
THE CONCEPT OF ANXIETY AND ITS REFLECTION IN AUDEN'S WORK 'THE AGE OF ANXIETY'

Martina Pavlíková*

*Central European Research Institute of Søren Kierkegaard,
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Faculty of Arts, Hodžova 1, 949 74 Nitra,
Slovak Republic*

(Received 4 April 2016)

Abstract

This paper analyses Kierkegaard's work 'The Concept of Anxiety' and reflects its importance and meaning in the literary work of Anglo-American writer W.H. Auden. Anxiety reflects our being and each individual has to face it in different forms. The relation of anxiety to freedom and knowledge, to time and eternity is assessed with the care and sensitivity that Kierkegaard's writing demands and has an influential impact on Auden's work. Auden subsequently implements Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety into his outstanding poem *The Age of Anxiety*. The poem deals with human's quest to find its identity and substance in the volatile and increasingly industrialized world, facing the feeling of anxiety and aloneness of man in modern society.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, despair, alienation, anxiety, suffering

1. Introduction

"Anxiety is the motive power by which sorrow penetrates a person's heart. But the movement is not swift like that of an arrow; it is consecutive; it is not once and for all, but it is continually becoming." [1]

"My soul is so heavy that no thought can carry it any longer, no wing beat can lift it up into the ether any more. If it is moved, it merely skims along the ground, just as birds fly low when a thunderstorm is blowing up. Over my inner being broods an oppressiveness, an anxiety, that forebodes an earthquake. How empty and meaningless life is." [1, p. 303]

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is a remarkable Danish philosopher. His influence and reception varied widely and made him one of the most important and influential thinkers in Central Europe in the past decade [2-4]. His legacy has been widespread in the USA and Western Europe since the second decade of the twentieth century mainly due to philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus, but also theologians like Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer [5]. In addition to these thinkers, Kierkegaard's thoughts significantly affected Franz

*E-mail: martina.pavlikova76@gmail.com

Kafka, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Jaspers, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, Wystan Hugh Auden, and many others.

Kierkegaard's legacy has influenced not only philosophers and theologians, but also writers, currently most appealing to society by their work. Kierkegaard's concepts of anxiety, despair and aloneness became significant part of human existence. Paradoxically, human feels alone in the midst of a perfect and technologically advanced world [6]. The cause of suffering, aloneness and anxiety of man must be sought in two World Wars and then in the bipolar post-war period of the Cold War which caused many people to emigrate. The aim of this paper is to deal with the concept of anxiety, which was presented in Kierkegaard's work *The Concept of Anxiety* and subsequently implemented into the literary work of Anglo-American writer W. H. Auden. His well-known book *The Age of Anxiety* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1948. The poem deals with human's quest to find his identity and substance in a highly volatile and increasingly industrialized world, facing the feelings of anxiety and aloneness that it brings [7, 8]. The objective of this paper is to analyse these selected works.

2. Kierkegaard's legacy in the 20th century

Kierkegaard highlighted the concepts of despair, aloneness and anxiety mainly in his works *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Either/or*, and *The Concept of Irony*. These ideas then influenced the literary work of American writer Walker Percy [9], theologian Paul Tillich [10, 11] and Anglo-American writer Wystan Hugh Auden. They were influenced by "Kierkegaard's rich treasury of concepts such as the absurd, contemporaneity, the demonic, double reflection, governance, the incognito, indirect communication, inward deepening, the leap, leveling, offense, the paradox, the single individual, and the theological suspension have long invited scholars to explore his works with an eye to conceptual analysis. This methodology tries to-sort out the different shades and nuances of meaning in his use of key terms. It is also a methodology that runs across disciplinary lines and can thus be applied to the different fields of Kierkegaard studies." [12]

However, Kierkegaard strongly influenced not only writers but also psychologists and other thinkers from different areas of intellectual spectrum. These include, for instance, Rollo May (a close friend of Paul Tillich), who wrote *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1950), Ernest Becker, especially his work of psychology and philosophy *The Denial of Death*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 1974. Kierkegaard related thinkers were inspired and influenced by following Kierkegaard's works: *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Either/Or*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Prefaces*, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, *The Concept of Irony*. Their works reflect Kierkegaard's thinking and interpret unique concepts of man, truth, anxiety, despair, irony, aesthetic, ethical and religious stages.

3. Philosophy in literature

One of the possible reasons, why there is a connection between philosophy and literature in the twentieth century, is a desire that philosophy testified about specific human situation. Auden argues: "The formal restrictions of poetry teach us that the thoughts which arise from our needs, feeling and experiences are only a small part of the thoughts of which we are capable" [13].

Late romanticism, bohemianism and romantic naturalism enabled the most radical form of being an individual. Importance of being a particular individual dominates in all aspects of life (politics, economy, family, mass, nature, suffering, joy, desire, needs...). It is also present in a spiritual way of life (God, the evil, the absolute, eternity). Moreover, the situation of existential hero in literature is always absolute and there is no escape from it.

Kierkegaard inspired American writers in specific existential areas such as suffering, aloneness, despair, dread, loneliness and death as an existential limit. Desperation resulting from the absence of the meaning of human existence is confronted with a hope to experience absolute freedom and salvation. Professor Gordon Marino highlights: "In the philosophical literature on Kierkegaard, there is a great deal of emphasis legitimately placed on considering anxiety as a structure of the self. To briefly summarize, anxiety is a manifestation of the fact that we are free. Anxiety is a shining forth of our spiritual nature. It reflects our relationship to possibility and the future." [14]

4. Reflection of anxiety

Professor Gordon Marino highlights the relation of anxiety to freedom and to knowledge, and also to eternity and time: "In anxiety, we use our freedom to make ourselves feel powerless or unfree. But in order for freedom to become entangled in itself, it must be actual." [13, p. 318] On one hand, facing the absurdity leads to existential resignation. On the other hand, it can lead to defiance and offense. "Anxiety is the possibility of freedom, but not an abstract or subjectless possibility...More specifically it is the subject's possibility of freedom in a higher subjectivity. Thus the anxiety experience points toward recovery of freedom, recovery of authentic possibility which is evolution as spirit." [15]

In order to explain the concept of anxiety Kierkegaard relates a man standing at the edge of a very high cliff. Whilst looking down, man has to face a terrible dread of falling. But on the other hand, there is also a desire to fall off the edge. This experience is anxiety or dread. There is a possibility of choice - either to stay on the cliff or to fall down. This unbearable choice to choose what one wills means "to be anxious about freedom's possibility, is to be anxious about what one will do with one's freedom" [14, p. 325]. Awareness of the fact that a man has the opportunity and free will to choose, even here the most terrifying possibility, rises to an unforeseen sense of fear. "Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his

own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself.“ [16]

Theologian Paul Tillich was also influenced by Kierkegaard and developed his own concept of anxiety. For him: “anxiety is the painful feeling of not being able to deal with the threat of a special situation. But a more exact analysis shows that in the anxiety about any special situation anxiety about the human situation as such is implied.” [17]

According to Kierkegaard, “anxiety is a desire for what one fears, a sympathetic antipathy, anxiety is an alien power which grips the individual, and yet one cannot tear himself free from it and does not want to, for one fears, but when he fears, he desires. Anxiety makes the individual powerless” [Pap. III A 233]. Each individual has to face dread and anxiety. It has to deal with anxiety of inevitable fate and finally death anxiety, which is “feeling of dread, apprehension or solicitude (anxiety) when one thinks of the process of dying, or ceasing to ‘be’” [18]. Death is predetermined and one cannot escape from it. “A certain presentiment [anelse] seems to precede everything that is to happen, but just as it can have a strong deterring effect, it can also tempt a person to think that he is, as it were, predestined” [Pap. II A 18].

Professor Gordon Marino explains that: “The link between anxiety and the future is underscored by the fact that the experience with which Kierkegaard’s *Haufniensis* most closely connects anxiety is, strangely enough, the experience of pre-sentiment” [14, p. 319].

In contrast to the future, the presence becomes a source of anxiety of an individual, because it represents its dislocation. Anxiety does not dwell in something certain. It dwells in nothingness and for each individual is terrifying and inviting. It is the anxiety itself, but also anxiety of future, relationships and love. Kierkegaard therefore emphasizes the ambivalent character of anxiety: “Anxiety is an alien power which lays hold of an individual and yet one cannot tear oneself away, ... for one fears, but what one fears one desires. Anxiety then makes the individual powerless.” [Pap. II A 233]

Everydayness brings anxiety in which individual has to face a fear of being harmed and is characterized by ontological meaning which is present in existentialism. Kierkegaard argues: “all existence makes me nervous” [Pap. II A 420]. Anxiety is the actual part of being human and one cannot escape from it. What more, “anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity, but in itself” [16, p. 49].

5. Concept of anxiety in Auden’s poem *The Age of Anxiety*

Kierkegaard’s concept of anxiety remarkably influenced American literature as well. Wystan Hugh Auden belongs to those writers most influenced by the Danish thinker. His literary works after 1939 are characterized by Søren

Kierkegaard's thinking. Kierkegaard shaped especially Auden's view on Christianity. After 1940, the Christian theme becomes dominant in his poems such as: *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, *The Sea and The Mirror: A commentary on Shakespeare's Tempest*, *Horae Canonicae*, *Musée des Beaux Arts*, *New Year Letter*, etc.

Evidence of Søren Kierkegaard's significant influence is in Auden's prosaic work *The Enchaféd Flood*, in which Auden analyzes ethic, aesthetic and religious stages of human existence. In 1939 Auden leaves Europe because of the rising power of Hitler and emigrates to the United States of America, where he follows "the western way of an existential Christianity grounded in Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich" [19].

Like Tillich before him, Auden "came to understand Kierkegaard better through suffering of the 1st World War, in which he served as a field spiritual on the Western Front and where he lived through real anxiety. Suffering and proximity of death had changed him." [10].

In 1973, Auden wrote a poem *Thanksgiving*, which can be considered to be his personal confession. The selected verse of the poem gives a testimony how vehemently was Auden influenced by Kierkegaard and how Auden perceived him [20].

„Finally, hair-raising things
that Hitler a Stalin were doing.
forced me to think about God.
Why was I sure they were wrong?
Wild Kierkegaard, Williams a Lewis
guided me back to belief.“

Auden was very interested in Kierkegaard's writings and after thoroughly studying them, he "left extensive documentation of his reception of Kierkegaard on three different occasions: first, in his 1944 review of the translation of *Either/Or* by David and Lillian Swenson and Walter Lowrie, *A Preface to Kierkegaard*; second, in his influential 1952 anthology of selections from Kierkegaard's oeuvre, *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*, which was accompanied by an extensive introduction; and finally in his 1968 review of the first volume of the *Journals and Papers* translated and edited by Howard and Edna Hong, *A Knight of Doleful Countenance*" [21].

After the World War II, in 1948, Auden wrote an outstanding poem *The Age of Anxiety*. It is a poem analysing the modern dilemma of modern man and becomes an eloquent definition of modern man's society living in the age of anxiety. Anxiety, uncertainty, aloneness are the main attributes of contemporary human civilization. "A common anxiety manifests itself differently in those with and without religion, and for both groups alike it is fed by political, social, familial, and personal disorders." [22]

The content of the poem was inspired by Tillich's interpretation of everything that the demonic represents and by Søren Kierkegaard's work *The Concept of Anxiety*. Paul Tillich adapted "A complex concept echoing the antecedent of Kierkegaard's 'demonic defiance,' and 'demonic despair,'" [23].

This concept subsequently influenced Auden's literary art. "Demonic defiance is more or less the creative aspect of this correlative of continuous consciousness. It powers the imagination to strive. This is not to say that the striving is always constructive. I can also be destructive, as in war. Demonic despair is inertia and depression." [23, p. 98]

According to Tillich, "the anxiety of fate was intensified by fear of demonic powers acting directly or through other human beings to cause illness, death, and all kinds of destruction" [17, p. 59]. After Germany attacked Poland in 1939 Auden writes how he feels [20, p. 95]:

"I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-Second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the Earth,
Obsessing our private lives,
The unmentionable odor of death
Offends the September night"

Even though he sits in a bar full of people he has to face anxiety and aloneness. Auden argues that during the war-time "everybody is reduced to the anxious status of a shady character or displaced person" [22, p. 3].

Being inspired by Tillich and Kierkegaard, Auden developed his own concept of demonic despair. For Auden, demonic would become "preferred term for most any especially dangerous personal excess, as in his essay Kierkegaard, in which he writes that 'the sufferer by fate' is tempted into 'demonic defiance' (guilt-ridden and foolish rebellion), and 'demonic despair' (guilt-ridden cynicism and depression)" [19, p. 14]. Demonic despair is manifested by guilt, whereas man falls into cynicism and into depression. Kierkegaard argues that depression is a very serious sin. It is actually a sin, "a sin *instar omnium*, for it is the sin of not willing deeply and inwardly, and this is a mother of all sins" [1, 189].

In one part of *The Age of Anxiety* Auden expresses doubts about the ability of mankind to learn from the mistakes of the past. He expressed deep sorrow and skepticism over the fate of the after-war generation and humankind itself [22, p. 105]:

"Yet the noble despair of the poets
Is nothing of the sort, it is silly
To refuse the task of time
And, overlooking our lives,
Cry – 'Miserable wicked me,
How interesting I am.'
We would rather be ruined than changed
We would rather die in our dread

Than claim the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.”

It is obvious, that Auden's concept of despair and anxiety is intertwined with Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety: “This comfort is precisely the torment, is precisely what keeps the gnawing alive and keeps life in the gnawing, for it is precisely over this that he despairs (not as having despaired): that he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing. This is the formula for despair raised to a higher power, the rising fever in this sickness of the self.” [24]

Auden's part of the verse: “We would rather be ruined than changed”, [22, p. 105] is a kind of despair which is according to Kierkegaard, “veritably a self-consuming, but an impotent self-consuming that cannot do what it wants to do” [23, 18]. It becomes quite obvious that, facing an empty possibility, “individual experiences dread, the fear of nothingness. In this anxious confrontation with the future, he becomes clearly aware of temporality. Anxiety becomes the very face of the future.” [25]

Life of an individual becomes a tense situation in which each particular individual must find courage to be, courage to face everydayness. Vincent McCarthy in his book *The Phenomenology of Moods in Kierkegaard* highlights: “But this is a terrifying call from which one may well wish to flee. And since possibility is infinite, one may indeed flee into inauthentic possibilities, refusing to pass into freedom by the refusal to choose or else by the despairing choice of unfreedom. It is such flight which aesthetic life represents by its very nature, and to the degree that it is conscious of this, it is demonic in its flight.” [15, p. 50]

Auden suggests that one possible way how to overcome anxiety is “cultivation of mutual sympathy - perhaps mutual love, even among those who hours before had been strangers” [22, p. xi]. However, it is very important to understand what the term ‘individual’ represents and means in Auden's work. Auden argues, that “the term individual has two senses, and one must be careful in discussion to find out in which sense it is being used. In the realm of nature, ‘individual’ means something that others are not, to have uniqueness: in the realm of spirit, it means to become what one wills, to have a self - determined history.” [22, p. xxxiv] In the first sense, individuality can be understood as a gift of fortune. An impartial observer can compare for example one person with another in order to recognize it, as when man is intelligent and when he is not clever enough. In the second sense fortune becomes either the enemy or irrelevant.

6. Conclusion:

“In times of war even the crudest kind of positive affection between persons seems extraordinarily beautiful, a noble symbol of the peace and forgiveness of which the whole world stands so desperately in need.” [22, p. 88]

W.H. Auden belongs to one of the most significant writers of the twentieth century. His talent and outstanding legacy has influenced wide spectrum of modern culture and art. Kierkegaard deeply influenced and formed Auden's ideas about Christianity [26-29]. His masterpiece poem, *The Age of Anxiety*, interprets his ideas' quest to find substance and identity of an individual in an unstable and increasingly industrialized world. Anxiety may be overcome not by a transformation of geopolitical conditions but by mutual sympathy perhaps even among those who had been not long before strangers. The poem *The Age of Anxiety* „is an extraordinarily acute anatomy of our self-images, and a diagnosis of those images, power not just to shape but to create our ideas” [22, pp. xlii]. Kierkegaard's legacy of loving the neighbour shaped his ideas and formed his attitude towards life. Despair and anxiety reflect misrelation [27]. In his analysis of Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*, Valčo underlines Kierkegaard's relational understanding of the human self, pointing out that “the root of the problem goes deep inside the human self, to its inability to relate properly to itself and to the Other, which established the very relation of the self to itself” [30]. The power of reason that urges us to rationalize our existential situation, as well as to “rationalize, psychologize, or historicize some basic teaching of Christianity”, fails in the face of human despair “unto death” [31].

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard describes the nature and forms of anxiety, placing the domain of anxiety within the mental and emotional states of human existence. Living in modern society, human has to face anxiety every day. Kierkegaard's concepts of anxiety, despair, dread and aloneness have become a significant part of his actual life experience.

References

- [1] S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, English translation, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1987, 155.
- [2] R. Králik, *Filosofický časopis*, **61(3)** (2013) 443-451.
- [3] R. Králik and M. Pavlíková, *Filozofia*, **68(1)** (2013) 82-86.
- [4] R. Králik, *Filosofický časopis*, **61(3)** (2013) 439-442.
- [5] M. Valčo, *Koncepcia subjektu a viery u S. Kierkegarda a D. Bonhoeffera*, KUD Apokalipsa, Ljubljana, 2016.
- [6] T. Máhrik, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **11(5)** (2015) 23-32.
- [7] L. Lenovský, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **11(5)** (2015) 171-184.
- [8] J. Jurová, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(3)** (2016) 71-80.
- [9] M. Pavlíková, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **11(3)** (2015) 191-200.
- [10] R. Králik, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **11(3)** (2015) 183-189.
- [11] R. Králik, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **11(4)** (2015) 179-188.
- [12] J. Stewart, *Editor's Introduction: Kierkegaard and the Rich Field of Kierkegaard Studies*, in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, J. Stewart (ed.), Blackwell Companions to Philosophy, Blackwell Publishing, Chichester, 2015, 11.
- [13] W.H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords*, Vintage, Reissue edition, 1990, 364.

- [14] G. Marino, *Anxiety in The Concept of Anxiety*, in *The Cambridge to Kierkegaard*, A. Hannay & G. Marino (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, 320.
- [15] V. McCarthy, *The Phenomenology of Moods in Kierkegaard*, Martinus Nijhoff, Hague/Boston, 1978, 50.
- [16] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, English translation, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981, 61.
- [17] P. Tillich, *Courage to Be*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008, 38.
- [18] L. Peters, R. Cant, S. Payne, M. O'Connor, F. McDermott, K. Hood, J. Morphet and K. Shimoinaba, *The Open Nursing Journal*, 7 (2013) 14–21.
- [19] D.G. Izzo, *W.H. Auden Encyclopedia*, McFarland & Company, London, 2004, 5.
- [20] W.H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, E. Mendelson (ed.), Vintage Books, New York, 2007, 316.
- [21] L.F. Lisi, *W.H. Auden: Art and Christianity in an Age of Anxiety, Kierkegaard's Influence of Literature, Criticism and Art*, vol. IV, Ashgate, Farnham, 2013, 1.
- [22] W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety a Baroque Eclogue*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011, xli.
- [23] D.G. Izzo, *The Influence of Mysticism on 20th Century British and American Literature*, McFarland, Jefferson (North Carolina), 2009, 97.
- [24] S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, English translation, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980, 18-19.
- [25] L. Dupré, *Of Time and Eternity, The Concept of Anxiety? A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, R.L. Perkins (ed.), Vol. 8, Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 121.
- [26] R. Králik and L. Torok, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, 12(3) (2016) 45-53.
- [27] P. Kondrla, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, 12(1) (2016) 117-128.
- [28] K. Valčová, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, 12(2) (2016) 203-212.
- [29] M. Valčo, R. Králik and L. Barrett, *Communications*, 17(2) (2015) 103-108.
- [30] M. Valčo, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, 12(1) (2016) 97-105.
- [31] M. Valčo, *Alternative Viewpoint: Edwards and the World Religions*, in *Understanding Jonathan Edwards*, G. McDermott (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, 195-200.