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FUNERAL BLUES – W.H. Auden

(Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone)

1. Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
2. Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
3. Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
4. Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

5. Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
6. Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
7. Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
8. Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

9. He was my North, my South, my East and West,
10. My working week and my Sunday rest,
11. My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
12. I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

13. The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
14. Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
15. Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
16. For nothing now can ever come to any good.

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FUNERAL BLUES – NOTES

The poet appears to be suffering the loss of someone close. He calls for a public lament, demanding that nothing may get in the way of his mourning.

W. H. Auden's poem, "Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone" conveys the meaning of overwhelming grief, tragic loss, and an unrelenting pessimism best exemplified in the last lines, "For nothing now can ever come to any good." The tone of the poem is that of a melancholy sadness enforced by the internal rhyme scheme (aabb) and the melodic iambic pentameter used.

The title and first line of the poem demonstrate the author's inconsolable grief by commanding the audience to do something which is not possible, "Stop all the clocks." This reference to time could also be an allusion to the death and brevity of life which cause the author such agony.

The verbs of the first three lines of the first stanza represent how the author wants to eliminate the distractions of the day – clocks ticking, telephones ringing, dogs barking, pianos playing – in order that everyone may mourn this death. These imperative verbs are all forbidding something and not until the mention of the coffin in line 4 do the verbs begin to be more allowing; "Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come."

The next stanza continues to develop the idea of public mourning. The author has been so deeply touched by such a personal loss that he feels the entire world should share in his grief. The subjects of this stanza; the aeroplane, the sky, the white necks of the public doves, and the traffic policemen, are not typically associated with death. However, by incorporating these things into an elaborate funeral procession, the author emphasizes the need for public mourning. Lines 5 and 6 illustrate the importance of the death to the author, for he wants news of it spread across the sky where everyone on earth can see it. Also emphasizing the relationship between the two is the capitalization of the phrase "He Is Dead" from line 6, in which the author tries to deify the deceased.

The funeral procession described in lines 7 and 8 serves to further represent both the importance of the deceased and the grief caused by this death.

The third stanza, particularly lines 9, 10, and 11, again conveys the intimacy of the relationship between the author and the deceased. The author shows reverence for this man by using exaggerated **metaphors** to imply his importance to the author. Line 9, "He was my North, my South, my East and West," demonstrates the relationship between the two men and combined with the next line, "My working week and my Sunday rest," implies this relationship to be of a very intimate nature. This is echoed in line 12, "I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong." This can be interpreted to represent the speaker's ignorance toward an inevitable death. The author's love for this man is so all encompassing he describes him as the points of the globe. This love is so strong that the speaker believes it will last forever, not until the death of his companion was the realization made that love, like everything else, will come to an end.

The last stanza and in particular line 16 affirms the hopelessness of the poem. The motif of commanding verbs concludes in this stanza where the author serves to convey a purposeless life without the deceased. The readers are instructed to again perform extraordinary tasks in order that the author may mourn. Lines 13 and 14, “The stars are not wanted now: Put out every one: Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;” express the despair of the author. A world without the sun and moon would be void of everything, including life. This sentiment is echoed in the following line, “Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;” Both these **hyperbolic metaphors** are again intended to symbolize the aimless feelings of the author and the void left by the death of this man. By commanding the audience to dispel of the oceans and remove the forests of the world, the speaker shows both how meaningless life is without his lover and how the world would be able to equate with such a loss.

The pessimism of the poem is captured best in line 16, “For nothing now can ever come to any good.” The death of this man has devastated the speaker in such a way that he feels both without purpose and unable to see any good in the world. This line concludes the poem and emphasizes the melancholy tone evident throughout. Like the death of his lover, the last line emphasizes the finality of life and an end void of purpose.

A CRITICAL READING OF ‘FUNERAL BLUES’

W. H. Auden’s poem ‘Stop all the clocks’ – poem number IX in his *Twelve Songs*, and also sometimes known as ‘Funeral Blues’ – is a poem so famous and universally understood that perhaps it is unnecessary to offer much in the way of textual analysis. Yet we’re going to offer some notes towards an analysis of ‘Funeral Blues’ in this post, because if a poem does touch us and move us in some way – especially so many of us – it’s always worth trying to explain why. The poem – and the work of W. H. Auden (1907-73) more generally – was brought to a whole new audience when it was quoted in full in the 1994 film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, in which Auden is described as a ‘splendid bugger’. You can read ‘Stop all the clocks’, which was first published in 1936.

A brief summary of ‘Funeral Blues’ first. The poem is divided into four stanzas. The first two stanzas see the speaker of the poem, who is mourning the loss of a close friend (or, indeed, a lover), making a series of requests or commands. In the first stanza, he asks that the clocks be stopped, the telephone be cut off so it cannot ring, the dog be kept quiet with a bone to gnaw, and the music of the pianos be discontinued. Instead, let the muffled drumbeats – historically associated with funerals – accompany the coffin as it is brought out and the mourners at the funeral arrive.

So far, so straightforward. During a funeral and, more widely, a time of mourning, you might not want to be disturbed by the noise of the world around you, partly because you need time to grieve and partly because such sounds are a reminder that the world around you carries on. The requests the speaker makes are paving the way for the funeral, after all.

In the second stanza, the speaker’s requests become different, however. He moves from a private or close-knit ceremony of mourning – the funeral of ‘Funeral Blues’ – to

wish for an altogether more public display of grief. But this is faintly absurd. He asks that the planes circle in the sky and, using the relatively recent phenomenon of skywriting (first used for advertising purposes by the *Daily Mail* in 1923, just over a decade before Auden wrote 'Funeral Blues'), that the message 'He Is Dead' be scribbled across the sky. This is, to say the least, unlikely to happen. The crepe bows he wants to put round the necks of the public doves (what are 'public doves', by the way – does he mean pigeons?) suggests that the speaker's grief is overwhelming and that he wants the whole world to mourn with him. The bows round the necks of the doves, and the black cotton gloves – black being associated with mourning – that he wants the traffic policemen to wear, are both excessive and unreasonable requests to make, but this is precisely the point. One's personal grief dwarfs the concerns of the rest of the world, and it often becomes inconceivable that everyone else would not share in the feeling of loss and sorrow the individual feels.

Indeed, as the third stanza makes clear, the man who has died was everything to the speaker: no matter where he was, or what day it was, or what time of day, the dead man *was* the speaker's life. This suggests that the speaker is talking about more than a friend, and is lamenting the loss of a lover: Auden himself was gay, of course, and the idea that the poem is an elegy by a male poet for a dead male lover is certainly how the poem was interpreted in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, where John Hannah's character recites the poem at the death of his lover, played by Simon Callow. The speaker thought that his lover would always be around, but with three simple words, heartbreakingly delivered at the end of the stanza, he concludes: 'I was wrong.'

The final stanza then takes a number of romantic tropes typically associated with poetry – the stars, the moon, the sun, the oceans – and rejects them as unhelpful. What use are such symbols of romantic love when you have lost your one true love? As with the previous stanza, the power of Auden's poetry in this stanza lies in the contrast between this catalogue of now-useless poetic tropes in the first three lines and the final line, which is breathtakingly simple and direct. But mentioning these poetic tropes has a dual purpose: as well as rejecting the usefulness of such romantic talk in the face of his grief, the speaker is also saying that the world – indeed, the entire universe – is of no worth if it does not have his lover in it. The word 'dismantle' verges on the flippant in the second line, as if the sun is a mechanical device that one can simply take apart, like a watch. It suggests that even the natural world seems fake and unreal now that the joys of the world have been taken from him.

As we said at the start of this close reading, many readers may feel that no additional analysis of W. H. Auden's poem is required. 'Funeral Blues' is not a difficult or elusive (or allusive) poem. But some its images are worth commenting on, as well as the way it achieves its emotional effects, the way it carries such a punch.

FUNERAL BLUES – AN ANALYSIS

In the poem “FUNERAL BLUES” by W.H. Auden, the speaker tries to stop the world after losing a loved one. The speaker uses the word choices, such as “...muffled drum...” and “mourners come” (3-4), to give the reader an audible sound that is dark, hollow, and echoing; like the feeling of death.

The speaker is serious, sad, and uses a somewhat relaxed, formal diction. The speaker’s diction is formal, yet it is not too elaborate or complex for the everyday reader. The tone conveys that the speaker has a mournful attitude towards the man who died. There is no shift in tone, showing that the speaker attitude is solid, confident, and unchanging, which may mean that the man who dies has been in the speaker’s life for a long time.

This grieving speaker wants to make the man’s death into a huge affair; hinting that this person may have been greatly important to not only the speaker, but also to many other people. In line 1, the speaker commands that all of the clocks and telephone lines be cut off. This is an unrealistic idea, one that shows the speaker may be so upset over this death that he or she is not thinking clearly.

The images in this poem also help to further a reader’s understanding of the situation that the speaker is going through. The image of traffic policeman stirs up the thought that so many people will be coming that traffic police will be needed, indicating that this person is important and well known. The white doves suggest that the man who died is a pure and kind person. The statement “Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead” (Line 5) suggests that this man may have been in the military, in which case the man could be given an honorary fly-by for heroic actions. The images of the phones not ringing, the clocks not ticking, the dog not barking, and the pianos muffled by a drum gives the reader an auditory sense of immense silence.

In line 12, the speaker says “I thought that love would last forever; I was wrong.” This statement leads me to believe that the speaker is a woman, upset over the death of her male lover. “He was my North, my South, my East and West” (Line 9) confirms that the female speaker is talking about her male lover. It seems that this male who died is an important person, or may just be very important to the speaker. He uses lines 9, 10, and 11 to show how important this man is to her. Using so many lines of a short poem to make the speaker’s immense love for the man clear emphasizes how important it is for the reader to know that the speaker cared immensely for this man.

The speaker seems to realize that, without her lover, there is no reason to live and no happiness in life. She wants everything in the world to stop, because she has no one to share the wonderful experiences of life with. The last line, “For nothing now can ever come to any good,” sums up the message that this poem is suggesting; life means nothing without someone to love and be loved by.

FUNERAL BLUES SUMMARY

An unnamed speaker laments the death of someone close to him. (The speaker's gender is never given, but we'll refer to "him" from now on for convenience.) The speaker asks for quiet. He wants to stop all clocks and telephones and to silence barking dogs and pianos. He says to bring out the coffin of the dead beloved, and for the mourners to come.

He continues on in a similar vein; and asks the airplanes to write "He Is Dead" across the sky. He says that doves should wear white ribbons and that policemen should wear black gloves to commemorate the death.

Then things take a turn for the personal. He says that the dead man was everything to him – all points of a compass, every day of the week, every time of the day. And the worst part is that this experience has taught him that love won't last forever, as he once thought.

That's when he starts to really despair. He doesn't want to see the stars, the moon, or the sun. He doesn't want to see the ocean or the forest. Now that the dead man is gone, there is no good left in the world. None at all.

<i>Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone, Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,</i>
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- The poem begins with a series of harsh commands: stop the clocks! Cut off the telephones!
- We don't know quite who our speaker is yet, but he sounds forceful, even angry.
- And actually, we'll never find out too much about the speaker himself. For the sake of convenience, we'll refer to the speaker as a "he," but "he" could just as easily be "she".
- Whoever he is, he sounds angry, and issues harsh commands. In the first line, he wants to stop the clocks and the telephone. These seem like physical representations of time and communication to us. He wants everything to just stop.
- In the next line, he asks for silence. He wants dogs to stop barking, too. But we have to ask: what dogs? Whose dogs? To whom does the speaker address these lines (and the poem in general)? His noisy, dog-loving neighbor? Dog-lovers in general?
- There's no one answer to these questions, but since the poem is called "Funeral Blues," it would be pretty legitimate to propose that the speaker is addressing an audience of mourners at a funeral. So this is a public poem, in a way—a poem meant for lots of people to hear.
- And finally, we noticed that these lines are similar in length. Line 1 has ten syllables, which is a sure sign that we're reading **iambic pentameter**. Line 2, though, has twelve, and the **rhythm** is off in both lines, so Auden's keeping us on our toes for now.

***Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.***

- Whatever's going on here, this is not a time for pianos. It's a time for muffled drums. Now that he's asked the dog and the phone to hush, he has no problem extending that request to musical instruments.
- Except he's not opposed to the drum. Which fits the title. If this is a funeral we're dealing with, drums are much more solemn and fitting for the occasion than a joyful, jazzy piano.
- In the next line, he wants the coffin to be brought out and for mourners to come see it. Maybe the "muffled drum," then, is the sound of mourners walking, or of pallbearers carrying a coffin. Or maybe it is a slow and stately drumming that the speaker wants, the kind of drumming that happens at military funerals.
- The interesting thing about these two lines, and the first two as well, is that they are all commands, also known as imperatives. The speaker is making a big pronouncement to the world: someone has died, and we must acknowledge it in dramatic ways.
- These lines might even seem a little exaggerated to you. Should we really stop the clocks just because someone has died? Probably not. But the speaker's using a bit of hyperbole or exaggeration to convey just how important all this mourning business is.
- But of course when someone's being so over-the-top, it raises the question, how serious is the speaker? Is he exaggerating to create drama, or does he really feel this deeply about all this?
- Line 3 has eleven syllables, and line 4 has ten – **iambic pentameter**.
- And by the end of stanza 1, we've also got a clear rhyme scheme at work. "Telephone" rhymes with "bone," and "drum" rhymes with "come." A little AABB action for you.
- Whenever you see a four-line stanza, or quatrain that has an AABB rhyme scheme in a poem about a funeral, you're reading an **elegiac** stanza.

***Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He is Dead,***

- Now things are getting really dramatic. As if stopping the clocks weren't enough, the speaker would like an airplane to write "He is Dead" in skywriting to commemorate his grief. If a funeral is a public acknowledgment of death, well then this is a super public acknowledgement of death. You don't get much more in-your-face than skywriting.
- While earlier he asked for quiet, and for people to cut off their telephones (which are private communication devices), he wants the whole world to know that "He Is Dead."
- And it's interesting here that the speaker doesn't provide a name. He could have written, for example, "John Is Dead." Or "Tommy Is Dead." But he leaves the dead man's name anonymous. Maybe he wants more privacy after all. Or maybe

he assumes that everyone already knows "his" name. Either way, there's an interesting mixture between private and public acknowledgments of death going on here.

***Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.***

- More public demands here, as the speaker wants even the "public doves" – we have a strong feeling that these are pigeons – to honor the dead man. And he wants even the traffic police to acknowledge him, too.
- Do these demands seem a little ridiculous to you? Does the speaker really want us to put bows on pigeons? It seems our man is getting **hyperbolic** again.
- And what's up with this dead guy? Why does the speaker care so much about how, where, and by whom he is mourned? Is the dead man the prime minister? A famous athlete? A poet? Why does he deserve to be publicly mourned? Let's keep reading.

***He was my North, my South, my East and West
My working week and my Sunday rest,***

- Ah, this clears things up a bit. This speaker is so broken up about stuff (and wants everyone else to be broke up about it, too) because he really loved the dead man. It doesn't seem like he was the leader of England or a world-class gymnast or anything like that. The dead man is someone the speaker knew and loved in daily life.
- These lines are incredibly personal, especially when compared to the earlier lines that are mostly about public mourning. The dead man meant everything to the speaker, so it's no wonder he'd like all the world around him to reflect the fact that the guy's dead.
- **Metaphor.** Was the dead man really a calendar of days for the speaker? All the directions on a compass? Of course not. But in a metaphor, we describe one thing by way of another thing. So here, the speaker describes the dead man by saying that he was like a compass for him, and also like every day of the week for him. He provided direction, and filled his time. It's a more poetic way of saying, "hey, I loved this person! He was important to me!"

***My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.***

- More **metaphors**. These lines seem to imply that the dead man filled every hour of the speaker's day. He brought conversation and joy into the speaker's life.
- And then line 12 hits you over the head.
- While the previous lines were lovely and **metaphorical**, this one is straight-up and harsh. Your loved ones will die. No love lasts forever.

***The stars are not wanted now: put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,***

- After that devastating line 12, the speaker grows even more depressed in these lines. Again using the imperative mood, he demands that someone puts out the stars, pack up the moon, and take apart the sun. Now his grief is so extreme, it's affecting the way he sees the cosmos.
- Does the speaker expect us to really do this? Of course not. But his extreme, hyperbolic commands are his expressions of his extreme grief.
- Even though no one could ever "dismantle the sun," the speaker's grief is so intense that he wishes that we could. All of these romantic and natural images – the stars, the moon, the sun – are too painful for him. It's almost as if he wants to blot out everything in the world except his own mourning.

***Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.***

- In these final lines, the speaker continues his hyperbolic thinking and asks us to get rid of the ocean and the wood (by "wood," he probably means the forests). He doesn't want to see any sign of the wonders of nature because he's so down in the dumps.
- The last line of the poem the narrator becomes totally hopeless, the speaker laments that nothing will ever be good again. Not since this person's death.
- In a lot of elegies (poems like this one that commemorate a person's death), the speaker will offer some hope for the future, or will talk about how the dead person will live on in memories and poetry. There's usually a small moment of optimism buried somewhere in them. But not in Auden's "Funeral Blues." This is just a really sad poem about death. There is no light at the end of the tunnel for anyone in "Funeral Blues."

SYMBOL ANALYSIS

- Line 1: The speaker wants to cut off personal communication with the world: he wants to stop the telephone lines from running. He's looking for isolation. He's probably being **hyperbolic** here, which means that he's exaggerating his feelings and desires to show just how sad and hopeless he feels.
- Line 2: He also wants to stop dogs from barking.
- Line 3: Now he'd like people to quit playing the piano.
- Lines 3 – 4: He wants to hear the "muffled drum" of the funeral march. The speaker wants to hear this and this only. It's like all other noise is a distraction from what really matters, which is his pain.

THE PUBLIC

Symbol Analysis

The speaker is not just concerned with his own reaction to the man's death. He wants the acknowledgment of the public, too. Even though we don't really have much of a reason to think that the dead beloved is famous or anything, the speaker really desires that this death be noticed. Perhaps his grief is so consuming, that he wants it to be reflected in all the world around him.

- Lines 1 – 4: The speaker wants quiet so that the drum of the funeral march can be heard by the mourners of the dead man. Once again, he's being **hyperbolic**. No one can really expect every dog in the world to stop barking just because a funeral is happening somewhere in the world.
- Lines 5 – 6: The speaker asks airplanes to proclaim the man's death though skywriting. It's like he wants the whole world to know what he's going through.
- Lines 7 – 8: He even wants policemen and pigeons to acknowledge the man's death. Once again, **hyperbole**.
- Lines 9 – 12: Compared to the previous lines that deal with the public, these lines seem quiet and intimate, and we realize what the dead man meant to the speaker. He wants a public acknowledgment of the man with whom he's spent his private life.

NATURE

Symbol Analysis

Sun, moon, stars ... He wants all these lovely things – and everything else in nature, it seems – to leave him alone. The grief he feels seems to have interfered with his ability to appreciate nature.

- Line 11: Here, the speaker says that the dead man was everything to him. Even times of the day. Even midnight itself. These **metaphors** are **hyperbolic**.
- Lines 13 – 16: The speaker calls for us to "put out" the stars, "pack up the moon and dismantle the sun." He wants every beautiful thing that nature provides to go away. No more ocean, no more forests. This person is so sad that he doesn't even want the stars around to remind him of his dead beloved. He's being **hyperbolic**, of course; he probably doesn't actually think that someone could "dismantle" the sun. But he yearns for this isolation from the natural world anyway.

FUNERAL BLUES: RHYME, FORM & METER

We'll show you the poem's blueprints, and we'll listen for the music behind the words.

Elegy

A dead person, mourners, a funeral, and a sad speaker? This poem is an **elegy**. *Elegies can take lots of different shapes and forms, since there are no rhyming or metrical rules for an elegy. But the great thing about "Funeral Blues" is that it's written in what are called elegiac stanzas – more or less.*

An elegiac stanza is a quatrain written in iambic pentameter, usually with the rhyme scheme ABAB. Here's where the "more or less" comes in. "Funeral Blues" *is* written in quatrains, and it does make use of iambic pentameter, but it's highly irregular in its meter, with extra syllables here and unsteady feet there. And the rhyme scheme is adjusted a bit, too: AABB instead of ABAB. Auden is using heroic couplets instead of alternating rhymes.

SHAKIN' UP THE BLUES

Now, for the nitty-gritty stuff. Let's look at some of the messier moments, when "Funeral Blues" shakes up the form and lets its freak flag fly.

Line 1. Stop **all** the **clocks**, cut **off** the **telephone**.

Pretty perfect iambic pentameter.

Line 2. Pre**vent** the **dog** from **barking with a juicy bone**.

That's twelve syllables, which means we are dealing with a line of iambic *hexameter* – that's six iambs all in a row. Auden shakes things up, right at the beginning of the poem to let us know this won't be your typical elegy.

Line 3. **Silence** the **pianos and** with **muffled drum**

Auden drops in a trochee in the place of an iamb in the first foot of the line. Then, just after that, he drops in an anapest, which accounts for the extra syllable in the line.

Finally line 4 of the stanza brings us back to the world of regular iambic pentameter: Bring **out** the **coffin let** the **mourners come**.

WHY SO UNSTEADY?

But of course that raises the question: why does Auden do all this metrical variation in the first place? To be frank, there are a lot of plausible theories. Auden was known for being a virtuoso of form, maybe he's just having a bit of fun. But we think it's more likely that each choice is a deliberate one.

Take that trochee that starts off line 3. It sure draws a lot of attention to the word "silence". It practically rings in your ears. And then, there's that super lengthy line 2. Coming after "stop all the clocks", it sure slows down time a bit, and in a way, it fulfills the command that came in the previous line. Auden is clever, so what some may write off as sloppiness, laziness, or even just quirky variations, are more likely deliberate choices.

SPEAKER POINT OF VIEW

Who is the speaker, can she or he read minds, and, more importantly, can we trust her or him?

Let's list what we know about the speaker:

As we mentioned in our "Summary" of the poem, we don't actually know if the speaker is male or female (though we've been consistently referring to him as a male for the sake of simplicity).

1. He likes issuing commands and telling people what to do.
2. He's sad – really, really sad.

It's that last one we're interested in. This person is so sad that he can't imagine any good or happiness in the future. He's so overwhelmed by grief that he's driven to speak in crazy **hyperboles**. It's as if his sadness has completely changed the way he sees the world around him, and he wants that sadness to be reflected back to him by everything he sees. It's serious business. But the problem is, he exaggerates so consistently that we may even have trouble taking him seriously sometimes.

We believe that the narrator is deadly serious. The mourning here is palpable, and it's no wonder this poem has become so popular at funerals and memorials. Anyone can relate to this speaker's consuming sorrow.

FUNERAL BLUES SETTING

This poem's set at a funeral.

This isn't about a small chapel, filled with loved ones in black. The setting, in many ways, is the whole wide world. And the speaker would like it to stop being awesome for a moment. It's not enough that the funeral's full of sad people. The speaker wants that sadness to be reflected in everything – from the pigeons in the street to the stars in the sky. The true setting of "Funeral Blues" includes all of those things.

WHAT'S UP WITH THE TITLE?

The poem is called "Funeral Blues," and that's the perfect title. After all, it's a sad song (blues) about a dead person (funeral).

WHAT IS THE POET'S SIGNATURE STYLE?

Master of Forms

Auden was writing his poems during a time when all the cool poets were writing in free verse. These poets wanted to break poetry apart, make it less stuffy, more free and fresh.

But not Auden. He loved poetic forms. In fact, he's pretty much the master. Even while the other poets hated rhymes and all that formal poetry essentials, Auden stuck with them, and got really, really good at writing in forms. Much of the power of "Funeral Blues" lies in its repetitive, heavy rhymes, and its play on the elegy form.

TOUGH-O-METER

"Funeral Blues" isn't too hard to understand, and you've got the title to clue you in on what's going down: someone has died, and the speaker is devastated. Not too difficult. But wading through Auden's hyperboles can be a little tough sometimes, so you might say this poem has a few tricks up its sleeve.

Funeral Blues Theme of Death

"Funeral Blues" pretty much puts it all out there in the title: this is a poem about death. Terrible, horrible, no good, very bad death. After the death of his loved one, the speaker has no joy or hope. He is completely and utterly devastated. There's no silver lining in this poem, no happy endings, no smiles or songs. There's only the notion that death is the a wretched and worst imaginable place, and not just for the dead – for the living, too.

QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH

1. Do we know exactly what the relationship was between the speaker and the dead man?
2. Is there a connection between the rhymes and the theme of death in the poem? What do you think it might be?
3. Does the speaker exaggerate his love for the dead man so much that it's unbelievable? Or does his hyperbole make the poem even more meaningful?
4. Why does the speaker issue so many commands? What is the relationship between this commanding speech and death?
5. Do you see any hope in this poem? Is the speaker condemned to a sort of death-in-life after the death of his loved one?

FUNERAL BLUES THEME OF LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

The speaker spends a whole lot of time in "Funeral Blues" issuing commands to an unnamed audience. He may be actually giving a eulogy at a funeral, or he may be talking to himself and expressing his desires. Either way, communication plays an important role in this poem, because we have all kinds of it here – private telephone communication, public skywriting, even traffic directing. "Funeral Blues" raises all kinds of questions about private and public speech, and private and public mourning. Does mourning have to be a public act? This speaker seems to think so.

QUESTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

1. Do you think that this poem is actually meant to be read at a funeral? Or does it just describe the feelings of a man whose beloved has died?
2. Why is it so important to the speaker for the public to acknowledge the death of his loved one?
3. Is it possible for the speaker to mourn privately? Or is mourning always a public act?
4. Do you think that the poem itself is a form of communication?

FUNERAL BLUES THEME OF MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD

The speaker of "Funeral Blues" wants us to put out the stars and dismantle the sun. These hyperbolic statements and the ones that follow are all about shutting down the

natural world in order to demonstrate this mourning person's grief. It seems like the speaker knows that his commands are hyperbolic, exaggerated, and impossible, but thinks that nothing smaller than nature itself can communicate his despair accurately.

QUESTIONS ABOUT MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD

1. Why does the speaker invoke the stars, the moon, and the sun? Isn't he being a bit self-centered?
2. Why is the dog with the juicy bone in the poem? Is the dog part of nature, too?
3. Is the speaker's desire to "put out" the stars (and nature) over-the-top? Or is this how he really feels?
4. What's up with nature anyway? Why does the speaker target it in the last stanza? Why doesn't he go after the clocks and telephones again?

FUNERAL BLUES DEATH QUOTES

Quote 1

Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come. (Line 4)

Until this moment, the speaker has been making lots of commanding statements. This line introduces the beloved's death into the poem. Now we know why he's been calling for quiet, and we start to understand the narrator a bit better.

Quote 2

"Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead". (Lines 5 – 6)

Here's the thing about death. People usually don't skywrite about it. Death and mourning are personal, and usually limited to a relatively small group of people. But the speaker's grief feels so huge, he wants everyone to pay attention.

Quote 3

"I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong". (Line 12)

The speaker's thoughts about life and love have been completely overturned by the man's death. He realizes that nothing, not even love, can withstand time. Death doesn't just destroys life – it destroys love, too.

MORE NOTES

The fourth stanza plays on images often associated with romantic love: The starlit sky,

- The shining moon,
- Romantic walks along a beach,
- Picnics in the woods.

These conventions are destroyed as the narrator calls for all these symbols to be stripped of their meaning as '*nothing now can ever come to any good.*' (Line 16)

Auden effectively captures the narrator's sense of devastation and grief with his images in the first stanza. The narrator's world has ended, and he feels that life has changed forever. It seems wrong for the world to continue on with the telephone ringing or dogs barking in the face of such terrible loss.

Stanza 1 explores the narrator's domestic or home environment.

Auden achieves remarkable balance of tone. The narrator's grief is starkly evident and his sorrow, confusion and even anger or bitterness at his loss is evident. However, Auden never allows the tone to become overly sentimental. As a result, the grief seems real and moving as we share and understand the narrator's bereavement.

THE TITLE

It is clear from the outset what the subject of the poem will be with the title "**FUNERAL BLUES**". The choice of the word "**BLUES**" is an effective one:

- it could refer to a depressed mood
- it also describes a slow, sad musical piece.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

The poem comprises of four stanzas of equal length. Each stanza's four lines rhyme regularly in an *a-a-b-b*, *c-c-d-d*, *e-e-f-f*, *g-g-h-h* pattern.

Each stanza explores a different aspect of the speaker's grief. The first stanza explores the domestic or home environment, the second broadens to his local and public surroundings, the third stanza explains the nature of the speaker's love for the deceased, while the fourth stanza looks beyond to elements of nature in the greater universe.

VOCABULARY

"muffled"	wrapped to deaden the sound
"Scribbling"	writing hurriedly and untidily
"crêpe"	light, crinkled fabric
"dismantle"	take apart

'FUNERAL BLUES'

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ANSWERS

1. **State the possible meanings of the word 'Blues' in the title, and relate this to the poem itself.**

'Blues' can refer to a depressed mood, when someone is feeling unhappy. Given that the poem is about grief, this is certainly appropriate. It can also apply to a type of music that is characterised by its soulful, sad mood, which also applies to the content of the poem.

2. **Identify the colour contrast found in the second stanza, and show how this reflects the speaker's mood.**

The contrast of the colours black and white comes to the fore. The white necks of doves need to be marked with a black ribbon (line 7), while the traffic policemen

must exchange their usual white gloves for black (line 8). This shows the depth of the speaker's bereavement as he wants the public acknowledgement of the death of this individual to be apparent.

3. *Discuss the nature of the relationship described in the third stanza, and comment on how this information is conveyed.*

This was clearly a very close relationship. This stanza expresses the joy of time spent together whether it was the day-to-day humdrum of the working week or the leisure of a weekend (line 10). The reader can infer from 'my talk, my song' (line 11) that this couple shared many conversations and were happy. The depth of loss is amplified by the fact that the loved one was 'my North, my South, my East and West' (line 9); clearly, the partner provided the speaker with direction, purpose, guidance and security. The simple comparisons used in this stanza are most evocative as their sincerity rings true and is immediately grasped.

4. *Critically evaluate the impact of this poem as an expression of loss and grief. Support your response with evidence from the poem.*

While readers may respond differently, most will find the poem moving. The simple diction of the poem, the ordinary scenes used, and the recognisable references make it effortless for most people to relate to. The way the speaker expresses his grief through the domestic scene, the public sphere and ultimately the universe, allows us to glimpse the pain and deep loss being experienced. The simplicity of 'I was wrong' (line 12) is searing, and the reader is able to get an inkling of the speaker's feelings. The sentiment that there is nothing good left in the world, nor will there ever be, rings true.

INTRODUCTION	'Funeral Blues' explores the speaker's sense of loss at the death of a loved one. Through the poem's stanza arrangement, and the use of evocation imagery, the poem illustrates the speaker's intense grief.	Position/response Supporting point
BODY OF ESSAY	The poem's structure is made up of four stanzas, each focusing on a different aspect of the speaker's loss <i>The first</i> stanza begins with a domestic scene with reference to items in a home such as the telephone, the dog and the piano. <i>The second</i> stanza moves to the public sphere, <i>while the third stanza</i> focuses on the private as it reflects on the enormity of personal loss. <i>The final stanza</i> encompasses the universe in which such elements as the stars, moon and ocean can no longer 'come to any good' (line 16).	Topic sentence <i>Linking device</i> Supporting point <i>Quote from the poem</i>
BODY OF ESSAY	The imagery used throughout captures the speaker's devastation. The speaker's emotions are reflected in the stopping of clocks, the telephone being '<i>cut off</i>' (line 1), and the dog and piano being silenced so that the '<i>muffled drum</i>' (line 3) can mark the coffin's journey with respect. The metaphor comparing the deceased to the speaker's compass tells us that the dead person provided a sense of direction and purpose, while the strength of the relationship is captured through the images of 'my talk' and the joy of '<i>my song</i>' (line 11). The speaker's mistaken belief that this 'love would last forever (line 12) is moving in its simple truth and tone of anguish. The imagery of the final stanza, in which the lights of the stars must be '<i>put out</i>' (line 13) and the romance of the moon needs to be '<i>pack[ed] up</i>' (line 14) reflects a tone of despair.	Topic sentence Supporting point <i>Quote from the poem</i> Paraphrase Supporting point <i>Quote from the poem</i> Topic sentence Supporting point <i>Quote from the poem</i>
CONCLUSION	The poem is a moving account of the speaker's deep sorrow at the passing of his loved one, and the reader is left in no doubt as to the enormity of his loss.	Concluding sentence

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