This is a study of the socio-political consciousness in the poetry of Wystan Hugh Auden, one of the most versatile and prolific poets of the twentieth century. He is not only a poet, but also a playwright, opera librettist, critic and a thinker. He has been described contrastingly as an atheistic Freudian Communist and as a Christian existentialist liberal. He is also referred to as a scientist, a musician, a ritualist and a Scandinavian. However, he is also a moralist, concerned with the problem of human guilt. By the end of the 1930s, he was an established and influential poet. Since none of his contemporaries equalled him in writing poetry on a wide range of subjects with varied and impressive techniques, he was befittingly acknowledged as the leading spokesman of a group of young poets such as C. Day Lewis, MacNeice and Stephen Spender. Subsequently, all these poets came to be known as the “Auden group”. He was viewed as a worthy successor of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot.

Auden was influenced by a number of poets such as T.S. Eliot, Thomas Hardy, William Blake, W. B. Yeats, and Laura Riding. William Wordsworth too was an early influence but was discarded as Auden resolved to write in the manner of T. S. Eliot. A significant role in Auden’s poetic growth has been played by his father, whose rich library contributed greatly to Auden’s knowledge since it was full of books on various disciplines ranging from medicine to classical and folk literature to psychology. From the very beginning the impulse behind a lot of Auden’s poetry has been the plight of common man. Since Auden was aware of
the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Homer Lane, he felt that therein lay the solution to man’s problems.

Auden’s early poetry is concerned with the analysis and exploration of man’s anxiety, guilt, and isolation by largely using the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Homer Lane. A number of poems written under the influence of Lane’s theories focus on the unconscious conflict and the repression of natural instincts in man, leading to disastrous consequences. That trifling with the “id”, the “ego” and the “superego”, according to Freud, can also lead to psychic ailments is also made use of by Auden. Anxiety, death wish, repression, guilt, suppression of the unconscious, conflict between the ego and the super-ego and the resultant psychic maladies and diseases in individuals, become an integral part of a number of poems written by Auden during the early phase of his poetic career. His poetry at this stage advances the argument that neurosis is the result of the suppression of natural instincts. According to Auden, in keeping with the various psychological theories to which he was exposed, man should lead a life which is in keeping with his instincts since instinctual behaviour is good. Psychological aspects are such an integral part of his poetry that the borders or frontiers that figure in his poems often have psychological implications. These borders or frontiers are the repressors of natural human instincts.

Auden was greatly disturbed by the social and economic problems that surrounded common man. The period of the nineteen thirties was one of severe economic depression in England as well as America. There was widespread unemployment and poverty. These were the after effects of the First World War
in many ways. Common man was being suppressed and oppressed. This led to dejection and frustration. So, a lot of poetry written during the early phase of Auden's career emphasises the idea of change or the desirability of establishing a new order which is possible only if man alters himself as well as society. Analysing the condition of modern man living in the Capitalist society Auden's poetry proposes that a change at the social as well as individual level, is the need of the hour.

Auden's poetry now, tends to fuse social and psychological elements in order to reform man and society. He realizes that the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Homer Lane, on which he had relied to a great extent earlier, are insufficient and cannot alone help man solve his problems. So, along with man's psychological problems, his attention gets focussed on the problems arising out of social complications and class divisions in the capitalist society of his time. The poetry that Auden wrote during the English period concentrates to quite an extent on the political, social and economic conditions of the 1930s. The negative impact of Capitalism on common man becomes a major issue that is explored in his poetry. It was a period of great political unrest and the public events were so strong that man's private life could not remain unaffected. Auden's poetry also highlights how public events encroached upon man's private life. Often his poetry advocates a change through a violent revolution initiated by the proletariat in order to overthrow Capitalism and replace it with Communism. The proletariat may be represented by a garage boy, a voyager, a wanderer or a man of action who can initiate and execute a violent revolution in order to bring
about that change which is needed to end the tyranny of Capitalism. Auden at this stage seems to believe in the Marxist theory of the inevitable decay of Capitalist society. A number of poems that Auden wrote also predict the destruction of the Capitalist system. Alienation and loneliness caused by the tyranny of Capitalism is a significant theme in a number of poems written in the nineteen thirties. This sense of alienation and loneliness also leads to tension, frustration and loss of individuality. Auden condemns Fascism, Imperialism and Capitalism that affect the lives of individuals in an adverse manner and lead to the exploitation of the common man and even war. The adverse impact of the Sino-Japanese war on soldiers as well as common man is also focussed upon by Auden in his poetry. A number of poems written by Auden highlight the helpless condition of man and explore how politicians have befooled common man. This tendency of committing evil deeds by politicians because of their lust for power and material wealth is also highlighted by Auden. Thus, Auden’s poetry is the survey of human history in a way. It also focuses on the struggle between good and evil. Finally, Auden now realizes that neither Freudianism nor Marxism can be instrumental in alleviating man’s suffering since suffering is an essential part of life, and it is futile to attempt to change the state of things. He returns to Christianity in his search for a system which would mitigate man’s plight.

A considerable amount of the poetry that Auden wrote after his migration to the U.S.A. is dominated by religious belief. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard’s (1813-55) Christian existentialism becomes the foundation of a lot of poetry he wrote during the later phase of his career. He continues to focus on
the failings of man and society but from a religious point of view. Quest for religious values is an important theme of this period. So, modern man is portrayed as an existentialist hero who is out on religious quest in the world that is spiritually sick. Auden’s poetry also highlights the three categories of human experience: the Aesthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious. Auden seems to return to Christianity in his search for a system which would replace the failed systems of the world. Auden’s poetry also exhibits his belief in Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism according to which man can get rid of his despair by following Christianity. Auden discovers that man is a fallen creature with a natural bias to do evil. Christian themes of temptation, guilt and salvation are central concerns of a number of poems written during this period. Auden explores man’s relationship to God at both levels, the physical or material and the spiritual level as well. Auden advocates selfless love that is universal in nature which is a central tenet of Christianity.

Thus psychology, politics and religion emerge as the three major strands in Auden’s poetry, the three modes through which Auden’s socio-political consciousness is revealed.