

# We Must Love One Another or Die: A Brief History

*by* Con Chapman

It is one of the twentieth century's most memorable lines of poetry: "We must love one another or die" wrote W.H. Auden in the eighth stanza of "September 1, 1939," his echo, on the eve of World War II, of W.B. Yeats "Easter, 1916."



## *Auden*

E.M. Forster, the novelist, said of Auden "Because he once wrote 'We must love one another or die' he can command me to follow him." The lines were frequently repeated, sometimes in truncated form, in the days following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. They were even taken in vain by Lyndon Johnson during his 1964 presidential campaign against Republican Senator Barry Goldwater. Johnson's infamous "Daisy" commercial depicts a young

girl picking petals from a daisy; she is slowly replaced by the image of a nuclear explosion over which Johnson's voice is heard saying "We must love each other, or we must die," an unpoetic rendering of the line that was inserted into a Johnson speech by an unidentified speechwriter.



*Yeats*

And yet when the poem was reprinted, four years after it first appeared in *The New Republic*, Auden chose to delete in its entirety the stanza in which the lines appear. In 1957 he wrote to the critic Laurence Lerner "Between you and me, I loathe that poem," and he resolved to omit it from his further collections. The poem was, he thought, too flattering to himself and his friends, with whom he sat "in one of the dives [o]n Fifty-Second Street" as the poem opens.



*LBJ's "Daisy" commercial*

Finally after a decade he allowed Oscar Williams to include it complete in *The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse* with the line changed to read "We must love one another *and* die." He subsequently allowed the poem to be reprinted only once, in an anthology printed a quarter of a century after it originally appeared in print, with a note stating that he considered it and four other poems "to be trash which he is ashamed to have written."



*Dizzy Gillespie on 52nd Street*

There has probably never been a greater disjuncture between a poet and seven words he'd written. What was it that so disturbed

Auden about the line after it had flowed from his pen to paper? The thought that by loving each other we could avoid a sort of death in life? Perhaps; since Hitler and the gas chambers followed the "low dishonest decade" that ended as America went to war, it must have struck Auden in retrospect as youthful naivete to think that love alone was enough to counteract evil.

His revision--"We must love one another and die"--surely states a fact, or at least a probability; everyone will die, and most will know love--merely physical or all-engulfing--before they do so. Still, Auden considered it trash, too easy a formulation. Between the nights of love and death, there is always the tedium and homely stuff of everyday life--a dog scratching its "innocent behind on a tree," as he observed in *Musee des Beaux Arts*. Love and death, while central themes of Western literature, leave great gaping holes to be filled by long periods of work and sleep and boredom--and poetry.

