

### A Primer for Poetry: W.H. Auden’s “Funeral Blues”

This first poem, W. H. Auden’s “Funeral Blues,” is a good poem with which to begin your preparation for poetry, and it will serve as a primer for the remainder of the tasks in the poetry section. Unlike other explanatory materials in this book, this one will not give you all the answers; rather, it is designed to initiate your journey through certain aspects of the poem, so that when you try the questions, you will approach with some prior knowledge of theme and technique. To begin, read the poem to yourself carefully.

#### Funeral Blues

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

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

(10) He was my North, my South, my East, my West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

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

—W. H. Auden

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“Funeral Blues” is a special type of poem, a poem of mourning (the term for which, if you don’t already know, you will learn later). Its title is also worth taking time to consider. Ask yourself whether it can possibly function on more than one level. These are the first two things you should consider.

Moving on to the poem itself, you can tell right away that the poet is doing something interesting with his verbs in the first two stanzas. “Stop” (line 1), “cut off (line 1), “Prevent” (line 2), “Silence” (line 3), “Let” (line 5), “Put” (line 7) and “Let” again (line 8) —what type of verbs are these? What do they all have in common? Do you know the name for this type of verb? If not, you will have to wait for the explication, or skip ahead to the “Prepping for Prose” section. Now take a look at the direct objects of these verbs. What do “clocks” (line 1), “the telephone” (line 1), “the dog” (line 2), “pianos” (line 3) and a “drum” (line 3) have in common? If you have an answer, put your thoughts together. What does the speaker demand happen in stanza one? If you know, you’re ready to move on.

Stanza two is a little different in terms of what the speaker is asking the “aeroplanes” (line 5), people and “traffic policemen” (line 8) to do. What “message” (line 6) does he want the planes to “[scribble] on the sky” (line 6)? Why do you think two of the words, “He” and “Dead” (line 6), begin with upper-case

letters? What do you make of the imagery in lines 7 and 8? (Make sure you are looking at the right words!). What is the purpose of these images? Connect your thoughts on stanza two with your explication of stanza one.

Ah, stanza three: do you sense a change in focus? What is the speaker speaking about now? What figure of speech is occurring when the speaker begins with “He was,” then makes a comparison? If you look carefully, you’ll see he is making multiple comparisons. To what is he comparing his dead friend? Can you suggest reasons why he is making those comparisons?

Line 12 is comprised of two sentences that are separated by a colon. What kind of sentences are these? If you don’t know, you can either wait for the explication or look it up in the “Prepping for Prose” section as well. However, breathe easy. Once you are familiar with these terms and devices, you’ll find they work just as well in poetry as they do in prose—and vice versa. You don’t need to worry about this issue now. However, when you do learn what type of sentence this is, you’ll be able to say something profound about why it is particularly appropriate in this instance.

One stanza to go, so let’s begin by asking ourselves some simple questions. First, has the focal point changed in this stanza? What type of things are now being discussed? Take a quick look at the verbs: see anything familiar? By now you should be able to figure out what the speaker is saying in this stanza, and if you can figure out the meaning of the final line, you’ll be able to determine why he is saying it as well. However, before we go on to the questions, I’d like you to think about one more thing—and that’s lines 13-15. Do you notice anything odd about the verbs and their objects? Compare, for example, “Stop all the clocks” (line 1) with “Pack up the moon” (line 14). If you see it, but don’t know how to articulate it, don’t worry. Right now seeing it is progress enough.

What you have just done is engaged the text in the way all competent readers do. In time, this will come more naturally for you. Now, if you are ready, let’s move on to some questions.

Questions 1-10. Refer to the following poem.

Funeral Blues

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Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
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Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

- (5) Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He is Dead,  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

- (10) He was my North, my South, my East, my West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

- (15) The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;  
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- “Funeral Blues” is BEST classified as a(n)
  - sonnet
  - ode
  - elegy
  - ballad
  - dramatic monologue
- Which of the following is a plausible interpretation of the poem’s title?
  - A reference to the depression that the speaker feels over his friend’s untimely death.
  - A reference to mournful music that typically characterizes a funeral service.
  - A reference to the poem itself.
  - I only
  - II only
  - I and II
  - I and III
  - I, II and III
- To augment the dramatic imperative that opens the first stanza, the poet employs which of the following?
  - an iamb
  - a trochee
  - a dactyl
  - an anapest
  - a spondee
- The death of his friend prompts the speaker to demand all of the following EXCEPT
  - the muting or elimination of all sounds
  - an opportunity for solitary mourning
  - a public acknowledgment of the deceased’s passing
  - an extinguishing of celestial objects
  - a forfeiture of nature

5. The mournful nature of the occasion is aurally reinforced by the
- (A) ticking of the clocks
  - (B) ringing of the telephone
  - (C) baying of the dog
  - (D) music from a piano
  - (E) droning of the aeroplanes
6. The third stanza differs MOST from the other three stanzas in its
- (A) subject
  - (B) tone
  - (C) perspective
  - (D) rhyme
  - (E) figurative language
7. Of the following, which BEST describes the nature of the contrast between the first and fourth stanzas?
- (A) activity to inertia
  - (B) sound to light
  - (C) temporal to cosmic
  - (D) mourning to celebration
  - (E) secular to spiritual
8. The word which BEST describes the speaker's feelings for his now-dead friend would be
- (A) platonic
  - (B) collegial
  - (C) fraternal
  - (D) distant
  - (E) reverential
9. All of the following are used as metaphors in the poem EXCEPT
- (A) a musical instrument
  - (B) a pad or billboard
  - (C) a compass
  - (D) a time of day
  - (E) a candle
10. The MOST unique aspect of Auden's poem is its
- (A) use of the imperative mode
  - (B) metrical structure
  - (C) distortion of nature
  - (D) symbols of mourning
  - (E) use of antithesis

### Précis and Explication of W.H. Auden's "Funeral Blues"

Auden's "Funeral Blues" is an elegy, a poem of mourning, in this case for a recently deceased friend. Its title has multiple meanings. It alludes perhaps to the music played at New Orleans funerals, it reflects the "blues" that the speaker himself is experiencing over this sudden and painful loss, and it references the poem itself, the expression of sadness through words, meter and rhyme. As a whole, the poem pays tribute to an individual who was the center of the speaker's affection and conveys the emotional devastation of loss and the disillusionment with life that often accompanies it.

The poem begins with a series of imperatives in which the speaker demands that all mundane noises—ticking clocks, ringing telephones, and barking dogs be silenced. The use of a spondee ( // ) makes the initial command even more passionate, reflecting the speaker's determination that this otherwise ordinary day be a singularly solemn one. Even the funeral music, the "pianos" and "muffled drum" (line 3), are intentionally muted. This is no occasion for joyous or frivolous sound. In the second stanza the speaker bids "aeroplanes" circling overhead to "[Scribble] on the sky the message He is Dead" (line 6). Here the sky becomes a giant billboard or writing pad on which the dolorous pronouncement of his friend's death is made, the upper-case lettering in the message implying the deity-like status of this friend in the speaker's eyes. In what is almost a pathetic fallacy, the planes are heard "moaning" (line 5), keening in the sky above in response to the grim news. The speaker continues the imperatives, insisting that "crepe bows" be placed around the "white necks of the public doves" (line 7) and that traffic policemen "wear black cotton gloves" (line 8). In this way white, the symbolic color of innocence, is either muted or replaced by black, the traditional color of mourning and one that reflects a public acknowledgment of death (much like the black band worn by athletes on their uniforms on similarly mournful occasions).

Stanza three marks a shift in the poem as the speaker switches to a more personal, first-person perspective, acknowledging in lines 9-12 that the deceased was

....my North, my South, my East, my West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stanza is replete with metaphor, the speaker comparing his beloved friend to a compass, a calendar week, times of day, conversation and song, showing how all-encompassing was his affection for and involvement with his friend. The two declarative sentences that close the stanza state a romantic belief, then cruelly and bluntly dispel it with a grim reality. People die. Love dies. That is life.

The concluding stanza of Auden's poem offers the most interesting language. So complete is the speaker's despair that no celestial body—not stars, not moon, not sun—can offer any hopeful light. Rather, the speaker dismisses the stars, saying they are "not wanted now" (line 13) and, returning to the imperative, demands of God or the universe to "put out every one" (line 13) like so many celestial candles, another metaphor. The language that follows is incongruous, linking large natural bodies such as the sun, moon, ocean and forest, with small ordinary actions such as packing a box, taking something apart, pouring something out, or sweeping something up. The verbs here, again all imperatives, suggest discarding, disposal, as if nothing beautiful in nature can ever make him happy again.

Auden's poem simply and eloquently captures the pain of loss that all humans experience—and the disconsolation and disillusionment that such loss can bring about. Written in primarily masculine rhyme in lines that vary from tetrameter to hexameter, it is a perfect example of how a gifted poet can effect complex things within a simple poetic structure.

1. “Funeral Blues” is BEST classified as a(n) **(C) elegy**.

An elegy is a poem of lamentation, of mourning. The title, “Funeral Blues,” is actually sufficient to determine this as one, but the content of the poem—the speaker’s request that all things be muted or silenced in honor of the passing of his friend—fully confirms it as such.

2. Which of the following is a plausible interpretation of the poem’s title?

- I. A reference to the depression that the speaker feels over his friend’s untimely death.
- II. A reference to mournful music that typically characterizes a funeral service.
- III. A reference to the poem itself.

**(E) I, II and III.**

As was suggested in the overall explication of the poem, the “blues” in the title, a slang term for moroseness or depression, implies an association with the sadness the speaker feels over his friend’s decease (I). In addition, the title perhaps alludes to the traditional New Orleans “jazz funeral,” the march through the streets to the cemetery with the mourners accompanied by a jazz combo. While this allusion is not specifically defensible from the poem’s content, the more general idea of a requiem or even any type of music played at a funeral is certainly a reasonable connection to draw from the title (II). Finally, the title references the poem itself, both in the instruments mentioned in line 3 which seem to be accompanying the funeral procession in line 4, and the overall “music” created by the words, rhythm and rhyme of the poem (III); thus, the selection of E as the best answer.

3. To augment the dramatic imperative that opens the first stanza, the poet employs which of the following? **(E) a spondee**.

A spondee is a metrical foot consisting of two stressed syllables (/ /). The order to stop everything that opens the poem is aurally reinforced by the meter.

4. The death of his friend prompts the speaker to demand all of the following EXCEPT **(B) an opportunity for solitary mourning**.

The silencing of the clocks, phone and dog confirm A while the aeroplane writing “He is dead” in the sky and the white gloves of the policemen support C. The instruction in stanza four to extinguish the stars and put away the moon and sun defends D while the pouring out of the ocean and sweeping up of the forest confirm E. Choice B receives no support from the poem.

5. The mournful nature of the occasion is aurally reinforced by the **(E) droning of the aeroplanes**.

The planes are said to be “moaning” (line 5) in a circle overhead. This gives them a pathetic fallacy-like quality in that their engines are responding to the human death below in an expression of sorrow or pain.

6. The third stanza differs MOST from the other three stanzas in its **(C) perspective**.

The imperatives of the first two stanzas, while giving orders, do not readily identify the relation of the speaker to the deceased. In the third stanza, however, the speaker comes out from a shield of anonymity to reveal that the deceased was his love (perhaps lov-er). In a series of metaphors he compares him to everything from a compass (figuratively showing the totality of his devotion by citing all four directions on it), to a song (suggesting something uplifting and inspirational). His extensive use of the possessive pronoun “my” conveys that he has lost a truly “personal” possession. He then switches fully to the first-person “I,” declaring romantically “I thought that love would last for ever” and then dispelling that fantasy with the brutally laconic “I was wrong” (line 12). Choice C captures this best.

7. Of the following, which BEST describes the nature of the contrast between the first and fourth stanzas? **(C) temporal to cosmic**.

The things the speaker mentions in the first stanza—clocks, a telephone, the dog—are all worldly possessions. The fourth stanza, however, focuses more on celestial objects: the stars, the moon and the sun. This perhaps reflects the change of status of the deceased from a temporal existence to some other consciousness. This is the logic behind the selection of C.

8. The word which BEST describes the speaker’s feelings for his now-dead friend would be **(E) reverential**.

Lines 9-11, “He was my North, my South, my East, my West, / My working week and my Sunday rest, / My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song...”, capture the totality of the impact of the speaker’s friend upon his existence. So important is he that he is all four points of the compass, both work and rest, both the height of day and the depth of night. Choice E offers the best expression of this sentiment.

9. All of the following are used as metaphors in the poem EXCEPT **(A) a musical instrument**.

The celestial surface on which the aeroplanes scribble confirms B, the points of the compass in line 9 defend C. The words “noon” and “midnight” in line 11 attest to D, the “putting out” of the stars in line 13 supports E. Neither the “pianos” nor “muffled drum” in stanza one are intended as metaphors.

10. The MOST unique aspect of Auden’s poem is its **(C) distortion of nature**.

Certainly other poems have featured imperatives (A), a free-verse metrical structure (B), black gloves and symbols of mourning (D) and antitheses such as midnight-noon, North-South, and talk-song (E). What is most singular in this poem is the distortion of nature that occurs in stanza four. Here the moon and sun, massive celestial objects, are “pack[ed] up” and “dismantle[d]” like a stage set; the distant stars are “put out” like so many bedside candles. A similar distortion is found in the Book of Revelation, in the account of the Apocalypse or end of days: things such as the sun going out, the sea turning to blood. Here the speaker may be suggesting that the death of his beloved friend is of apocalyptic proportion; that it has essentially shattered his world. This is the reasoning behind the selection of answer choice C.