Competitive”
- **Lines 40-41:** “long / In”
- **Lines 43-44:** “face / And”
- **Lines 45-46:** “bar / Cling”
- **Lines 49-50:** “conspire / To”
- **Lines 50-51:** “assume / The”
- **Lines 54-55:** “night / Who”
- **Lines 56-57:** “trash / Important”
- **Lines 57-58:** “shout / Is”
- **Lines 59-60:** “wrote / About”
- **Lines 60-61:** “Diaghilev / Is”
- **Lines 62-63:** “bone / Of”
- **Lines 63-64:** “man / Craves”
- **Lines 65-66:** “love / But”
- **Lines 67-68:** “dark / Into”
- **Lines 68-69:** “life / The”
- **Lines 73-74:** “wake / To”
- **Lines 78-79:** “voice / To”

- **Lines 80-81:** "brain / Of"
- **Lines 81-82:** "man-in-the-street / And"
- **Lines 82-83:** "Authority / Whose"
- **Lines 84-85:** "State / And"
- **Lines 86-87:** "choice / To"
- **Lines 89-90:** "night / Our"
- **Lines 92-93:** "light / Flash"
- **Lines 93-94:** "Just / Exchange"
- **Lines 95-96:** "them / Of"
- **Lines 97-98:** "same / Negation"

IMAGERY

Though "September 1, 1939" is largely concerned with the interior world of its speaker, plumbing the depths of his thoughts as he mulls over the events that have just taken place in Europe, it is nonetheless a poem rich in imagery. The speaker uses specific details to illustrate and give shape to his emotions in response to these events. For instance, the first stanza vividly describes the rising tide of fascism in Europe as "waves of anger and fear" that "circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth." These natural images—waves, light and dark, land and earth—feel at odds with the politics being described, helping evoke the same feelings of unease, uncertainty, and fear that the speaker himself professes a few lines earlier.

Likewise, the poem does not just straightforwardly describe the United States as a neutral country in these world affairs, or bluntly indict the country for its naive belief in democratic security, but instead uses the image of "blind skyscrapers [stretched to] their full height" in order to evoke that same idea. People confronting the horrors of their governments, in which they have been complicit, do not just think about them, but instead find "out of the mirror they stare" back at them. Indeed, even society itself is described through a series of metaphors, all of which are built on unique and vivid imagery: "lights [that] never go out," "music [that] always play[s]" and a "fort [that] assume[s]," or takes on, "the furniture of home."

Most movingly, the poem's final stanza uses the imagery of lights in the darkness—"dotted everywhere" and "flash[ing] out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages"—in order to evoke feelings of hope and love (see the "Symbols" section of this guide for more on this).

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** "Waves of anger and fear / Circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth,"
- **Lines 10-11:** "The unmentionable odour of death / Offends the September night."
- **Line 13:** "Unearth the whole offence"
- **Lines 34-37:** "Into this neutral air / Where blind skyscrapers use / Their full height to proclaim / The strength of Collective Man,"
- **Lines 42-44:** "Out of the mirror they stare, / Imperialism's face / And the international wrong."
- **Lines 45-55:** "Faces along the bar / Cling to their average day: / The lights must never go out, / The music must always play, / All the conventions conspire / To make this fort assume / The furniture of home; / Lest we should see where we are, / Lost in a haunted wood, / Children afraid of the night / Who have never been happy or good."
- **Lines 56-57:** "The windiest militant trash / Important Persons shout"
- **Lines 62-64:** "For the error bred in the bone / Of each woman and each man / Craves what it cannot have,"
- **Lines 67-69:** "From the conservative dark / Into the ethical life / The dense commuters come,"
- **Lines 80-83:** "The romantic lie in the brain / Of the sensual man-in-the-street / And the lie of Authority / Whose buildings grope the sky:"
- **Lines 89-94:** "Defenceless under the night / Our world in stupor lies; / Yet, dotted everywhere, / Ironic points of light / Flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages:"
- **Line 99:** "Show an affirming flame."

METAPHOR

In many ways, "September 1, 1939" can be described as a poem that deals almost entirely in metaphor, since the speaker never explicitly mentions or describes the major political event at the heart of the poem (Hitler's invasion of Poland). However, there are certainly sections that rely more on metaphor than others. While the first half of the first stanza, for instance, very straightforwardly places the speaker in a particular setting, and names his feelings quite openly, the second half of that stanza is less literal. Instead of coming out and saying, "Fascism is spreading across Europe, and stressing everybody out," the speaker uses several metaphors to get at the same idea:

> Waves of anger and fear
> Circulate over the bright
> And darkened lands of the earth,
> [...]
> The unmentionable odour of death
> Offends the September night.

This remains the case throughout the rest of the poem, as the speaker uses metaphor and imagery to convey complex thoughts and ideas. Dictatorship, writ large, is metaphorically reduced to a list of symbolic concepts: "enlightenment driven away," "habit-forming pain," "mismanagement," and "grief." Political naïveté becomes "an euphoric dream," while

governmental misdeeds are "Imperialism's face / And the international wrong."

Even the philosophical struggles of everyday people is described through the metaphor of New York City commuters "com[ing]" out of "the conservative dark" tunnel of their inner lives, and "into [an] ethical life." And most famously, of course, the poem's final stanza uses metaphors of light and flame to represent hope that burns bright despite the darkness of fascism.

Many of the poem's metaphors are more specifically examples of personification as well—such as the idea of "the September night" taking offense to the "odour of death" or the idea of a grave being "apathetic" or indifferent. The speaker tellingly personifies the skyscrapers in lines 35-39, saying that they're "blind" and "proclaim / The strength of Collective Man." These buildings aren't actually alive, of course, and this personification actually draws attention to the poem's idea that there is no all-powerful ruling "State" separate from human beings. Governments are made up of people, and the idea that they're not is a "lie."

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-8
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 13-15
- Lines 24-32
- Lines 34-37
- Lines 38-39
- Lines 40-41
- Lines 42-44
- Lines 45-55
- Lines 56-57
- Lines 62-64
- Lines 67-69
- Lines 73-74
- Lines 75-77
- Lines 78-83
- Lines 89-94
- Lines 95-96
- Line 99

REPETITION

Repetition plays a small but important role in "September 1, 1939." The poem returns a few times to specific words or ideas, and because this kind of repetition occurs so sparingly, it stands out, making clear that these are core concepts for the poem.

The first, of course, takes place in the first stanza, when the words "afraid" and "fear" appear within lines 3-6. Though these are not the exact same word, they represent the same concept, and describe an intense emotion very straightforwardly. The fact that the speaker mentions fear twice in the first stanza alone emphasizes just how shaken and afraid he really feels about the events of September 1st, 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland.

The next word to repeat is "evil," at the end of the second stanza. The speaker is seeking to explain Adolf Hitler's psychology, the reason why he has become "a psychopathic god." What he ends up concluding (and believes is something everyone, including "all schoolchildren," already knows) is that: "Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return." This is an example of antimetable and it's an interesting moment, juxtaposing the image of innocent schoolchildren with evil itself. It speaks volumes of Hitler's behavior and, again, the speaker's fear, that he does not hesitate to ultimately characterize his actions as evil—not just once, but twice.

There are also moments of syntactical repetition in the poem, when sentence structures repeat. For instance, lines 47-48 feature parallelism:

> The lights must never go out,
> The music must always play,

Though the subjects and verbs here differ, the construction of these lines is very similar; this repetition emphasizes the embedded nature of the behavior that the speaker is describing—that of people who have buried their heads in the sand, preferring the distraction of those metaphorical lights and music. Similarly, the syntax of lines 75-77 ("Who can [...] for the dumb?") repeats almost identically, even employing anaphora at the start of each line.

The other two words that repeat multiple times in the poem are "lie" and "love." This is fitting, given that the poem sets up these two concepts as opposites, with love ultimately described as the only force that can counter "the lie of Authority" and other hallmarks of fascism.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "afraid"
- **Line 6:** "fear"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return."
- **Line 24:** "All that a speech can say"
- **Lines 47-48:** "The lights must never go out, / The music must always play,"
- **Line 63:** "Of each woman and each man"
- **Lines 65-66:** "Not universal love / But to be loved alone."
- **Lines 75-77:** "Who can release them now, / Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?"
- **Lines 79-80:** "To undo the folded lie, / The romantic lie in the brain"
- **Line 82:** "the lie of Authority"
- **Line 88:** "love "

VOCABULARY

Dives (Line 1) - A shabby and disreputable establishment (such as a bar or nightclub).

Expire (Line 4) - Come to an end.

The whole offence / From Luther until now (Lines 13-14) - A wide span of troubled German history, beginning with Martin Luther's 15th-century Protestant Reformation.

What occurred at Linz (Line 16) - A roundabout reference to the birth and youth of Adolf Hitler, in Linz, Austria.

Imago (Lines 17-18) - An unconscious idealized mental image of someone, especially a parent, which influences a person's behavior.

Thucydides (Line 23) - An ancient Greek general and historian of the Peloponnesian War who was exiled from Athens because he failed to prevent the Spartans from seizing a colony.

Rubbish (Line 27) - British slang for trash or garbage; something that is worthless or nonsensical.

Apathetic (Line 28) - Having little or no interest or concern, indifferent.

Enlightenment (Line 30) - The state of having attained knowledge or insight.

Habit-forming pain (Line 31) - Suffering to which people or a society have become accustomed.

Neutral air (Line 34) - A reference to the United States's neutrality at this point in the conflict that became World War II.

Proclaim (Line 36) - Declare publicly, typically insistently, proudly, or defiantly.

Collective Man (Line 37) - A reference to an idealized vision of strong, unified democracy.

Euphoric (Line 41) - Marked by a feeling of great happiness and excitement.

Imperialism (Line 43) - Dominion of a nation over other nations by direct territorial acquisition and/or control over political or economic life.

Conventions (Line 49) - Customs, rules of conduct, or habits, especially in social matters.

Conspire (Line 49) - Plot, scheme, work together secretly.

Lest (Line 52) - "For fear that"—often used after an expression suggesting fear or apprehension.

Militant (Line 56) - Combative, engaged in aggression or warfare.

Nijinsky and Diaghilev (Lines 59-60) - A reference to the Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (later diagnosed with schizophrenia) who turned on his former lover, Sergei Diaghilev, whom he blamed for destroying his dance career and wrote about in his diary.

Compulsory (Line 74) - Mandatory, enforced.

Sensual (Line 81) - Relating to or involving gratification of the senses and physical, especially sexual, pleasure.

Authority (Line 82) - Power, or people in power (specifically, government).

The State (Line 84) - The civil government of a country; more sinisterly, the apparatus of power that upholds a government.

Stupor (Line 90) - A condition of dulled senses, extreme apathy, a daze.

The Just (Line 93) - A reference to those upholding justice, righteousness, hope.

Composed (Line 95) - Formed, constructed, made up of.

Eros (Line 96) - A reference to the Greek god of love and physical desire; love and desire more generally.

Negation (Lines 97-98) - Denial, absence, the opposite of something positive.

Beleaguered (Lines 97-98) - Suffering or being subjected to constant or repeated trouble or harassment.

Affirming (Line 99) - Encouraging, supportive.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many other modernist poems, "September 1, 1939" does not adhere to any traditional verse form. It consists of exactly 99 lines, which break down into nine stanzas of 11 lines each. The poem's structure is thus fairly consistent, granting the poem a solemn, controlled tone even as the speaker is clearly anxious about and fearful of what's to come. The speaker seems to think that repeating the mistakes of the past is inevitable, and the poem's predictable stanzas subtly evoke that sense of inevitability.

Also note that the poem relies heavily on enjambment to create a sense of momentum amid the poem's otherwise despairing tone. Most stanzas are composed of one (very complex) sentence. Coupled with the poem's use of a first-person speaker, the run-on, winding nature of these one-sentence stanzas suggests a grim internal monologue, as readers journey alongside the speaker while he wades through his "uncertain and afraid" thoughts and feelings.

METER

"September 1, 1939" very loosely follows iambic trimeter, a meter of three iambs per line (an iamb is a metrical foot with an unstressed-stressed, da-DUM, syllable pattern). However, from the very beginning, the poem does not always stick to this pattern. For starters, the poem's lines vary in length, and there are many metrical substitutions; the speaker also regularly uses anapests (feet that go da-da-DUM), for example.

The looseness of this meter and lack of rhyme scheme might push some readers to argue that the poem is actually best thought of as being free verse, with no meter whatsoever. We argue for iambic trimeter given that there are, on average, three stressed beats per line and the iamb seems to be the dominant foot. What's clear in either case is that the speaker sounds at once confessional and poetic—like a slightly heightened version of regular speech. There is none of the rigid, march-like meter common to patriotic or war poems, yet there's still some structure here.

Take a look at the meter of the first half of the first stanza:

I sit | in one | of the dives
On Fif- | ty-sec | ond Street
Uncer- | tain and | afraid
As the clev- | er hopes | expire
Of a low | dishon- | est decade:

The second and third lines follow perfect iambic trimeter. They contain exactly six syllables each, and follow the iambic da-DUM pattern that is often said to mirror the sound of a heartbeat. However, the very first line of the poem, though it begins with two iambs, has seven syllables and closes on an anapest: "of the dives." The fourth line is also seven syllables long, but instead *opens* with an anapest ("as the clever") before settling back into iambs.

The fifth line varies from all of the above in order to contain eight syllables! Similarly, it opens with an anapest ("of a low") but the meter that follows is highly irregular, briefly adhering to an iambic beat ("dishon") before departing from any standard metrical form whatsoever. The poem continues in this vein, dipping in and out of iambic tetrameter but varying its meter and rhythm to add interest and emphasis.

RHYME SCHEME

"September 1, 1939" does not follow a rhyme scheme. Occasionally, there are moments of end rhyme, such as in the first stanza when lines 3 and 5 rhyme ("afraid" and "decade") or in the fifth stanza when lines 46 and 48 ("day" and "play") and lines 53 and 55 ("wood" and "good") rhyme as well. Likewise, there are moments when the poem uses slant rhymes, creating a visual matching effect, such as in the first stanza when lines 8 and 10 end on "earth" and "death."

For the most part, however, the poem eschews any kind of rhyme, in keeping with the modernist style of mimicking human speech; after all, in daily life, people rarely rhyme. This suits the poem's tone; as the speaker himself says in the first stanza, he feels "uncertain and afraid," and those sentiments do not lend themselves to the pleasant cadence a regular rhyme scheme might create. Likewise, the poem's serious subject matter—the rise of fascism, and the complicity of everyday people—does not exactly call for rhyme. Instead, the poem's lack of rhyme helps create a strong sense of an internal monologue, peering in at the speaker's thoughts as he meditates on the state of the world on the brink of World War II.

SPEAKER

The first-person speaker of "September 1, 1939" does not identify himself, but many readers and critics have interpreted him as closely linked to the poet, W.H. Auden, himself. In keeping with these interpretations, this guide uses male pronouns throughout; note that the speaker's gender is not revealed in the poem itself and does not have to be taken as male.

The poem opens by describing where the speaker is located: in "one of the dive [bar]s / on Fifty-second Street" in New York City. The British spelling and vocabulary used throughout the poem—"odour," "offence," "rubbish"—suggests that, like Auden, the speaker is a British expatriate living in the United States in 1939. In addition, the poem's many references and allusions, from Martin Luther to Thucydides to the Bible, suggest that, like Auden, who was educated at Oxford University in England, the speaker is a learned man.

What's more, the latter half of the poem, in which the speaker declares that he has "a voice / to undo the folded lie [...] of Authority," and connects himself to "the Just / exchang[ing] their messages," suggests that, like Auden, the speaker is a poet. At the very least, the speaker understands the power of self-expression, and the importance of using one's voice to speak out against "negation and despair" and "love one another" despite the difficulties of the era.

Perhaps most importantly, the speaker is clearly deeply attuned to current events, and feels mostly alone in his concerns about world affairs. The United States did not enter World War II until 1941, but as a European expat, it makes sense that the speaker (and Auden himself) would be paying closer attention to events going on back home than the "faces along the bar" who are too distracted by everyday life in the U.S. to pay attention to politics overseas. The poem's central focus is a cry against authoritarianism, and the speaker's identity as a pro-democratic individual shines through every line.

SETTING

"September 1, 1939" is set very clearly, as the title states, on September 1, 1939, the day that Hitler and the German army invaded Poland. Looking back, this moment marked the beginning of World War II, and even at the time was viewed as a shocking development on the world stage.

The invasion deliberately defied the 1938 Munich Agreement, which had essentially permitted Germany to annex Czechoslovakia in an attempt to prevent any further German

conquest and the outbreak of war. Hitler's decision to flout the Munich Agreement and invade Poland anyway promptly resulted in both England and France declaring war on Germany two days later.

Even without the hindsight of history, the speaker of "September 1, 1939" is painfully aware of the conflict that has been unfolding for several years in Europe—and which is clearly about to get much, much worse. The physical setting of the poem, however, is a dive bar in New York City, on "Fifty-second Street," miles away from the imminent war. What's more, the United States at the time was taking great pains to remain neutral in the growing European conflict. The contrast between the speaker's physical location, amid "neutral air" and "blind skyscrapers," and his mental state, very much preoccupied with events in Europe and what they mean for everyone—even indifferent or ignorant Americans—provides the poem's central tension.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"September 1, 1939" is one of the most famous of W.H. Auden's poems, though he later came to despise it (and ultimately banned it from collected editions of his work). Always prone to editing his poems even after publication, Auden also revised this one, writing later:

> I came to the line "We must love one another or die" and said to myself: "That's a damned lie! We must die anyway." So, in the next edition, I altered it to "We must love one another and die." This didn't seem to do either, so I cut the stanza. Still no good. The whole poem, I realized, was infected with an incurable dishonesty—and must be scrapped.

Despite the poet's belief in the poem's "dishonesty," however, it has remained a centerpiece of Auden's poetic legacy, resurfacing in popular culture amid other times of crisis (such as, famously, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001). Auden's literary legacy is not limited to this one poem, however. A modernist who helped to define the era, he is considered one of the masters of 20th-century English poetry, known for his work's playfulness, wry intelligence, craftsmanship, and experimentation.

Auden's early work flirted with social and political aspirations; "September 1, 1939" is a leading example of such (as well as an homage to another political poem, W.B. Yeats' "Easter, 1916"). As time went on, however, especially in the wake of World War II, Auden became increasingly skeptical of poetry's ability to effect change. Nevertheless, even as his poetry became increasingly personal, his work remained at the forefront of culture while also retaining his signature talents for capturing everyday people's speech and displaying technical expertise.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As is evident by the title of the poem, "September 1, 1939" is concerned with the events of this date in history: Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland, and the outbreak of World War II. The poem was published while those events were still fresh, in fact, in an October 1939 edition of *The New Republic*. Although the invasion itself was shocking, flying in the face of the 1938 Munich Agreement that had sought to contain Hitler and Germany's territorial expansion, the war itself was not particularly surprising.

Hitler's rise to power in 1933 was part of an era of European history marked by the rise of totalitarian governments, from Benito Mussolini's Italy to Francisco Franco's Spain. A political philosophy defined by dictatorial power, political violence, the regimentation of society (including the repression of speech), and intense nationalism, Germany's move toward fascism led to rampant militarism and the conquest of surrounding countries like Austria and Czechoslovakia. Initially, other European powers like France and England sought to control this violent expansion through policies of appeasement rather than confrontation, but the invasion of Poland marked the end of that approach. Ultimately, World War II became a global conflict spanning multiple continents. By the war's conclusion, 40 to 60 million people had died.

"September 1, 1939" was written at the beginning of this conflict, and much of its staying power can be attributed to its remarkable prescience. The poem's condemnation of dictatorship, propaganda, and political naïveté or apathy was insightful, anticipating what would later become commonplace analyses of both the rise of fascism and the outbreak of the war.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poems of Protest, Resistance, and Empowerment — A diverse collection of poems often turned to in moments of crisis. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/101581/poems-of-protest-resistance-and-empowerment)
- Auden's Biography — A detailed account of Auden's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- Archival Auden Material — Scans of primary sources related to Auden's work, including the collection in which the poem was published. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items?related_to=c56690a6-a16d-4ff7-96c1-351350ad9c3c)
- The Invasion of Poland — A Time Magazine analysis of the

historical context and events at the center of "September 1, 1939." (https://time.com/5659728/poland-1939/)

- A Reading of "September 1, 1939" — Listen to a recording of poet Dylan Thomas reading the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ED4sN16x1Is)
- "The right poem for the wrong time" — An article at The Guardian on the persistent legacy of "September 1, 1939," despite the poet's own objections. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/31/wh-auden-september-1-1939-poem)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- As I Walked Out One Evening
- Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)
- Musée des Beaux Arts
- Refugee Blues
- The Shield of Achilles
- The Unknown Citizen

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