Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)

SUMMARY

Turn off the clocks and cut the telephone cords. Give the dog a juicy bone so it stops barking. Make the pianos stop playing and then bring out the coffin and the mourners, accompanied only by a quiet drum.

Let airplanes fly sadly over us and write "He is Dead" in the sky. Put black bows around the white necks of the pigeons in the street. Make the traffic cops wear black gloves.

He was everything to me: all the points of the compass. He was my work week and my day off. He was every hour of my day, present in everything I spoke or sang. I thought our love would never end. That wasn't true.

I don't want to see the stars anymore: put out their lights. Take the moon out of the sky and take the sun apart. Pour the ocean down the drain and sweep the forest away. Nothing good can ever happen again.

THEMES

GRIEF AND ISOLATION

"Funeral Blues" is a poem about heartbreak and grief—specifically, about the way that these feelings make people feel isolated from and out of sync with the world around them. It's possible to interpret the loss at the heart of the poem in several ways—the speaker could be grieving the end of a romantic relationship or the death of a loved one. But regardless of *why* the speaker grieves, the poem insists that the world doesn't stop to grieve *with* the speaker: the stars keep shining, the clocks keep ticking, and the dogs keep barking, much to the speaker's frustration. The world's indifference highlights the intensely personal and isolating nature of grief. Grief, the poem argues, can make it feel like your entire life has come undone—even if the rest of the world doesn't seem to notice that anything has changed.

The speaker of "Funeral Blues" has clearly lost someone important. The poem's title suggests that someone has literally died, and the speaker also asks for "coffin" and "mourners." The speaker even demands that "aeroplanes … scribbl[e] on the sky the message 'He is Dead.'" Of course, this could also all be metaphorical; the speaker could be going through a major breakup and using death as a way to talk about these feelings of heartbreak and loss. The exact cause of this grief isn't really what's important here, though. Instead, the poem focuses on the fact that, even as that this grief seems totally overwhelming to the *speaker*, it's not even a blip on the radar of the rest of the world.

The fact that the world keeps chugging along feels like an affront to the speaker, because it seems to belittle the speaker's grief and to disrespect the memory of what the speaker lost. How, the poem implicitly asks, can everyone else go on when this earth-shattering event has taken place?

The speaker thus makes a series of grandiose, even hyperbolic, requests: the speaker wants to stop the clocks. The speaker wants a public funeral, with pigeons wearing black bows around their necks. The speaker wants the sun, moon, and stars to all stop shining. The speaker wants the whole world to shut down and grieve.

Over the top as they are, these demands reveal to the reader that the speaker doesn't want to grieve alone. The speaker wants the rest of the world to acknowledge and reflect the magnitude of the speaker's loss. The poem thus suggests that, whether you've lost a loved one or had your heartbroken, part of what makes grief so terrible, so hard to endure, is the *isolation* it creates. Grief causes a painful separation between the world—indifferent, unconcerned—and the person who grieves. More broadly, the poem also speaks to the overwhelming, all-encompassing nature of grief—which can make it feel like the world itself has ended, and that "nothing now can ever come to any good."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Stop all the ...
... the mourners come.

The poem begins with the speaker making a series of urgent requests. The speaker wants to stop "the clocks," to turn off the "telephone", to give the dog a "juicy bone" to keep it from barking, and to "silence the pianos." Many of these requests are symbolic. For instance, when the speaker asks to "stop all the clocks," the speaker is really asking to stop time itself. The telephone, meanwhile, might represent modern life and business: the speaker isn't asking to "cut off" a specific telephone, but *all* telephones, and with them their constant stream of interruptions and information. Finally, the "pianos" symbolize raucous parties and celebration. Overall, then, the speaker is asking for a moment of peace and stillness, free from distracting noises, a moment of somber reflection.

In lines 3-4, it becomes clear *why* the speaker wants this: someone important to the speaker has died. (It's possible to read this as a literal death, or as a metaphor for the end of an important relationship.) The speaker is asking the rest of the world to mourn with the speaker, to acknowledge the magnitude of this loss. But the fact that the speaker has to ask for the clocks to stop and the telephones to be cut suggest that the world *hasn't* stopped to accommodate the speaker's grief. In other words, there's a disconnect between the world and the speaker. The speaker is heartbroken, and the world seems indifferent to the speaker's grief: it keeps moving along, business as usual. As such, the speaker feels isolated and demands that the world slow down, stop, bring itself in line with the speaker's grief.

The first four lines also establish the poem's form. The poem is written in quatrains: it has four stanzas, each with four lines. Each quatrain is composed of two rhyming couplets (creating an AABB rhyme scheme). The poem uses meter, but its meter shifts around unpredictably: lines 1, 3, and 4 are in iambic pentameter, while line 2 is probably best thought of as being in iambic hexameter. Recall that an iamb is a poetic unit with a da DUM stress pattern; pentameter has five iambs per line, while hexameter has six.

There are also lots of metrical substitutions throughout. The first line, for instance, opens with a spondee (stressed-stressed) or a trochee (stressed-unstressed), depending on how it's read; either way, this adds extra emphasis to the speaker's request:

> Stop all | the clocks, | cut off | the tel- | ephone
> Prevent | the dog | from bark- | ing with | a jui- | cy bone,
> Silence the | pia- | nos and | with muf- | fled drum
> Bring out | the cof- | fin, let | the mourn- | ers come.

As is clear above, the meter definitely isn't regular. Line 3, for instance, actually opens with a dactyl (stressed-unstressed-unstressed). Altogether, these shifts in the meter add a sense of instability to the poem's rhythm.

The poem almost exclusively uses end-stopped lines. This creates a sense that each line is cut off from the next, a sense which is strengthened by the caesuras that divide lines 1 and 4. Overall, the poem's sentences and phrases tend to be discrete. The speaker doesn't use coordinating words like "and" or "therefore" to show the reader how each is related to the next. Instead, the reader has to figure out for themselves how everything fits together. This is an example of the poetic device asyndeton—a device the speaker uses throughout the poem. Without such clues about how the speaker's ideas and requests are related to each other, the poem feels spontaneous and unplanned—an overflowing of grief that expresses itself in a turbulent, sometimes disorganized flow of thoughts.

The speaker does give some hints that the reader *should* try to assemble these discrete ideas. For example, the speaker uses an alliterative /k/ sound in lines 1 and 4, in words like "clock," "cut," "coffin," and "come." Bracketing the stanza, these alliterations suggest an underlying continuity that runs through the speaker's grief. And, at times, the speaker breaks the poem's pattern, slipping in an enjambment—as line 3. This enjambment falls at a crucial point in the poem: the first time the speaker admits that someone has (metaphorically or literally) died. The idea is so upsetting for the speaker that it causes the poem to skid a little, to lose its confidence.

LINES 5-8

> *Let aeroplanes circle ...*
> *... black cotton gloves.*

The first four lines of the poem establish a tension between the speaker and the rest of the world. The speaker is grieving the death—metaphorical or literal—of someone important, and wants quiet and peace to do so. But the world keeps on turning, with its barking dogs and ringing telephones. Here the speaker continues to lay out requests or demands for the world, describing how the world should grieve alongside the speaker.

In lines 5-6, the speaker asks for "aeroplanes" to announce the sad news, writing in the sky "He is Dead." The speaker describes the airplanes as "moaning": to the speaker, even their engines sound mournful and sad. Line 5 is also enjambed—one of only two enjambments in the entire poem. Like the other enjambment (in line 3), this one comes at a key moment: when the speaker is directly discussing the death of whomever the speaker is mourning. Just talking about that death—even if it's only a metaphorical death—is enough to disrupt the otherwise steady end-stops and throw the poem out of alignment, briefly.

In lines 7-8, the speaker issues two more requests. The speaker wants the "public doves"—pigeons—to wear black bows around their necks, a sign of respect for the dead. And the speaker also wants the "traffic policemen" to wear "black cotton gloves"—another sign of respect. The speaker wants the whole world, from animals to human beings, to openly acknowledge the speaker's grief. "Doves" are also often symbols of peace. The speaker doesn't just want the annoying or loud parts of the world to slow down and stop, then, but also wants things that symbolize peace to join in this mourning.

Like the previous quatrain, this one is composed of two rhyming couplets with an uneven meter. Every line here could actually be read as having a substitution, because all can be read as opening with a stressed syllable:

> Let aer ...
> Scribbling ...
> Put crepe ...
> Let the ...

These all begin with spondees (stressed-stressed) or trochees (stressed-unstressed) rather than iambs (again, unstressed-stressed), and these strong opening sounds add a sense of urgency and emphasis to the lines. The opening stresses underscore how strongly the speaker wants the world to do all of these things. The shifts in the meter and the metrical substitutions thus suggest the power of the speaker's grief, which prevents the speaker from establishing a regular, dependable meter for the poem.

LINES 9-12

He was my ...
... I was wrong.

In lines 9-12, the speaker switches things up. Instead of asking for peace and quiet from the world, the speaker describes the person that the speaker is mourning. The speaker specifically uses a series of metaphors to explain how much that person mattered to the speaker. In line 9, the speaker says that this person—whom the speaker simply calls "he"—was all the cardinal directions: "my North, my South, my East, and West." In other words, "he" was the speaker's whole world. The repetition of "my" here (technically diacope) underscores the intense connection between the speaker and this person. And in lines 10-11, the speaker adds to this: "he" was also the speaker's whole week, Monday through Sunday, noon and night. "He" was everything the speaker talked about and sang about.

In three short lines, the speaker makes claim after claim about the person that the speaker loved. These lines rely heavily on asyndeton, juxtaposing phrases and lines without making clear connections between them: the reader has to figure out how they're related, why they fall in the order that they do—if, indeed, there are reasons to be discovered. Indeed, in one of the poem's few instances of assonance, the speaker quietly implies that what matters here is the accumulation of details, the force of love that these details convey *together*. The speaker uses an /ee/ sound in lines 9 and 10 with "East" and "Week," linking together two very different metaphors for the importance of the person the speaker loved. The assonance encourages the reader to move through these different metaphors, focusing on the way that they create a picture of intense passion and devotion, rather than dwelling on each metaphor in its own right.

Whoever this person was, "he" was so important to the speaker that he occupied all the space, time, and attention in the speaker's life—so much so that the speaker never even considered that their "love" could end. Now that "he" is gone, the speaker admits in line 12 that the speaker "was wrong" about this. The speaker has learned that love is impermanent, capable of changing, decaying, and dying. This line supports the sense that the death the speaker describes is metaphorical, rather than literal: it sounds more like the complaint of a heartbroken lover than a grieving family member. In other words, it suggests that the speaker is using death as a metaphor to describe the end of a relationship.

LINES 13-16

The stars are ...
... to any good.

In lines 13-16, the speaker starts making requests and demands again—but the tone of the demands has changed. In the early parts of the poem, the speaker asked the world to be respectful and quiet, to mourn with the speaker. In lines 13-16, the speaker's requests feel more desperate and despairing. The speaker asks for the stars to be "put out"—in other words for their lights to be turned off. Since stars are often symbols for guidance and hope, the speaker seems to want to *give up* all hope, all possibility of escaping from this grief. Indeed, the speaker wants the world itself to end: in lines 14-15, the speaker wants the moon and sun to be taken down from the sky. And the speaker wants the world's oceans to be drained, its forests swept away.

These are not literal requests. Again, the speaker is using metaphors to say that, without this person whom the speaker loved, it isn't worth continuing to live. As the speaker announces in the poem's final line, "nothing now can ever come to any good." In other words, the speaker doesn't think that *anything* will ever turn out well again.

The bleak despair of the line is reinforced by the consonant /n/ sound that runs through it, in words like "nothing," "now," and "can." This sound binds together "nothing" and "can" and thus emphasizes the speaker's sense that there are no good possibilities left. Indeed, the speaker turns to consonance throughout this stanza to emphasize the force of the speaker's despair. For example, line 13 bristles with a consonant /t/ sound:

> The stars are not wanted now; put out every one ...

The /t/ sounds make it sound like the speaker is spitting out the line, full of sadness and, possibly, disgust with the world. The speaker does not end the poem happy or resolved: the speaker clearly hasn't grieved and then moved on. Instead, the speaker's grief and heartbreak seem to just to get even more pronounced across the poem, getting more and more intense as it proceeds. This poem is definitely not about getting over heartbreak and grief, but rather about refusing to move on—loving someone so intensely that it seems irresponsible to just "get over it."

SYMBOLS

CLOCKS

Clocks not only measure time: they're also symbols for time. So, when the speaker says in the poem's first line to "stop all the clocks," what the speaker is really asking for is to stop time itself. The speaker doesn't want the world to keep going, to keep rushing forward: instead, the speaker wants the world to pause and reflect, to absorb the loss that the speaker is mourning.

The reader can interpret the "clocks" as metonyms for time in general, but there's also a more specific symbolic resonance. They appear next to the "telephone" which can be read as a symbol of business and commerce. The "clocks" might be meant in roughly the same way: the speaker wants to slow down the hectic pace of business or of modern life in general—where everyone's on the clock, on a deadline—and carve out time for reflection and mourning. In either case, the speaker's goal is to find a way to slow things down—to make the world take a pause and mourn.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "clocks"

TELEPHONE

At the time "Funeral Blues" was written, telephones were new-fangled inventions. For the speaker of the poem, they likely symbolize the modern world itself—its innovations, its speed, and the sudden ease with which people could communicate with each other.

More specifically, since early telephones were largely used in businesses, the telephone might be taken to symbolize business and commerce. The speaker wants that fast paced world to pause, to grant the speaker space and silence to mourn. In order to so, the speaker must first "cut off the telephone": shut off its constant stream of information and communication. The telephone is thus a symbol of everything that the speaker wants to slow down and shut up—and a painful reminder of the way that the world keeps humming along, despite the speaker's loss.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "telephone"

PIANOS

"Pianos" are symbols for joy and celebration. At the time "Funeral Blues" was written, pianos were widely used in raucous, celebratory music. Of course, they were used in mournful music too, but the speaker ignores that here. Instead, the speaker draws a contrast between the bright, cheerful tinkling of a piano and the "muffled drum," a sad, quiet instrument appropriate to the speaker's mournful mood. The speaker finds the piano and its loud, joyful music inappropriate: the speaker wants music that matches that grief and heartbreak that the speaker feels. Thus when the speaker asks the world to "silence the pianos," the speaker is really asking the world to stop all its celebrations and parties, to join the speaker in mourning.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "pianos"

DOVES

"Doves" are symbols of peace. Doves are actually the same species as pigeons, a fact that the speaker nods to by calling the birds "public"—in other words, just like pigeons, these "public doves" live on the streets and in buildings, scavenging for food. Invoking "doves" here, the speaker suggests how deep this grief is. The speaker doesn't just want people to stop going to parties and talking on the telephone: the speaker even wants symbols of peace and understanding to cease their usual activities and join with the speaker in mourning. *Everything* must reflect the speaker's grief.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "doves"

STARS

"Stars" are symbols of hope and guidance. For instance, sailors used stars to navigate: they helped them figure out where they were on the sea and where to go. Stars are also bright and beautiful, often used to represent the things that people dream about, the goals they set for themselves and hope to attain. The speaker rejects this hope, this guidance, in line 13, saying, "The stars are **not** wanted now." In other words, the speaker has totally given up and doesn't seek a way out of all this despair. Instead, the speaker wants to wallow in grief.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "stars"

BLACK CLOTHING

The speaker references black clothing twice in the poem: first in line 7 with the "crepe bows" to be tied "round the white necks of public doves," and then with the

policemen's "black cotton gloves" in line 8. In both instances, this black clothing represents the speaker's desire for public despair and mourning. This isn't a particularly surprising symbol, since the color black has long been associated with mourning. The speaker wants the world to physically reflect how the speaker feels—to wear its mourning on its sleeve (well, its neck and hands!).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "crepe bows"
- **Line 8:** "black cotton gloves"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"Funeral Blues" is a strongly end-stopped poem: in fact, it only uses enjambment twice, in lines 3 and 5. Otherwise, every line in the poem is end-stopped. These end-stops tend to cut off one line from the next: each line has a discrete idea or request and the next line introduces a new idea, a new demand. Take lines 7-8:

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

In line 7, the speaker wants "public doves"—in other words, pigeons—to wear black ribbons as a show of respect for the speaker's loss. In line 8, the speaker asks "traffic policemen" to "wear black cotton gloves"—another sign of respect. The two lines are obviously related: they make fairly similar requests, though they are addressed to very different groups, pigeons and policemen.

Otherwise, though, the lines are disconnected, even disjointed—a pattern that holds for the rest of the poem. They don't build on each other in a logical way: readers could reverse the order of these lines without changing the energy or the meaning of the poem. The end-stops help to create this disjointed, disconnected feeling—as though the speaker is simply listing demands and requests as they occur to the speaker, without much forethought or planning. The poem's end-stops are thus definitive, sharp, and isolating—they cut one line of the poem off from the lines around it. In this way, the subtly echo the speaker's point: that grief is isolating, that it cuts off the person who grieves from the world around them.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "telephone,"
- **Line 2:** "bone,"
- **Line 4:** "come."
- **Line 6:** "Dead.'"
- **Line 7:** "doves,"
- **Line 8:** "gloves."
- **Line 9:** "West,"
- **Line 10:** "rest,"
- **Line 11:** "song;"
- **Line 12:** "wrong."
- **Line 13:** "one,"
- **Line 14:** "sun,"
- **Line 15:** "wood;"
- **Line 16:** "good."

ENJAMBMENT

"Funeral Blues" contains only two enjambments, in lines 3 and 5. The speaker prefers end-stopped lines. Most of the poem's lines are isolated, complete thoughts—and, in that way, they echo the isolation that the speaker argues comes with grief. The poem's only two enjambments are thus important and noteworthy: they break the poem's pattern, upset its equilibrium. And they fall at striking, important moments in the poem—indeed, the speaker uses enjambment in the only two places in the poem where death is talked about directly.

The poem's first enjambment falls in line 3:

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

The speaker is describing a funeral procession, with a group of mourners following a coffin to its grave, accompanied by the sound of a quiet, mournful drumbeat. The next enjambment falls in lines 5-6:

> Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
> Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead.'

Here the speaker asks "aeroplanes" to announce the death by writing it in the sky. These are the only two places in the poem where the speaker directly claims that someone has died—elsewhere, things are more metaphorical, less immediate. (These might be read as metaphors too, though they are particularly explicit and direct.) Readers might see why: even admitting that the person the speaker loves has died is enough to knock the poem out of alignment, introducing enjambments into a poem that otherwise only uses end-stops. The poem's enjambments thus register the speaker's grief—which is so powerful that it threatens to upset the poem's otherwise plodding form.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "drum / Bring"
- **Lines 5-6:** "overhead / Scribbling"

CAESURA

"Funeral Blues" uses caesura in a few different ways. Sometimes the caesuras divide two separate thoughts or demands, as in the poem's first line:

> Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,

The speaker issues two separate requests here: to stop or slow down time, and to stop hearing the phone ring. In other words, the speaker wants the world to slow down, to come to rest, to take a moment to mourn. The caesura divides these two demands. In that way it emphasizes that they are unconnected, discrete. In turn, that helps to give the poem it's spontaneous, unplanned feel. The speaker is deep in grief and not issuing these demands in any organized, logical way; rather, the speaker is simply saying things as the speaker thinks of them.

Elsewhere in the poem, the caesura works differently. In lines 12 and 13, the speaker uses caesuras to separate cause and effect:

> I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.
> The stars are not wanted now; put out every one.

The two lines function similarly. In the first halves of lines 12 and 13, the speaker lays out an idea or makes a claim: the speaker thought that "love would last forever"; the speaker doesn't want to see "the stars" anymore. In the second halves of lines 12 and 13, the speaker unfolds the consequences of those ideas or claims: the speaker "was wrong"; the stars should be "put out." The caesuras create a clean separation in the lines, splitting cause from effect, idea from consequence. They also mark the transformation in the speaker's life. In line 12, for instance, the first half of the line shows the reader how the speaker felt *before* losing this person; the second half shows how the speaker's life has changed as a result of this loss. The caesuras thus separate past from present, love from grief.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "clocks, cut"
- **Line 4:** "coffin, let"
- **Line 9:** "North, my South, my"
- **Line 11:** "noon, my midnight, my talk, my"
- **Line 12:** "forever: I"
- **Line 13:** "now; put"

ALLITERATION

The speaker of "Funeral Blues" uses alliteration throughout the poem. Alliteration helps bind the poem together—and, at the same time, it also emphasizes the speaker's grief and heartbreak. Take a look at the alliterative /k/ sound in lines 1 and 4:

> Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone…
> Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Both lines contain two separate commands: the speaker asks the world to do one thing, then another. These requests are not bound together grammatically: the speaker doesn't use a word like "and" or "then" to explain how they're related to each other. So they feel a bit cut off: it's up to the reader to figure out how they relate. (This is an example of asyndeton, which we discuss in further detail in our entry on that device.) The alliterative /k/ sounds in these lines help the reader get across these bumpy, disconnected phrases—they suggest that there is a connection to be found. And that feels even more true when the same alliterative /c/ sound appears in the first and last lines of the stanza: it invites the reader to think of the stanza as a unit, as a whole; it asks the reader to assemble the pieces.

More generally, this is also just a sharp, hard sound. It appears throughout the next stanza as well, in "scribbling, "sky," "crepe," and "cotton." It's even thicker in these stanzas when considering more general consonance ("clocks," "barking," "circle," "necks," "public, "traffic"). The effect of all these sounds is to give the opening stanzas a biting tone, underscoring the strength and anguish behind the speaker's demands. Something similar happens with the alliteration of the popping, plosive /p/ sound in the final stanza, in "put," "pack," and "pour."

Later in the poem, alliteration emphasizes the speaker's grief. For instance, note the alliterative /m/ sound in lines 5-6:

> Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
> Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead.'

"Moaning" is often associated with grief—it is a verbal, vocal expression of heartbreak and sorrow. So the speaker is suggesting that the "aeroplanes" are grieving with the speaker. The alliteration links this expression of grief to the "message" that the planes write. It suggests, in other words, that the message itself is full of grief and sadness—even that it is a kind of moaning.

Another interesting moment comes in line 12, with the shared /l/ sound of "love" and "last." The speaker is saying that this love did *not* "last" forever, and the shared sound here draws what becomes a poignant, even bitter connection between these words.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "c," "c"

- **Line 2:** “b,” “b”
- **Line 3:** “m”
- **Line 4:** “c,” “m,” “c”
- **Line 5:** “m”
- **Line 6:** “Sc,” “sk,” “m,” “D”
- **Line 7:** “c,” “p,” “d”
- **Line 8:** “p”
- **Line 9:** “m,” “m,” “S,” “m,” “W”
- **Line 10:** “M,” “w,” “w,” “m,” “S”
- **Line 11:** “M,” “m,” “m,” “m,” “m”
- **Line 12:** “l,” “l”
- **Line 13:** “n,” “n,” “p”
- **Line 14:** “P,” “s”
- **Line 15:** “P,” “s,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 16:** “n,” “n,” “c,” “c”

ASSONANCE

“Funeral Blues” uses a fair amount of assonance. Much of this is tied to the poems strong end rhymes, the vowel sounds of which often echo throughout the poem's stanzas. For example, take the short /uh/ sound that is scattered in lines 3 and 4:

> with muffled drum
> Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

This sound appears often in the final quatrain as well, in "one," "up," "sun," "up" (again), "nothing," and "come." The return to this sound suggests a sense of inevitability or obsession, as the speaker keeps invoking the same sounds again and again throughout the poem. The poem's assonance makes it feel like the speaker can't move past certain sounds any more than the speaker can get over this massive loss. Note, for instance, the thickness of the /aw/ and /oh/ sounds in that first stanza:

> Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
> Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
> Silence the pianos ...
> Bring out the coffin ...

The /aw/ sound appears as assonance yet again in lines 11 to 13:

> ... my song;
> I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.
> The stars are not wanted now ...

The insistence of these sounds mirrors the insistence of the speaker's demands. That is, they make it seem like the speaker is asking for the same thing again and again, which, essentially, is exactly what's going on: all of these different demands ultimately constitute a single request for the rest of the world to join in the speaker's mourning.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “o,” “o,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 2:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 3:** “o,” “u,” “u”
- **Line 4:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 5:** “ea”
- **Line 6:** “e,” “ea”
- **Line 7:** “e,” “u,” “o”
- **Line 8:** “e,” “e,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 9:** “y,” “y,” “y,” “Ea”
- **Line 10:** “y,” “ee,” “y”
- **Line 11:** “y,” “y,” “i,” “y,” “y,” “o”
- **Line 12:** “ou,” “o”
- **Line 13:** “o,” “a,” “o,” “ou,” “o”
- **Line 14:** “u,” “u”
- **Line 15:** “u,” “oo”
- **Line 16:** “o,” “o,” “oo”

CONSONANCE

“Funeral Blues” uses a lot of consonance, often of hard or plosive sounds like /k/, /p/, and /b/. This makes sense: the speaker of “Funeral Blues” is in no mood for the soft and soothing. Instead, the speaker wants to cry out in grief and heartbreak; the speaker wants to rage against the world that took away the speaker's love. Consonance helps express this underlying sense of frustration.

Note, for instance, the consonance of the /k/ sound throughout the first and second stanzas (something we also discuss in this guide's entry on alliteration). This, combined with these lines' frequent use of plosive /p/ and /b/ sounds, give the speaker's commands an air of harsh, biting intensity. The speaker isn't asking politely for the world to mourn; the speaker is bluntly commanding that it do so:

> Stop all the clocks, cut off ...
> Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
> ... pianos ...
> Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.
> Let aeroplanes circle ...
> Scribbling on the sky ...
> Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
> Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

The consonant /t/ and /p/ sounds in lines 13 and 14 create a similar effect. These sounds are harsh and explosive: it feels like the speaker is spitting out the lines in anger and frustration:

> The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
> Pack up ...

Similarly, in line 16 the speaker uses an /n/ sound to emphasize a sense of frustration and despair:

> For nothing now can ever come to any good.

The word "can" has some positive undertones: it suggests empowerment, possibility. But the speaker is quick to cancel those undertones: "nothing," the speaker emphasizes, will ever "come too any good." The strong alliteration and consonance emphasizes this cancellation of possibility, binding "nothing" and "can" together.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ll," "c," "l," "ck," "c," "ff," "l," "ph"
- **Line 2:** "b," "k," "c," "b"
- **Line 3:** "S," "c," "m," "ff," "m"
- **Line 4:** "c," "m," "c," "m"
- **Line 5:** "c," "c," "m"
- **Line 6:** "Sc," "bb," "sk," "m," "ss"
- **Line 7:** "P," "c," "p," "b," "ck," "p," "b," "l," "c"
- **Line 8:** "L," "p," "l," "c," "bl," "ck," "c," "l"
- **Line 9:** "m," "m," "S," "m," "st," "W," "st"
- **Line 10:** "M," "w," "k," "w," "k," "m," "S," "st"
- **Line 11:** "M," "n," "n," "m," "m," "n," "m," "m"
- **Line 12:** "l," "l"
- **Line 13:** "t," "n," "t," "w," "nt," "n," "w," "p," "t," "t," "n"
- **Line 14:** "P," "p," "m," "n," "n," "m," "n," "n"
- **Line 15:** "P," "w," "w," "p," "p," "w"
- **Line 16:** "n," "n," "c," "n," "c," "n"

METAPHOR

The speaker of "Funeral Blues" uses metaphor in two different ways. First, in lines 9-11, the speaker uses metaphor to describe the person that has been lost. For instance, in line 9, the speaker describes him as "my North, my South, my East and West …" These are the four cardinal directions—all the different directions that someone could travel. The speaker's love isn't *literally* all of these different directions. Instead, the speaker is using the cardinal directions as a metaphor: they indicate how important the speaker's love was. This person was basically the speaker's whole world: every direction the speaker turned, the speaker saw or thought of this person.

In lines 13-15, the speaker turns to metaphor to express grief. For example, in line 14, the speaker instructs:

> Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,

This isn't literally possible. Instead, this is a metaphor for the speaker's desires. The speaker doesn't want the world to keep going, doesn't want the sun and moon to keep rising and setting day after day. Without the person the speaker loves, it isn't worth it to keep going. The speaker thus uses metaphor to express love—and grief at losing that love.

It's also possible to interpret the poem's references to funerals—the poem's title, the "coffin," "mourners," etc.—as all part of an extended metaphor. In this metaphor, the speaker presents the loss of love as a kind of death. Taken metaphorically, the poem isn't about the death of a loved one but a breakup. Either way, though, its message about the overwhelming and isolating power of grief remains the same.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead"
- **Lines 9-11:** "He was my North, my South, my East and West, / My working week and my Sunday rest, / My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;"
- **Lines 13-15:** "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;"

ASYNDETON

"Funeral Blues" uses asyndeton often, and this asyndeton is also often an example of parataxis. Because the two devices overlap quite frequently in this poem, we're discussing them together here.

Most of the poem's line count as examples of asyndeton. As a result, asyndeton is quietly crucial to the poem. It shapes the reader's experience of the poem, creating the sensation of grief piling up endlessly. The speaker's requests of the world go on and on without pause for a conjunction, subtly underscoring the intensity of the speaker's pain.

Also note the way that asyndeton works in line 11:

> My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;

Here, the speaker is describing how important the person who has been lost was: he was both day and night, talking and singing. But the speaker doesn't connect these different things with conjunctions. Instead, the speaker simply lists them in a chaotic rush. The reader is left to puzzle through the list. The reader might wonder, for example, how "my noon, my midnight" relates to "my talk, my song." The speaker doesn't *tell* the reader why these descriptions are on the same line. And perhaps there isn't a good reason at all—these phrases end up next to each other because the speaker is so utterly overwhelmed with grief. In other words, the use of asyndeton registers the speaker's powerful emotions—emotions that overpower the poem, keep the speaker from organizing all its details, explaining all its connections, in a logical, definite way.

That's true of the relationship between phrases within a line, and it's also true of the relationships between lines themselves. When the speaker moves from line 11 to line 12, for example, the speaker also uses asyndeton, failing to specify the

relationship between these two lines:

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

The implication is clear: because the speaker's love was so important, the speaker never imagined that it would end. But the reader has to supply this connection: the speaker just jumps on ahead without stopping, and asks the reader to put the pieces together.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 4
- Lines 5-8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Lines 12-13

HYPERBOLE

The speaker of "Funeral Blues" uses hyperbole twice, first in line 12 and later in line 16. The speaker's use of hyperbole emphasizes the depth of the speaker's love—and the deep grief that the speaker feels now that this loved one is gone. In line 12, the speaker focuses on his or her love:

> I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The speaker is being a little bit dramatic here: surely, the speaker knew that love can't *literally* last forever. But the drama underscores the passion that the speaker felt for the person who has been lost. The speaker loved that person so much that the speaker thought their love would defy the laws of physics, would transcend their individual lifetimes.

The speaker's dramatic streak reappears at the end of the poem, in its final line:

> For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Here, the speaker makes a decisive, sweeping generalization. Now that the person the speaker loved is gone, nothing good can ever happen again. This is probably not literally true, but again, it reveals the depth of the speaker's passion, the speaker's love. The speaker's love was so important that, in its absence, it seems like no good will ever happen again. The speaker's use of hyperbole thus gives the poem an exaggerated, dramatic flair—in keeping with the passionate love that the speaker felt for the person being grieved.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong."
- **Line 16:** "For nothing now can ever come to any good."

VOCABULARY

Muffled (Line 3) - Muted, hard to hear. The speaker wants the drummers to play quietly out of respect for the speaker's loss.

Mourners (Line 4) - The people who attend a funeral.

Aeroplanes (Line 5) - Airplanes. Auden uses a British spelling of the word.

Crepe (Line 7) - A type of black fabric traditionally worn by people in mourning.

Public Doves (Line 7) - Pigeons on the street. Doves and pigeons are the same species of bird; "dove" is a more poetic, literary name for them. Doves often serve as symbols of peace.

Working Week (Line 10) - The work week; in other words, the days of the week that one spends at work. For the speaker, these days are Monday through Saturday.

Sunday Rest (Line 10) - A Sunday off work. In Christianity, it's traditional for people to refrain from working on Sundays.

Dismantle (Line 14) - To take apart or disassemble.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Funeral Blues" is best thought of as an elegy, given that it's meant to memorialize someone who has died (or perhaps just disappeared from the speaker's life).

It has 16 lines, divided into four four-line stanzas, or quatrains. Each stanza is *almost* something called an elegaic stanza; these are stanzas with four lines in iambic pentameter with an alternating ABAB rhyme scheme. Except, this poem is actually written in rhyming couplets (AABB). And since these couplets are, broadly speaking, in iambic pentameter, they can specifically be thought of as something called "heroic couplets." As the name would suggest, this makes the poem feel lofty and literary; its form elevates the intensity of the speaker's grief.

Overall, the poem's steady couplets and stanza lengths suggest a relatively predictable musical pattern. The poem feels tidy on the surface—though, as we'll talk about more in this guide's discussion of meter, things aren't actually are smooth as they first appear.

METER

Broadly speaking, "Funeral Blues" can be thought of as using iambic pentameter. There are lots of variations throughout,

though, and sometimes the poem relies on iambic *hexameter* instead. Recall that an iamb is a poetic foot that follows an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern. Iambic pentameter has *five* feet per line, while iambic pentameter has *six* feet. This means many lines feel like they have extra poetic feet dangling off the ends.

As a result, the poem's da DUM *rhythm* feels consistent, but its lines keep changing *length*. In a strongly rhymed poem, this might makes things sound a little wonky or syncopated because the poem's rhymes don't always fall where readers expect them to. Readers can hear the poem's rhythm—and the discomfort its shift line lengths cause—in the first two lines:

> Stop all | the clocks, | cut off | the tel- | ephone
> Prevent | the dog | from bark | ing with | a juic- | y bone

"Telephone" and "bone" rhyme. But line 2 is two syllables *longer* than line 1. So the reader has to wait just a moment to get to the rhyme. In this way, the poem creates tension between the reader's expectations and its rhythm, generating delay, syncopation, even awkwardness.

This effect is admittedly pretty subtle. But the sensation that this poem isn't all that simple and smooth is bolstered by the fact that the poem's iambic meter *itself* is unsteady. Many of the poem's lines—including line 1 quoted above—begin with *stressed* syllables rather than the initial unstressed syllable that characterizes an iamb. This creates either trochees (stressed-unstressed) or spondees (stressed-stressed). In both instances, these initial stresses open many lines on a powerful, assertive note—and, as such, emphasize the intensity of the speaker's grief. The speaker isn't gently *requesting* that the world grieve; the speaker is forcefully *demanding* that it do so.

There are other metrical substitutions and hiccups throughout the poem. Take a look at line 10, for example:

> My work- | ing week | and my | Sunday | rest,

The line starts out iambic, but the last couple feet don't quite fit: "and my" arguably has no stress at all (making it a pyrrhic), "Sunday" is another trochee, and then there's a single stressed syllable at the end of the line. All these variations and shifts give the reader the sense that the speaker is struggling—and failing—to control the poem. The speaker's "blues" is marked by the grief that the speaker, an emotion so powerful and overwhelming that it upsets the poem's meter.

RHYME SCHEME

"Funeral Blues" is written in rhyming couplets. The poem's rhyme scheme is therefore:

> AABB

Because the poem is, very broadly speaking, written in iambic pentameter, these couplets can be even more specifically described as being "heroic couplets." There's also a new set of rhymes in each quatrain, and these are all strong, perfect rhymes. The poem's rhyme words—like "drum" and "come" in lines 3-4 and "doves" and "gloves" in lines 7-8—line up nicely, giving the poem a sense of steady music, which is important for a poem that calls itself a "blues"! In short, the poem's rhyme scheme helps "Funeral Blues" really feel like a song, a mournful dirge for a lost love.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Funeral Blues" is a person who has recently lost someone important and is currently in mourning. Perhaps this speaker is being a bit melodramatic, what with hyperbolic phrases like "nothing now can ever come to any good." Then again, that's often how grief and heartbreak can make things feel—like you'll never be happy or even just okay again.

It's not clear from the poem what happened—maybe someone has died or a relationship has simply ended. The poem doesn't specify, and, in a way, it doesn't matter: the poem isn't focused on a specific kind of grief or heartbreak. Instead, it's about the way that grief and heartbreak, whatever their source, can be overwhelming and isolating. As a result, the reader never gets many specifics about the speaker either. The reader never learns the speaker's age, gender, profession, or nationality. The poem describes something universal—grief—and it uses a more or less universal speaker to do so: there's no specific attachments that might get in the way of fully empathizing with and sharing in the speaker's grief.

SETTING

"Funeral Blues" doesn't have a specific setting. This might seem surprising, given that the poem lists so many specific things ("clocks," "aeroplanes," "doves," "traffic policemen," etc.). But at best, the reader can infer that the poem is set in a city, since there are "traffic policemen" around. The speaker uses details, but handles those details in a very generic, non-specific way. For instance, when the speaker asks in line 1 for "the telephone" to be "cut off," the speaker isn't referring to a specific telephone in a specific place. Instead, the speaker is calling for all telephones to be "cut off."

The poem resists putting itself in a specific place for a good reason. It's describing a universal experience: the sense of isolation from the world that follows a serious loss. And in the absence of a specific setting, the poem feels universal—like it could describe anyone's experience, in any place and any time.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

In its current form, "Funeral Blues" was first published in a 1938 anthology. Since then, it's become one of the classic poems of grief and heartbreak—something that people turn to in a variety of contexts (it even appeared in a Hugh Grant movie from the 1990s!). However, it wasn't originally intended to be so universally applicable. The early drafts of the poem were written for the play *The Ascent of F6*, which Auden co-wrote with the writer Christopher Isherwood in 1936. The play makes fun of British imperialism, and the poem appears in a satirical context.

Isherwood and Auden were frequent collaborators. They were part of an early wave of 20th century gay writers (and, in fact, were some of the first openly gay writers). Both were firmly on the political left as well, criticizing not only their own country's imperial escapades, but, in poems like "September, 1939," criticizing the rise of fascism in Europe. However, as it was eventually published, "Funeral Blues" doesn't engage any of these literary or political projects. It's often read in LGBTQ contexts—in the Hugh Grant movie, the character Matthew reads it at the funeral of his dead lover, Gareth. But it doesn't have to be: the version that Auden published is resolutely universal, open for all readers to identify with.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Funeral Blues" was written in the late 1930s, which was a difficult time for a number of reasons. The world was in the middle of a serious economic downturn, which economists now call the Great Depression. Millions of people around the globe were struggling to find work and feed their families. Meanwhile, oppressive fascist governments had taken power in key European countries, including Germany and Italy, and there was a significant fascist movement in Auden's home country of England. Large parts of the globe, including significant portions of Africa and Asia, were ruled by European countries via a system called "imperialism." Imperialism stripped these people of their capacity to rule themselves, to control their own lives—and it often involved brutal suppression of civil liberties and human rights.

When the poem was first written, it engaged directly with this historical context: it was part of a play Auden co-wrote with Christopher Isherwood called *The Ascent of F6*—a play that satirized Britain's participation in imperialism. However, Auden subsequently published the poem on its own, stripping it of its immediate political engagements, and transforming it into a universal statement of grief and heartbreak. The poem thus can be read in relationship to its own moment: the economic and political insecurity of the late 1930s. But it can *also* be read without reference to any particular historical context. Indeed, it's a poem that invites its reader to identify with it, to bring it into their own lives and historical moments.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Four Weddings and a Funeral" — A scene from the classic 1994 film in which a character recites "Funeral Blues" at his partner's funeral. The film helped secure the poem's place in modern pop culture. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_a-eXloyYA)
- The "Blues" Aloud — Tom O'Bedlam reads the poem out loud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJwmpmZytGg)
- W.H. Auden's Biography — A detailed biography of W.H. Auden from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- An Introduction to "Funeral Blues" — A detailed history of the poem from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-stop-all-the-clocks)
- Funeral Blues — Benjamin Britten's musical setting of "Funeral Blues." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UzEPQhtzWc)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- Musée des Beaux Arts
- Refugee Blues

HOW TO CITE

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