

Chapter 17

Refugee Blues

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Understanding the Poem

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

Answer

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

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

Answer

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

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

Answer

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

4. How does the poet juxtapose the human condition with the behaviour of the political class?

Answer

The poem is crafted in the environment when the whole of Germany rose to the ideology of Nazism and the political thinkers were determined to terminate the whole of Jew community.

The thunderous rumbling of Adolf Hitler that "they must die" shook waves of terror across Europe paralysing Jews to utmost horror. The narrator exclaims at this that they are in his mind! In a public meeting in USA, where they took refuge, the speaker spoke anti Jews as well. He possibly meant that if Jews were allowed to settle in they would steal their jobs and food. Jews across the America and Europe were looked at with bitter hatred. Everyone wanted them dead. At this time the couple is left destitute at the hands of fate. They are scared and bewildered. They have nothing to go back to the nation that was once their. They suffer the loss of identity and are threatened with death constantly. A striking contrast is drawn between the two sects that the world around them is divided into. One is comprising of people like them, the Jews and the other is the one hunting for them, wanting to kill them. One is the

sufferer and the other is the one inflicting pain on the first one.

5. How is the essence of the poem captured in the lines 'two tickets to Happiness'?

Answer

The narrator and his partner are homeless and they have nothing to go back to. They grieve on their loss of identity and home. Desperate to be happy, they are ready to pay for it. The picture presented is piteous and lamentable. Though they can not have the happiness in reality, they imagine an express that goes to a land of happiness and wish to purchase two ticket of it, one for the narrator and other for his partner. The narrator desperately looks for some place to board the train but every coach was full. It is death present everywhere and they can not afford to be happy as Hitler has called the whole Europe that "they must die". Even in the end on a land far stretched with whiteness of snow everywhere, it is displeasing to see the Nazi army hunting the Jew couple, obviously, to kill them.