Refugee Blues

SUMMARY

Let's say there are 10 million people in this city. Some are living in mansions; some are living in slums. But there's nowhere for us to live, my dear, there's nowhere for us to live.

We used to belong to a nation, and we thought it was beautiful. If you look in the atlas, you'll see it. But we can't go there anymore, my dear, we can't go there anymore.

An old yew tree grows outside the village church. Every spring, it blossoms again. But our old passports don't blossom in the spring, my dear, they don't blossom in the spring.

The immigration official slammed his fist down on the table and shouted, "If you don't have a passport, then you're legally dead." But we're still living, my dear, we're still living.

I went to a committee for help and they told me to take a seat—then told me to wait until next year. But where will we go right now, my dear, where will we go right now?

I went to a political rally where the speaker said: "If we let the refugees enter our country, they'll take our food." He was talking about you and me, my dear, he was talking about you and me.

I thought I heard thunder in the sky. It was Hitler above Europe, saying, "They must die." He was talking about you and me, my dear, he was talking about you and me.

I saw a poodle wearing a jacket fastened with a brooch. I saw a door open to let a cat in. But these were not German Jews, my dear, they weren't German Jews.

I stood on the pier down at the harbor. I saw the fish swimming there—and they looked free enough. They were only ten feet away from me, my dear, only ten feet away.

I went for a walk in the woods and saw birds in the trees. They don't care about the politicians; they sang freely. They weren't human beings, my dear, they weren't human beings.

In my dream, I saw a building a thousand stories tall. It had a thousand windows and a thousand doors. But not one of them belonged to us, my dear, not one belonged to us.

I stood in a big field in the falling snow, while ten thousand soldiers marched back and forth, looking for us, my dear, looking for us.

THEMES

ANTISEMITISM AND COMPLICITY IN PREJUDICE

"Refugee Blues" is about the plight of Jewish refugees in the 1930s. When the poem was written in 1939, millions of Jews were trying to flee Nazi Germany. However, most countries had strict quotas on Jewish immigration—and, as a result, most Jews were sent back.

The speaker of "Refugee Blues" is one of these Jews, and thus faces two kinds of antisemitism. On the one hand, there is the Nazi regime, with its explicit, state-sanctioned violence against Jews. On the other hand, there is the less explicit but no less virulent antisemitism of countries that use immigration quotas to exclude Jews. These countries have the power to help—indeed to *save* the speaker's life—but they refuse to do so. The poem thus levels a stern accusation against them, insisting they are complicit in the Jews' suffering and mass murder. To not actively step in to *stop* prejudice, the poem implies, is its own form of prejudice and cruelty.

Although the speaker identifies as a "German Jew," Germany no longer feels like home. The speaker thought this country was "fair," both beautiful and just, a safe place for Jews to live. But notice how the speaker refers to it in the past tense: "Once we had a country…" The speaker continues, mournfully, "We cannot go there now." The speaker cannot go back because it isn't safe; Hitler has taken power in Germany and believes Jews "must die."

Despite this direct and dire threat, the speaker cannot find refuge elsewhere. The speaker seeks asylum in an unnamed country in Europe or the Americas, but that country frustratingly turns the speaker away on a technicality: the speaker's passport is expired. An immigration official announces: "If you've got no passport you're officially dead." Without the proper documentation, the speaker is unable to enter the country—a country that could save the speaker's life.

For the speaker, this refusal is both hypocritical and cruel. It is hypocritical because the country has no trouble housing other people. As the poem opens, the speaker complains "there's no place for us, my dear"—even though the "city" where they find themselves has managed to find homes for "ten million," with "mansions" for the rich and "holes" for the poor. Indeed, the inhabitants of the city seem more willing to help *animals* than these refugees: they give comfort and welcome to "poodle[s]" and "cat[s]"—they even dress their dogs in fancy "jacket[s]" to keep them warm! Thus even though they do not announce their antisemitism with the same force as the Nazis, their behavior reveals it: they act as though the lives of animals are more valuable to them than the lives of Jews.

And it is cruel because, without protection, the refugees face certain death. The poem closes with the refugees standing on a

"great plain in the falling snow." They have nowhere to hide. And there are "ten thousand soldiers" hunting for them. The speaker thus predicts that without refuge, Jews will be slaughtered. The poem blames the soldiers for their brutality and inhumanity—justifiably so, since they are pursuing and killing innocent people. But it also strongly suggests that the countries that turn the speaker away share a good deal of the blame and responsibility: they had the power to save the speaker and failed to do so.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

EXILE AND LONELINESS

"Refugee Blues" is, in part, about the fear and desperation of being a refugee. The speaker is terrified of returning to Germany, but also is unable to find a safe haven elsewhere. As a result, the speaker is isolated and in limbo, trapped between countries without a clear sense of home. The speaker does not hold out hope that this situation will get better, and the poem uses the speaker's despair and frustration to convey the loneliness, pain, and sense of stagnancy that accompany exile.

Throughout "Refugee Blues," the speaker's mood is bleak and mournful. The poem begins with the speaker complaining that "there's no place for us, my dear"—no safe home in any country. And no one will help the speaker: indeed, the people in the "city" would rather take in dogs and cats than Jewish refugees. The speaker thus feels friendless, profoundly lonely.

And without the possibility of finding asylum in a country like England or the United States, the speaker feels trapped. Even *fish* have more liberty than the speaker: they can at least "swim … as if they were free." At points, the speaker seems jealous of animals and birds because they don't have to deal with hateful "politicians"—they experience a kind of happiness and "ease" that the speaker no longer can.

The speaker seems to have given up on changing the minds of such politicians—even though they have the power to change the laws that exclude Jewish refugees. The poem does not directly address the countries and governments that refuse to grant asylum the speaker. Instead, using apostrophe, the speaker addresses another refugee, someone the speaker simply calls "my dear." Instead of calling for, say, specific policy reforms, the speaker simply expresses sadness and frustration. Indeed, the speaker seems to have slid into despair. For the speaker, the poem is cathartic; a way for these refugees to get some of the weight of their situation off their chest.

But for the reader, it has a different effect: the speaker's suffering and loneliness acts as a powerful call for action, an impassioned demand for change. By providing a window into the speaker's suffering, the poem thus makes a passionate case for more just and welcoming immigration laws.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Say this city …
… go there now.

The poem concerns the plight of Jewish refugees in Europe in the 1930s. Forced to flee persecution and violence in Nazi Germany, many Jews were unable to secure asylum in countries like England or the United States because they kept tight quotas on the number of Jewish immigrants admitted each year. Such Jews were trapped between countries—unable to find a safe refuge yet terrified of returning home.

As the poem opens, the speaker is trapped in that difficult position. The speaker is in an unnamed city. The city is enormous—ten million people live there. Some of them are very wealthy; some are very poor. As the speaker notes, "Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes." The line is carefully constructed to emphasize the *difference* between the rich and the poor: its two clauses have the same grammatical structure, but they say opposite things—an instance of antithesis. And they are split by a caesura, which emphasizes that antithesis. Yet, despite the difference between rich and poor, they are united in one respect: they all have some kind of *home*, whether it's a mansion or a tenement.

But the speaker has no such security. As the speaker complains, addressing another refugee—whom the speaker simply calls "my dear"—"there's no place for us." The speaker is worse off than even the poorest of the poor: at least they have a home.

This homelessness is especially bitter because the speaker once *had* a home: a "country" that the refugees thought was "fair." (In other words, it was both beautiful and just, a safe place for Jews to live.) The country still exists—one can find it on a map. But they can't return there: "We cannot go there now, my dear," the speaker insists. It's no longer safe for them.

"Refugee Blues" has an unusual, idiosyncratic form. W. H. Auden invented it specifically for the poem. The form of the poem is designed to convey the difficult, alienating, frustrating experience of being a refugee:

- It has no set meter: its line-lengths shift around unpredictably. Just as the speaker has no solid ground to stand on, the poem's meter is unsteady.
- Each line of the poem is also end-stopped. As a

result, the lines feel isolated from each other: there are strong borders or barriers between them—much like the borders the speaker cannot cross.

- The poem is rhymed AAB. The first two lines of each tercet rhyme with each other—usually using simple, direct rhymes. These lines thus feel like they belong together. But the third line of each tercet doesn't rhyme with anything. It feels isolated, alone—just like the speaker.
- The third line of each stanza is also highly repetitive. The speaker introduces a phrase or sentence, like "We cannot go there now ..." Then the speaker addresses the other refugee, "My dear." Finally, the speaker repeats the opening phrase: "We cannot go there now." Even though the third line of each stanza is quite different, they all feel linked together by their similar structures—and so they function as refrains for the poem. Paired with the poem's rhymes, these refrains help the poem feel musical, turning it into a "blues"—a song of mourning and despair.

LINES 7-12

In the village ...
... are still alive.

In lines 7-12, the speaker continues to describe the anxiety and frustration of being a refugee. The speaker starts, in lines 7-9, by describing an "old yew" tree growing next to a church. Even though the tree is very old, it flowers every spring; it still "grows"—a paradox underlined by the assonant /oh/ sound in line 7:

> In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,

Linking together "grow" and "old," the assonance stresses the way that the tree defies its age, keeps growing, changing—and, since the "blossoms" in line 8 are a symbol of rebirth, keeps renewing itself. Nature has the power to renew itself. But the speaker does not. In line 9, the speaker complains, "Old passports can't do that, my dear." Of course, the speaker isn't upset that the passport doesn't grow flowers every spring. Instead, this is a metaphor: the passport lacks the power to renew itself. It has to be renewed by the German government—something the Nazis have no intention of doing.

Without a current passport, the speaker can't cross borders, can't find a safe haven. As an angry "consul" shouts in line 11, the speaker is "officially dead." This is, of course, a technicality, a legal fiction. The speaker is very much "still alive." But in the eyes of the law, the speaker has died and become a non-person. In other words, although the immigration officer has the power to save the speaker's life, he turns the speaker away on the grounds of a technicality. Even though there's no *overt* antisemitism in this decision—the "consul" is just doing what the law says—it feels like the law itself is a convenient shield, which allows the country to refuse to admit Jewish refugees.

With nowhere to go and no one willing to help, the speaker feels a mounting sense of isolation and frustration. The form of the poem reflects the speaker's despair and dismay. It continues to be entirely end-stopped. As the speaker discusses the difficulty of crossing borders between countries, the firm pause at the end of each line feels more and more like its own kind of border. The end-stops again mimic the closure and constraint that the speaker feels. And lines 9 and 12—which serve as refrains—feel as isolated and friendless as the speaker. The other lines in each stanza rhyme strongly with each other: "yew" and "anew"; "said" and "dead." But lines 9 and 12 don't rhyme at all, which makes them feel detached and lonely.

LINES 13-18

Went to a ...
... you and me.

In lines 7-12, the speaker meditates on the way that countries like England and the United States use legal technicalities to exclude Jewish refugees. In lines 13-18, the speaker focuses on other ways that they are neglected and victimized. In lines 13-15, the speaker describes an organization dedicated to helping Jewish refugees, a "committee." The committee may have good intentions, but it's unable to provide meaningful help and support: it tells the speaker to wait, offering "a chair" before telling the speaker to "return next year." That's too late, of course: the speaker needs help now, "to-day." Even the organizations designed to help refugees like the speaker can't do anything.

The committee's neglect isn't a result of hatred—it's simply overwhelmed; it doesn't have the resources it needs. But there's plenty of hatred to go around. In lines 16-18, the speaker describes a "public meeting"—a political rally—where a politician warns against admitting Jewish refugees, saying, "If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread." Daily bread is a symbol of the economic prosperity of the country. To "steal" it is thus a metaphor: the speaker is suggesting that Jewish refugees will sap the country's economic resources.

The poem was written during the Great Depression, a time when people were suffering from serious disruptions in the global economy. But these disruptions weren't the fault of Jewish refugees from Germany! The speaker is using the Jews as scapegoats, blaming them for problems they didn't cause. Moreover, he is suggesting that the lives of these refugees don't really matter to him: the economy is more important to him than their plight.

The form of the poem continues to echo the speaker's isolation and loneliness as a refugee. These lines are not written in meter; their rhythm shifts around unpredictably. Long lines like line 15 ("But where shall we go ..."), with its 16 syllables, echo

the long wait times that the speaker has to endure to get help from the committee. Paired with much shorter lines like line 14 ("Asked me politely ..."), which has only 10 syllables, the reader gets a sense of how unsteady the speaker's world is.

LINES 19-24

Thought I heard ...
... weren't German Jews.

Over the course of the poem, the speaker has gradually painted a dire picture of the life of a refugee. The speaker is isolated, trapped between countries. The speaker feels threatened. However, the precise dynamics of the speaker's situation have remained a little vague. Until lines 19-24, the reader doesn't know precisely *why* the speaker can't return home, *why* the speaker is a refugee. In lines 19-24, the speaker makes it plain. The speaker is a "German Jew," fleeing the violence and persecution of Hitler's Germany.

When the poem was written, in 1939, the Holocaust had not yet begun—although the Nazis had already started depriving Jewish citizens of their rights and property. But the speaker has a clear sense of where things are headed. In line 20, the speaker has Hitler say "They must die." (As the next line clarifies, "they" refers to the speaker and other Jews: "we were in his mind.")

This isn't a direct quote from one of Hitler's speeches; instead, the speaker is condensing and distilling his message, exposing the violence and hatred at its core. That violence and hatred inflect the speaker's own language. The speaker calls Hitler's speech "thunder rumbling in the sky … over Europe." Thunder is a symbol of violence and warfare; the speaker thus suggests that Hitler's language is itself violent. That violence resonates in the consonant /th/, /h/, /r/, and /d/ sounds that run through lines 19-20:

> Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
> It was Hitler over Europe, saying, "They must die":

These sounds (along with the plosive /b/ and /p/ consonants) give the line an harsh, rough quality: they sound like the "thunder" the speaker describes "rumbling … over Europe." They feel threatening, even violent—like the language Hitler uses to attack the Jewish citizens of his country.

The threat that the speaker faces is thus real and very serious. And that makes the neglect and negligence of people in countries that could help crueler—and all the more hypocritical. As the speaker points out in lines 22-23, they are more willing to help *animals* than Jewish refugees: letting cats come in from the cold, dressing their dogs in fancy coats. They evidently value the lives of their pets more than their fellow human beings. And although these people aren't as openly antisemitic as Hitler, it comes to much the same thing. Since they are unwilling to help or protect the speaker and other refugees, they share much of the blame for what will happen to them when they return to Germany.

The speaker uses parataxis in these lines, rushing through them without connecting words like "and" or "then." (Indeed, lines 22-23 are sentence fragments.) This gives them a clipped quality: the reader can feel the speaker's frustration and disdain in the way these lines rush by.

LINES 25-30

Went down the ...
... the human race.

The first 24 lines of "Refugee Blues" have presented a bleak picture. The speaker is trapped between countries, unable to secure asylum, but terrified of returning to Nazi Germany. There seems no relief for the speaker, no possibility of hope—indeed, no possibility of freedom. In lines 25-30, the speaker considers what freedom might look like. The speaker wanders down to the harbor and stands on a pier, looking down at the fish swimming around below. They seem "free" to the speaker—they can swim wherever they want, without worrying about borders. That kind of freedom is close—painfully close—to the speaker: "only ten feet away."

The speaker seems a little hesitant, though, to fully commit to the idea that the fish are free. Indeed, the speaker uses a simile—they are swimming "as if free." The speaker refuses to personify the fish. Instead, the speaker insists on this difference between animals and human beings. In the next stanza, the speaker goes for a walk in the woods and hears birds singing. They sing "at their ease"—that is easily, freely—because they "had no politicians." In other words, their freedom comes from the fact that they're not mixed up in politics—and that makes them unhelpful for the speaker, who is inextricably caught up in human life, with its harsh, violent politics. As the speaker complains, "They weren't the human race."

The speaker thus feels a little impatient with the birds and fish. And that impatience is reflected in the use of asyndeton in line 28:

> Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;

A caesura divides the line into two short grammatically incomplete phrases, with no connecting words to join them. Once again, the speaker sounds rushed and clipped. The speaker seems to be hurrying through this material, eager to get back to the things that matter.

As the speaker describes these wild, unconstrained creatures, the poem's form remains steady—or, at least, steady in its *unsteadiness*. Lines 25-30 form two tercets that rhyme AAB. The first two lines of each stanza feel strongly bound together. But the third line, once again, feels cut off, left on its own.

LINES 31-36

Dreamed I saw ...
... you and me.

In the last six lines of "Refugee Blues," the speaker meditates on two separate but related ideas. First, the speaker "dream[s]" about the safety and security that a prosperous, modern society could provide—but that has been denied to Jewish refugees. Second, the speaker considers what's likely to happen next: the violence that's coming in the near future.

In lines 31-33, the speaker describes a dream. In a dream, the speaker saw a "building with a thousand floors, / A thousand windows and a thousand doors." The "building"—a vast skyscraper—is a symbol of modernity, with its technological accomplishments and prosperity. By extension, the building seems like a metaphor for the way that modern societies are capable of caring for enormous numbers of people, finding them homes—indeed, the "building" that the speaker sees has "a thousand doors."

But, the speaker complains in line 33, "Not one of them was ours." The building may be able to accommodate a huge number of people, but it is not open to the speaker. The building thus serves as a final reminder of the ways in which the speaker has been excluded—even by accomplished, prosperous societies that could care for Jewish refugees if they wanted to. The speaker uses alliteration, consonance, and diacope to underscore the frustration that comes from this exclusion:

> Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
> A thousand windows and a thousand doors:

The alliteration links together "dreamed" and "doors" and thus stresses the speaker's exclusion: for the speaker, the "doors" are nothing but a dream. The insistent, heavily used consonant /d/ sound in lines 31-32 and the repetition of the word "thousand" (an instance of diacope) make the passage feel obsessive: the speaker is fixated on this injustice—understandably so.

With no "door" to open, with nowhere to hide, the poem ends with the speaker standing with the speaker's "dear" on a "great plain in the falling snow." They are out in the open, vulnerable, exposed—and there are soldiers hunting for them, hoping to kill them. The poem closes on a dark, somber note: the speaker expects to be killed shortly. The people and countries who turned the speaker away thus share some of the blame for the speaker's death. By denying the speaker asylum, by refusing to open its doors, they have put the speaker in harm's way.

The speaker calls attention to this hypocrisy. And the speaker also describes the frustration and loneliness of being a refugee in direct, stark terms. But the speaker never comes right out and says something like, "You should change your immigration policies!" Indeed, the speaker never addresses the immigration officers or politicians who have victimized Jewish refugees. Instead, the speaker consistently addresses another *refugee*: "my dear." (This is an instance of apostrophe). For the speaker, the poem is cathartic—a way to share frustrations and sorrows. However, by presenting the speaker's laments and complaints, the poem itself makes a powerful case for change: the speaker's suffering serves as evidence that immigration quotas are unjust and expose refugees to violence.

SYMBOLS

MANSIONS

"Mansions" are a symbol of wealth and privilege. Invoking them, the speaker suggests that there a people living in the city in considerable comfort: they have big houses, lots of food, and, most importantly, they aren't threatened by politicians like Hitler. This creates an implicit contrast with the speaker's own situation. The speaker has no home, let alone an enormous mansion. Without such a safe, secure home, the speaker can't escape from persecution; the speaker has no refuge, no place to turn. Bringing up the "mansions" then, the speaker suggests that it is unfair that some should live in such wealth and luxury while others struggle just to survive.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Some are living in mansions"

HOLES

"Holes" are symbols of poverty. Literally speaking, no one is actually living in a hole in the city. Rather, they live in dirty, cramped, run-down apartments: tenements and slums—the only homes available to the poor in this city. The "holes" thus stand in, symbolically, for the poverty of the people who live in them. And they also create an implicit contrast between the desperate situation of the poor and the speaker's even more desperate situation. The poor may not live in "mansions," but at least they have homes. The speaker has no home—neither a mansion nor a "hole."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "some are living in holes"

BLOSSOMS

"Blossoms" symbolize rebirth. Even the "yew" tree in the "churchyard" is "old" it still puts forth new flowers every spring. Through this yearly cycle, the tree is reborn; it has a chance to renew itself, regardless who holds political power,

what their policies are. But the speaker doesn't have the same chance. The speaker's passport doesn't follow the rhythms of nature; it isn't reborn every spring. It has expired, and the speaker's home country, Germany, refuses to renew it: denying the speaker the capacity to travel freely.

The symbol thus serves to create a contrast between the speaker's dangerous and difficult political situation and the tree's relative freedom. By creating this contrast, the symbol suggests that the speaker should enjoy the same capacity for renewal and rebirth that the tree enjoys: that it is unnatural to be deprived of such freedom.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Every spring it blossoms anew"

DAILY BREAD

"Daily Bread" is a symbol for the well-being of a country—its capacity to support itself economically, to feed its people, to prosper. The "speaker" at the "public meeting" in lines 16-18 is thus advancing a deeply antisemitic argument. He is saying that Jews will steal the resources of the country, preventing it from prospering. This politician thus has no sympathy for the plight of Jewish refugees. Even though the poem's speaker is struggling to survive, threatened with death, the politician thinks the economic well-being of his own country is more important than the lives of the Jewish refugees. However, the reader shouldn't take the politician seriously: he is using "daily bread" as a convenient excuse to exclude the refugees, turning them into scapegoats.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** ""If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread""

THUNDER

"Thunder" is a symbol of conflict, violence, and war. In literary tradition, poets often use "thunder" to describe the sounds of battle; a volley of cannon-fire might, for instance, be called "thunderous." The speaker plays on that tradition here. After all, there isn't—yet—a literal war going on. ("Refugee Blues" was written in 1939, just before the start of World War II.) Instead, as the speaker reveals in line 20, this "thunder" comes from Hitler himself; it embodies his anti-Semitic rhetoric. The speaker thus suggests that Hitler's language is, in itself, a form of violence—and that it will lead to future violence. The symbol thus serves to underline and emphasize the speaker's anxiety and fear. If the speaker returns home to Germany, the speaker will be forced to face such violence directly.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky"

BUILDING WITH A THOUSAND FLOORS

Literally speaking, the "building with a thousand floors / a thousand windows and a thousand doors" that the speaker describes in lines 31-32 is a skyscraper. Symbolically, however, it stands for the modern world—with its massive technological achievements, its huge cities, and its diverse societies. It symbolizes everything that is impressive and magnificent about modern life. In its grandeur, its sheer size, the "building" makes the speaker feel all the more bitter. After all, in a building so large, with so many "windows" and "doors," there ought to be space for the speaker. But even in a "building"—or a society—that large, that impressive, with so many resources and such economic power, there's no place for a Jewish refugee.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 31-32:** "Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors, / A thousand windows and a thousand doors:"

GREAT PLAIN

The "great plain" that the refugees stand on at the end of the poem is a symbol for Europe itself. The speaker anticipates that war is about to start, and that Jewish refugees will be chased all over the continent by Nazi soldiers who want to murder them. The speaker feels unprotected in the face of these soldiers. The "great plain" doesn't have any places to hide; it is open, bare. The symbol thus suggests how vulnerable the refugees are—and how easy it will be for the "ten thousand soldiers" to find them and kill them. It also suggests that the differences between countries don't matter to the speaker. England and France, for instance, might have different cultures and languages; for the speaker, none of that is particularly important. It's all the same "open field," where the soldiers move unimpeded in their efforts to chase the refugees down.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 34:** "Stood on a great plain in the falling snow"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

Every line of "Refugee Blues" is end-stopped. The poem never

uses enjambment. The end-stops in the poem contribute significantly to its rhythm—and, at the same time, underline the sense of isolation and exclusion the speaker feels.

The end-stops contribute to the rhythm of the poem by making each line feel definite and complete. Sometimes, this emphasizes the poem's rhymes—making the ring out more clearly and distinctly. But, of course, not all the lines in the poem rhyme. The third line of each stanza doesn't rhyme at all. Those lines feel lonely, isolated, cut off. The end-stops contribute to that sense of isolation—since they work to further separate those lines from the rest of the poem.

Indeed, the poem's strong and strict use of end-stop echoes the plight of the refugees. For instance, the end-stops in lines 10-12 reflect and amplify the problems with the speaker's passport:

> The consul banged the table and said,
> "If you've got no passport you're legally dead":
> But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

The end-stops not only function as barriers between lines, but they also echo the barriers between countries. In a poem without enjambments, these end-stops feel increasingly claustrophobic: there is no relief from them, no release, where the reader freely and easily crosses from one line to the next. Instead, like the speaker, the reader encounters borders and barriers everywhere they turn.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "souls,"
- **Line 2:** "holes:"
- **Line 3:** "us."
- **Line 4:** "fair,"
- **Line 5:** "there:"
- **Line 6:** "now."
- **Line 7:** "yew,"
- **Line 8:** "anew:"
- **Line 9:** "that."
- **Line 10:** "said,"
- **Line 11:** "dead":"
- **Line 12:** "alive."
- **Line 13:** "chair;"
- **Line 14:** "year:"
- **Line 15:** "to-day?"
- **Line 16:** "said;"
- **Line 17:** "bread":"
- **Line 18:** "me."
- **Line 19:** "sky;"
- **Line 20:** "die":"
- **Line 21:** "mind."
- **Line 22:** "pin,"
- **Line 23:** "in:"
- **Line 24:** "Jews."
- **Line 25:** "quay,"
- **Line 26:** "free:"
- **Line 27:** "away."
- **Line 28:** "trees;"
- **Line 29:** "ease:"
- **Line 30:** "race."
- **Line 31:** "floors,"
- **Line 32:** " doors:"
- **Line 33:** "ours."
- **Line 34:** "snow;"
- **Line 35:** "fro:"
- **Line 36:** "me."

CAESURA

"Refugee Blues" uses caesura throughout. Many of these caesuras appear in the third line of each stanza—like lines 3, 6, or 9. These caesuras separate the phrase "my dear" from the rest of the line. In doing so, they emphasize the poem's use of apostrophe—the fact that the speaker is addressing someone else. The caesuras in the third line of each stanza thus play a small but important role, emphasizing the work of another poetic device.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses caesura in a similar way: to support and emphasize other devices. The reader can see this in line 2:

> Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:

The line uses antithesis to draw a contrast between the luxury and comfort in which some people live and the poverty and desperation which others endure. The caesura emphasizes the antithesis, splitting the line neatly in half, separating each part of the antithesis cleanly from the other.

Similarly, a caesura in line 28 supports the poem's use of parataxis/asyndeton:

> Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;

In the absence of a connecting word like "and" or "then," the caesura separates the two phrases in the line. And as it interrupts the line, it also calls attention to the *absence* of such connecting words. This gives the line a rushed feeling. Even as the speaker describes seeing something beautiful and potentially hopeful—birds singing "at their ease"—the caesura and parataxis give the reader that the speaker is rushing through this description. And that makes a certain amount of sense—after all, the "birds in the trees" are irrelevant to the speaker: they aren't "the human race." Thus, while the poem's caesuras are thus rarely significant on their own, they do important work supporting the poem's other

devices—including apostrophe, antithesis, and parataxis.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "mansions, some"
- **Line 3:** "us, my dear, yet"
- **Line 6:** "now, my dear, we"
- **Line 9:** "that, my dear, old"
- **Line 12:** "alive, my"
- **Line 13:** "committee; they"
- **Line 15:** "to-day, my dear, but"
- **Line 16:** "meeting; the"
- **Line 17:** "in, they"
- **Line 18:** "me, my dear, he"
- **Line 20:** "Europe, saying, "They"
- **Line 21:** "mind, my dear, O"
- **Line 24:** "Jews, my dear, but"
- **Line 27:** "away, my dear, only"
- **Line 28:** "wood, saw"
- **Line 30:** "race, my dear, they"
- **Line 33:** "ours, my dear, not"
- **Line 36:** "me, my dear, looking"

ASSONANCE

"Refugee Blues" is not a strongly assonant poem. Most of its assonance falls in lines like lines 3, 6, and 9: the third line of each tercet. Those assonant sounds usually come from the repetition of words in those lines—and for that reason, they are better discussed as instances of diacope, parallelism, and refrain.

Beyond these instances of repetition, the speaker does use assonance from time to time. These instances of assonance are carefully controlled, designed to support the speaker's depiction of the loneliness and frustration of a refugee's life. For example, there's an assonant long /oh/ sound in line 7:

> In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,

This assonance is surprising and interesting. The "yew" tree in the "churchyard" is *old*. But it still grows, flowering *newly* every spring. That's a paradox—a paradox that the assonance underlines, linking together "grow" and "old."

When the /oh/ sound appears later in the stanza, it stresses the way that the speaker is excluded, can't access the possibilities the paradox unlocks. Although the "old yew" can blossom every spring, "old passports can't do that." The tree has a freedom the speaker—and the speaker's passport—doesn't: it can renew itself, no matter how old it is. The assonance here thus underlines the difficulty of the speaker's situation—and the way that restrictions on immigration are arbitrary, unnatural.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "grows," "old"
- **Line 10:** "banged," "table"
- **Line 19:** "thunder rumbling"
- **Line 26:** "fish swimming"

SIMILE

"Refugee Blues" contains a single simile, which appears in lines 25-26:

> Went down the harbor and stood upon the quay,
> Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:

In this moment, the speaker goes down to the harbor and looks at the water. From a "quay" or pier, the speaker can see fish swimming in the water. These fish have a kind of freedom that the speaker lacks: they can swim wherever they want to without worrying about whether their passports are up-to-date. (Indeed, since they're fish, they don't have passports at all!) They thus seem "free" to the speaker.

This tells the reader something important about how the speaker understands "freedom." It consists in the freedom of *movement*, the capacity to cross borders, to find safety in new places.

But the reader might also detect a hint of reticence in the simile. After all, the speaker merely says that the fish swim around "as if" they were free. The speaker seems hesitant to say that they actually *are* free. In this stanza and the next, the speaker is careful about personifying animals, about bringing them into human politics. Indeed, the speaker tends to emphasize the way that their freedom comes from the fact they aren't human—a fact which makes them alluring, but useless to the speaker. They may be free—and close by, "only ten feet away"—but the speaker is nevertheless stuck in the mire of human politics.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-26:** "Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay, / Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:"

REPETITION

"Refugee Blues" uses repetition throughout. Specific types include diacope and parallelism. The third line of each stanza marks the most obvious form of repetition in the poem. For example, take line 3:

> Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Or line 6:

> We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go
> there now.

These lines act like a chorus for a song. They bind the separate stanzas together and help to give the poem its musical feel. They are all very different from each other—except for the exact repetition of the phrase "my dear" at the center of each one—yet they all have similar grammatical structures: they introduce a statement or question, address the speaker's "dear," then repeat that sentence or phrase. In other words, they are grammatically *parallel*. (Since this parallelism relies on the repetition of words, it can also be labeled as an instance of diacope.) That parallelism binds the lines together—and, in turn, helps these lines bind the entire poem together. Although the lines that end each stanza are often quite different from each other, they end up functioning almost as refrains because they are so closely related to each other, so strongly parallel.

Parallelism also supports the poem's use of antithesis in line 2:

> Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:

The sentence creates a neat, clear opposition between the luxury that "some" enjoy and the poverty that others endure. The antithesis helps marks the speaker's exclusion. The speaker doesn't fit in here; the speaker doesn't have anywhere to go at all, not even a "hole." In this sense, it underlines the speaker's plight as a refugee.

Finally, the poem also regularly uses diacope. This is evident in the refrain lines that end each stanza, since they repeat themselves exactly, using exactly the same words in the first and second halves of the line. It also appears in lines 31-32:

> Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
> A thousand windows and a thousand doors:

The repetition of the word "thousand" works with the symbolic properties of the "building with a thousand floors." The building represents the abundance, the technological innovations of the modern world. The word "thousand" suggests just *how* abundant that world is: how large its buildings are, how many people it can accommodate—and it makes the speaker's exclusion even more bitter. Repetition thus works to bind together the poem, contributing to its rhythm, its musical feel. And, at the same time, it also emphasizes the speaker's isolation and exclusion.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:"
- **Line 3:** "Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us."
- **Line 6:** "We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now."
- **Line 9:** "Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that."
- **Line 12:** "But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive."
- **Line 15:** "But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day?"
- **Line 18:** "He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me."
- **Line 21:** "O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind."
- **Line 24:** "But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews."
- **Line 27:** "Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away."
- **Line 30:** "They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race."
- **Lines 31-32:** "a thousand floors, / A thousand windows and a thousand doors:"
- **Line 33:** "Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours."
- **Line 36:** "Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me."

PARATAXIS

"Refugee Blues" uses parataxis (which also often is an example of asyndeton) fairly often. It doesn't dominate the poem, but it shows up regularly—regularly enough that it shapes the way the poem sounds and feels. It gives the poem a clipped, rushed quality, as though the speaker is sprinting through the story, with no time to waste for pesky connecting words like "and" or "then." At some points in the poem, this rushed quality reflects the speaker's sense of frustration as in lines 22-23:

> Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,
> Saw a door opened and a cat let in:

These lines are outraged and incredulous—it's as though the speaker's saying, "Can you believe these people? They care more about their dogs than refugees." The use of parataxis here emphasizes that incredulity: clipped, abbreviated sentences like "Saw a door opened and a cat let in" are full of disdain and dismay.

Later in the poem, parataxis plays a slightly different function. Note the way the device works in line 28, for example:

> Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;

If the speaker sounds impatient and clipped here, that might be surprising—after all, the speaker's describing a relaxing walk in the woods. This ought to be an opportunity to relax. But the

speaker ultimately finds it to be a frustrating experience. The "birds in the trees" aren't the "human race," so the fact that they sing "at their ease" is irrelevant to the speaker's struggles. Parataxis gives the reader the sense that the speaker wants to hurry up and get past this, to get back to the real troubles. Parataxis thus serves to convey the speaker's frustration and impatience in a tough and trying situation.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:"
- **Lines 22-23:** "Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin, / Saw a door opened and a cat let in:"
- **Line 28:** "Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;"
- **Lines 34-35:** "Stood on a great plain in the falling snow; / Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:"

ASYNDETON

The poem's use of asyndeton is closely related to its use of parataxis, and indeed the devices often overlap. Their effect in the poem is also largely similar: both add to the poem's clipped, rushed tone in parts. There are a few instances of asyndeton that are *not* parataxis, however, which is why we've chosen to discuss each device separately in this guide.

For example, take lines 13-14:

> Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
> Asked me politely to return next year:

The lack of *conjunctions* in these two lines emphasizes the lack of *care* that the speaker (and by extension other refugees) is treated with by this committee. Regardless of how "polite" the committee is, it treats the speaker briskly, without much thought. The whole matter is dispatched with efficiently, coldly—a sensation bolstered by the speaker's use of asyndeton. A similar thing happens in line 16:

> Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and
> said;

There is no coordinating conjunction like "where" or "and" between the two parts of this sentence—between when the speaker arrives at the meeting and when this other "speaker" gets up to talk. This gives the line a brisk, matter-of-fact quality. This other "speaker" at the "public meeting" has already made up their mind, getting up quickly and without fanfare—refusing to even consider the poem's speaker's presence before scapegoating Jewish refugees.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Went to a committee; they offered me a chair; / Asked me politely to return next year:"
- **Line 16:** "Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up"
- **Lines 25-26:** "Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay, / Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:"
- **Lines 31-32:** "Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors, / A thousand windows"

ALLUSION

"Refugee Blues" contains several allusions. These allusions help the poem establish its setting. In doing so, they also clarify the speaker's situation and reveal why the speaker is afraid to return home. In line 20, for instance, the speaker alludes to a specific historical figure, "Hitler"—the leader of Nazi Germany. And line 24 reveals that the speaker is a "German Jew." Hitler and his regime targeted Jews, depriving them of their rights. As a result, fearing for their safety, many Jews fled Germany in the 1930s—only to find themselves unable to obtain asylum in another country. These allusions to the Nazi regime and its anti-Semitic policies clarify the speaker's identity—as a German Jew—and the dangers that the speaker is trying to escape from.

"Refugee Blues" was written in 1939, just before the start of World War II and several years before the beginning of the Holocaust. But the speaker anticipates the coming violence—in part, because Germany spent much of the 1930s preparing for the conflicts and building up its military. The speaker alludes to this threat of violence in line 35, describing "Ten thousand soldiers march[ing]" across Europe, hunting for Jewish refugees. This allusion to German military might not only predicts the violence to come, but it also suggests how serious the stakes are for the speaker—and how cruel and hypocritical the countries are that turn the speaker away.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "It was Hitler over Europe"
- **Line 24:** "But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews."
- **Line 35:** "Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:"

VOCABULARY

Souls (Line 1) - People. There are ten million people living in the city. Technically, this can be thought of as an example of synecdoche.

Holes (Line 2) - Slums or hovels.

Fair (Line 4) - Beautiful or pretty. The other meaning of the word—just, equitable—is also present in the line.

Yew (Line 7) - A tree. A yew is a conifer—like a pine or an evergreen. It's native to Europe and Africa.

Anew (Line 8) - Once more, once again.

Consul (Line 10) - Immigration official.

Chair (Line 13) - A place to wait. This is technically an example of metonymy.

Quay (Line 25) - Pier or landing.

To and fro (Line 35) - Back and forth.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Refugee Blues" is a 36 line-long poem made up of 12 tercets (a tercet is a three-line stanza). This stanza form is regular throughout, even though the poem doesn't have a regular meter and its lines vary in length. However, it does have a strong rhythm—so strong that the poem feels sing-songy, like a torch song or a melancholy ballad. And as its title indicates, the poem is a kind of "blues"—a song of sadness and mourning. Again, though, the poem thus doesn't follow any traditional poetic forms: its rhyme scheme isn't adapted from the sonnet or the villanelle. In response to a set of 20th century crises—the rise of Hitler, the resulting surge of refugees fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany—and it accordingly develops a new form to explore and express the terror of life in the 20th century.

METER

"Refugee Blues" does not follow a set meter and instead is written in free verse. Its lines vary in rhythm and in length. In the first stanza (lines 1-3) of the poem, for instance, line 1 is 9 syllables long:

> Say this city has ten million souls,

Line 2 is 13 syllables, and line 3 is 14 syllables long. The lines expand as the stanza unfolds, each line longer than the last.

Not all of the poem's stanzas work that way, though. Stanza 3 (lines 7-9) follows a different pattern: line 7 ("In the village ...") is 11 syllables long, line 8 ("Every spring ...") is only 8 syllables long, and then line 9 ("Old passports ...") is 14 syllables.

As a result of these broad variations in line lengths, the poem feels off-kilter, unsteady: things keep shifting around. There's no solid ground for the reader to stand on. In this way, the poem's lack of regular meter, its shifts in line length and rhythm, echo the plight of the refugees it describes: they too have no steady ground, nowhere safe and secure. The poem's insecurity and unsteadiness is the *refugees*' insecurity and unsteadiness.

RHYME SCHEME

As its title suggests, "Refugee Blues" is a blues—a song of sadness and mourning. Its speaker is a Jewish refugee in the 1930s who has been forced to leave Germany. The speaker mourns this persecution—and the resulting sense of loss, homelessness, dispossession. And the poem's rhyme scheme echoes and amplifies the speaker's sense of alienation.

The poem is written in tercets, three-line stanzas that rhyme AAB. In other words, the first two lines of each stanza rhyme with each other. Take the first stanza:

> Say this city has ten million souls,
> Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:

These rhymes tend to be simple and straightforward: the speaker rhymes strong, single-syllable words like "souls" and "holes" or "fair" and "there." As a result, the first two lines of each tercet feel like they *belong* together: they form a powerful couple. Further, they give the poem its sing-songy feel. These rhymes help the poem sound *like* a blues.

But the third line of each tercet doesn't rhyme with anything. It feels like the odd-man out—a kind of poetic third wheel. Again, look at the first stanza:

> Say this city has ten million souls,
> Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
> Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no
> place for us.

In each stanza, the third line is as lonely and isolated as the refugees themselves, stuck at the end of each stanza without companionship. The poem's rhyme scheme thus does two things at once: it helps create the poem's strong sense of music and rhythm, making the poem into a blues, and it echoes the isolation and alienation of the refugees—who, like, the third line of each stanza, don't fit in anywhere.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Refugee Blues" is a Jewish refugee living in the 1930s. Hitler's rise to power has forced the speaker to flee Germany, but the speaker has not been granted safe haven or asylum in another country. Everywhere the speaker goes, the speaker is turned away. The poem thus focuses on the speaker's sense of loneliness, alienation, and homelessness. The speaker "once had a country" but now "cannot go there."

The speaker addresses another refugee (only referred to as "my dear") to articulate the pain and anxiety such homelessness causes. As the speaker complains in line 3, "there's no place for us" anywhere. As the poem proceeds, the speaker's sense of frustration and victimization builds. The speaker complains

about being targeted by politicians like Hitler; the speaker envies animals and fish, who are "free," whose lives are not dominated by hateful "politicians" and therefore can sing "at their ease." The speaker thus presents a damning indictment of Europe in the 1930s, attacking Hitler's antisemitism and the indifference of countries like England and the U.S. to the plight of Jewish refugees.

SETTING

"Refugee Blues" is set in Europe in the 1930s. It discusses the plight of Jewish refugees—fleeing Germany to escape Nazi persecution, yet unable to secure asylum in countries like England and the United States. The poem does not specify where the speaker hopes to obtain asylum, and that's part of the point of the poem: to the speaker, it doesn't much *matter* whether France or Cuba or England or the United States refuses to grant asylum. The result is always the same: the speaker has become a person without a state, forced to return to Germany, where the speaker will face persecution and almost certain death. The setting of the poem is thus intentionally vague—a way of calling attention to the persecution and hypocrisy that German Jewish refugees faced wherever they turned.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) published "Refugee Blues" in one of his most celebrated collections, *Another Time* (1940). Written in the period preceding, and just following, the outbreak of World War II, the book features some of Auden's best-known political poems, including "September 1, 1939," "Epitaph on a Tyrant," and "The Unknown Citizen."

Auden is considered one of the masters of English-language poetry. He was a modernist who helped to define that early 20th-century movement, with its groundbreaking formal and stylistic experimentation. For modernist poets like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, traditional poetic forms like the sonnet and meters like iambic pentameter felt stodgy and old-fashioned: they couldn't capture the energy and speed of the modern world. Modernist poets thus sought *new* ways of making art capable of expressing the dynamics of modern society. "Refugee Blues" participates in this literary movement: with its unmetered lines and its unusual, innovative rhyme scheme, it creates a new form to express the isolation and homelessness of Jewish refugees during the 1930s.

However, "Refugee Blues" *breaks* from modernism in an important respect. Many of the leading modernist poets were deeply antisemitic. In his critical writings and poems, T. S. Eliot regularly expressed antisemitic ideas. (In a 1933 article—which he later retracted—Eliot proclaimed, "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.") Eliot's close friend—and the de-facto leader of modernist poetry in English—Ezra Pound openly supported fascism. He even moved to Italy, where he made regular radio broadcasts in support of Mussolini. Some scholars have even argued that antisemitism is not incidental to modernism: it was deeply *part* of the poems that the modernists wrote and responded to the transformations in modern society.

By contrast, Auden's poetry was often explicitly socialist and anti-fascist. For a time, critics viewed him as the head of a so-called "Auden Group" of left-wing UK poets, which also included Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, and Cecil Day-Lewis. As his career went on, however, Auden grew skeptical of poetry's ability to effect social change. (Another poem from *Another Time*, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," famously claims that "poetry makes nothing happen"—though it's a qualified claim.) Even as Auden's work became increasingly personal and spiritual, it remained at the forefront of English-language literary culture.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Refugee Blues" engages directly with the history of Europe in the 1930s. After his rise to power in 1933, Hitler targeted German Jews, destroying their property and businesses and depriving them of their civil rights. This escalating pattern of violence and persecution culminated in the Holocaust, during which the Nazis murdered 6 million European Jews. As Jews fled Nazi Germany, however, countries like Britain and the United States were often unwilling to take them in. German Jews became permanent exiles, traveling from country to country seeking asylum; many were sent back to Germany and almost certain death.

"Refugee Blues" was written in 1939—before the Holocaust began in full force. Auden did not yet know the full scope of the crisis or the full horrors of the Nazi regime. But his poem powerfully anticipates the Nazi's crimes and levels a fierce and righteous critique against countries in Europe and the Americas that refused to open their doors to Jewish refugees, putting them in a permanent state of legal limbo or, worse, sending them back to face their persecutors. The poem suggests that these countries should carry some of the blame for what happened to Jewish refugees after—and because—they were turned away.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Introduction to the Holocaust — A detailed introduction to the Holocaust from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, with links to many other

resources on the history of the Holocaust. (https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust)

- W. H. Auden's Life — A detailed biography of the British poet from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- "Poetry Makes Nothing Happen" — An essay from the Boston Review on W. H. Auden's life-long struggle with whether or not to write politically engaged poems. (http://bostonreview.net/poetry/robert-huddleston-wh-auden-struggle-politics)
- "Refugee Blues" Read Aloud — Shelia Hancock recites "Refugee Blues" for Holocaust Memorial Day, 2017. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7fMK8lNXMI)
- German Jewish Refugees, 1933-1939 — An article from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the fate of Jewish refugees in the 1930s. (https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/german-jewish-refugees-1933-1939)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- As I Walked Out One Evening
- Epitaph on a Tyrant
- Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)
- Musée des Beaux Arts
- Partition
- September 1, 1939
- The More Loving One
- The Shield of Achilles
- The Unknown Citizen

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