

The More Loving One



SUMMARY

The speaker, looking at the night sky, observes that the stars don't care one bit about humanity. But really, the speaker goes on, indifference is the least of anyone's problems in this world.

Wouldn't it be unpleasant, the speaker says, if the stars loved humanity desperately, but humanity couldn't love the stars back? No, if there can't be mutual love, the speaker would rather be the party who loves more deeply.

Much as the speaker thinks they love the indifferent stars, however, now that the speaker is looking at them, they don't think they could say that they missed any one in particular during the daytime.

If every single star vanished or burnt out, the speaker would figure out how to appreciate the beauty of a completely dark night sky—though it might take them a while.

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THEMES

THE PAIN AND BEAUTY OF UNREQUITED LOVE

The speaker of Auden's "The More Loving One" reflects that while love is often disappointing, it's still worthwhile. Personifying the stars as distant, indifferent beloveds, the speaker decides that, even if the stars don't "give a damn" about the speaker, the speaker will go on loving the stars (for a while, at least). Unrequited, imperfect, temporary, or painful love, this poem suggests, is better than no love at all.

"Looking up at the stars," the speaker is certain they're not looking back—an image that hints at the pain of unrequited love. The stars are traditional metaphors for true lovers: their steady shining evokes fidelity, their beauty the loveliness of a beloved's face. (See Romeo and Juliet or Keats's "Bright star" for two famous examples among many.) To this poem's speaker, though, the stars seem totally indifferent: "for all they care," the speaker says, "I can go to hell." If these stars represent a beloved, then it's a beloved who doesn't care a bit about the speaker, and the speaker is under no illusions about that.

However, the speaker reflects, this isn't the worst possible state of affairs: it's better to love something that doesn't love you back than to be the object of a "passion" that you can't return. "If equal affection cannot be"—that is, if the speaker and beloved can't feel the same way about each other—it's much better to be the "more loving one" than the indifferent party.

This declaration suggests that experiencing love, even unrequited love, is a good thing in itself. Being loved by

someone whom you can't love back, the speaker observes, is merely uncomfortable. Loving someone who can't love you, on the other hand, can be just as rewarding as it is painful. Those stars might be indifferent, but they're still beautiful!

The speaker further suggests that unrequited love might also be worth enduring because, no matter what the stories say, love doesn't last forever. Even the most fervent "admirer" of the stars could learn to embrace the "total dark" if all of the stars were to "disappear or die." In other words, the speaker knows that their unrequited love isn't permanent or overpowering, and that they can get over it (though, as they understatedly note, "this might take me a little time"). The idea that love fades might feel a little deflating; equally, it might feel comforting.

Love, in this speaker's vision, isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's often marred by "[un]equal affection," and it's nowhere near as constant as the stars: disappointed lovers get over their heartbreak, slowly but surely. All this imperfection, however, doesn't mean it's not worth taking on the burden of loving.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

• Lines 1-16

MEANING AND MEANINGLESSNESS Gazing up at the stars, the speaker of "The More

Loving One" takes an unconventional poetic perspective on the heavens: "for all they care," the speaker says, "I can go to hell." The stars, this poem suggests, don't steer people's fates (as they're traditionally said to). And yet, the fact that the universe is indifferent to humanity doesn't mean that humanity can or should be indifferent to the universe. People,

humanity can or should be indifferent to the universe. People, this poem suggests, keep on finding ways to see the world as "sublime" and awe-inspiring even when old ideas about the meaning of life fade away.

The stars "do not give a damn" about the people who look up so lovingly at them, the speaker declares—an idea that counters a lot of old literary and religious traditions in which the stars symbolize the course of fate or the protective guidance of the gods. Yet even if the universe isn't inherently meaningful, watchful, or caring, the speaker feels it's worthwhile to be "the more loving one": to see beauty and meaning in the stars despite the fact that the stars aren't looking lovingly back.

For that matter, the speaker goes on, it might be possible to find the beauty in a world without stars: to see the "total dark" of a night sky as "sublime," not terrifyingly empty. This image suggests an effort to find meaning in the world even when old ideas about meaning fade away altogether—for instance,





through a loss of faith. It "might take [...] a little time" to learn to see a new kind of beauty in a sky without those old, familiar guiding stars, the speaker suggests, but it's not impossible.

Through these images of seeing astonishing, "sublime" beauty in indifferent stars or even-more-indifferent darkness, the poem suggests that being human means *finding* or *making* meaning in the world, even if the world doesn't offer one much encouragement in return.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

• Lines 1-16



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Looking up at man or beast.

"Looking up at the stars," the speaker of "The More Loving One" does not see what poets often do. To this speaker, the stars don't symbolize fate or love or the watchful eyes of the gods; there's no pattern up there, no order, no affection. "For all [the stars] care," the speaker feels sure, "I can go to hell."

In just these first two lines, then, readers learn a lot about the speaker's dry, <u>ironic</u> perspective on the relationship between humanity and the universe. To this speaker, the stars have nothing to do with people and nothing to say to them.

Declaring that the stars don't care a whit for stargazers, the speaker seems to feel that the world lacks inherent meaning or guidance. However, the speaker isn't going to make a big deal out of this vision of cosmic indifference. A different sort of person might bewail the horrific emptiness of a universe without meaning. This speaker's offhand, casual, slangy tone makes it clear that they see the unresponsive stars as a mere matter of fact, something that one "know[s] quite well." No sense in making a fuss about it.

In fact, the universe's indifference might even be a little funny. Alongside the comical "for all they care, I can go to hell," the poem's structure works a lot like a joke's. Each of this poem's four <u>quatrains</u> is written in <u>couplets</u>, every pair of <u>rhymes</u> hitting like a setup and punchline.

However, as readers will soon see, this poem's ironic wit becomes a vehicle for deep feeling—and for a serious philosophical question. How, this poem will ask, ought a person to live in the face of cosmic indifference?

Well, first of all, the speaker goes on, there's no reason to especially fear indifference; it's "the least / We have to dread from man or beast," far from the worst thing in the world. The <u>understated</u> reserve of this line invites readers to consider what the *worst* we have to dread might be. The notion of what

"we have to dread from man or beast," in particular, might suggest a dreadful beastliness in both humanity and nature: plain old brutish violence.

The <u>juxtaposition</u> of indifferent stars and the fear of "man or beast" hints at a dark unease. For all that this poem's tone is light and wry, there's another serious question implied here: if the heavens aren't watching over humanity, what will keep people human?

LINES 5-8

How should we one be me.

The poem's first stanza introduced vast philosophical questions in a <u>tone</u> as light and crisp as a wafer. The second carries on in much the same vein—and subtly introduces a note of personal pain.

The speaker begins here with a rhetorical question:

How should we like it were stars to burn With a passion for us we could not return?

In context, these lines suggest a reversal. Earlier, the speaker looked at the stars and felt that the stars weren't looking back. Now, the speaker imagines what it would be like if the tables were turned and the *stars* adored *humanity* unrequitedly. The implied answer to this question is, *We wouldn't like that one bit.*

Notice, though, that the first stanza said nothing at all about "passion": only plain old "looking." Introducing the idea of a burning passion here, the speaker hints that their feelings for the stars are similarly passionate: that "looking up at the stars," they feel love and know that this love isn't returned.

These <u>personified</u> stars may have a little of their traditional <u>symbolic</u> weight here, after all. They might represent not just an indifferent cosmos, but an indifferent beloved.

That possibility makes the speaker's resolution in the next two lines feel all the more courageous:

If equal affection cannot be, Let the more loving one be me.

These few simple words are packed with meaning and feeling. First of all, there's the wistfulness of "if equal affection cannot be": the speaker would clearly prefer a universe that *did* seem to contain inherent meaning, a beloved who *did* love them back. If that "cannot be," however, the speaker would rather be the "more loving one" in the equation.

If the speaker is talking about an unrequited passion here, then this idea might be equally self-sacrificing and self-protective:

> Perhaps the speaker is falling on their own sword here, preferring to take on the pain of unrequited



love than to put their beloved through it.

• Equally, the speaker might prefer to feel love, even unrequited love, than to feel indifference! As the speaker just noted, people don't "like it" when they can't return a lover's affections; it's just plain uncomfortable and unrewarding. At least unrequited love means you get to *love*: to see beauty, to feel deeply.

Note, though, that the speaker has no control over whether their beloved feels "equal affection" for them. They can proclaim, "let the more loving one be me," but it's not really in their power to decide. Rather, they're choosing to embrace their fate, accepting the way things are, and finding the good in their predicament. Better to love than not to love.

At just the same time, these lines suggest a philosophical position that *does* involve a choice. If the speaker is responding to an indifferent universe here, then asking to be "the more loving one" is a momentous decision. To do so means deciding not to turn away from stars that don't look back, but to *go on* seeing beauty and meaning in the heavens, even if one "know[s] quite well" that those qualities aren't inherent.

In other words: in a quiet, wry, resigned way, this speaker is making a claim for the value of loving, even in the face of emptiness or pain. This idea sits right at the heart of the poem in more ways than one; this stanza gives the poem its title.

LINES 9-12

Admirer as I terribly all day.

The speaker has just finished making the rather courageous declaration that, even in the face of unrequited love and/or an indifferent universe, it's better to go on loving than to feel nothing—to imbue the world with one's own meaning and passion, even if the world doesn't offer much in return. However, the kind of person who declares that "for all [the stars] care, I can go to hell" will not leave a moment of such sincerity totally undisturbed.

In the third stanza, the speaker qualifies their devotion, questioning their own depth of feeling. Much as they admire "stars that do not give a damn," the speaker reflects, it's not as if they sit around "all day" waiting for one star in particular to come out again. In fact, the speaker waits until the stars come out again to form this judgment:

I cannot, now I see them, say I missed one terribly all day.

Readers who are still moved by the poignant second stanza might feel jolted by laughter here: the image of the speaker gazing up at the endless heavens with new skepticism is pretty funny. Even the deepest emotions, this stanza suggests, can be <u>ironically</u> punctured. The human predicament is as ridiculous as it is moving.

LINES 13-16

Were all stars a little time.

This poem's subtle mixture of sorrow, courage, and <u>irony</u> comes to a head in the closing stanza. Having unsentimentally observed that their love for the stars doesn't seem to mean that they "miss one terribly all day," the speaker envisions a world in which "all stars [...] disappear or die." In the face of this apocalyptic darkness, the speaker says, they would learn to find the "total dark sublime."

In other words, the speaker feels sure they would learn to see the awe-inspiring beauty in the void where the beloved (or at least sort of beloved) stars once were. However, "this might take me a little time." That, the reader has to imagine, is an understatement—a last moment of poignant humor. Losing the stars (or the loved one they might symbolize) altogether would not be easy to recover from.

There's a complex, contradictory blend of emotions here. With these closing words, the speaker stresses their dedication to the idea of loving even what can't love you back—even if that means learning to love an absence even deeper than the present "indifference" of the stars. At exactly the same time, they suggest that their unrequited love is not so pervasive and crushing that they won't recover from it one day.

Love, in this speaker's world, is thus:

- A valiant effort, a noble pursuit that raises humanity above beastliness:
- Its own reward, a source of meaning and beauty even through pain;
- Profoundly important;
- And not so serious as all that, in the end.

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SYMBOLS



Stars are traditional <u>symbols</u> of fate, love, and the gods. In this poem, however, they play the opposite role. To this speaker, the stars reflect not meaning and feeling, but the pure "indifference" of an unfeeling and meaningless universe.

This poem's <u>personified</u> stars might also suggest an indifferent lover: a person the speaker feels deeply for, but who "does not give a damn" about the speaker.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:



- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 13-15

X

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

In the very first lines of the poem, the speaker <u>personifies</u> the stars:

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well That, for all they care, I can go to hell,

On one level, the speaker is making a point about an uncaring universe here, saying that the stars are utterly unresponsive to humanity. The speaker portrays the stars not merely as unfeeling balls of gas blazing in the night, however, but also as figures who *could* care and simply do not. These "stars that do not give a damn" sound an awful lot like a person who's indifferent to the speaker.

That idea gathers steam when the speaker asks:

How should we like it were stars to burn With a passion for us we could not return?

Note that no mention of "passion" appeared in the first stanza! Yet the way the speaker phrases these lines, implies a turnabout: "What if the stars were in love with us, the way we're in love with the stars?" In other words, the stars here suggest not just any indifferent person, but someone with whom the speaker is in unrequited love.

This personification helps to give this poem its subtle depth of feeling. While the speaker's voice sounds wry, the distancing image of the stars suggests a person trying to manage a painful romantic disappointment by philosophizing about it.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2: "Looking up at the stars, I know quite well / That, for all they care, I can go to hell,"
- **Lines 5-6:** "How should we like it were stars to burn / With a passion for us we could not return?"
- Line 10: "stars that do not give a damn"

UNDERSTATEMENT

Through <u>understatement</u>, "The More Loving One" suggests the speaker might feel much more deeply than this poem's dry <u>tone</u> lets on.

Consider, for example, the moment when the speaker declares

that:

[...] on earth indifference is the least We have to dread from man or beast.

A lot remains unsaid here. If indifference is "the least / we have to dread," then there are far worse things in the world than not being cared about: being despised, just for instance. Or for that matter, as the speaker points out in the second stanza, *feeling* indifferent, as opposed to suffering someone else's indifference. Better to be "the more loving one," the speaker suggests, than to feel nothing.

The speaker veils a passionate attitude with droll understatement again at the end of the poem. "Were all stars to disappear or die," the speaker declares, it might just be possible to find the "total dark" beautiful in their absence—"though this might take me a little time." That "little time," the reader senses, might not be so very little at all: learning to live in the absence of a beloved (or the absence of a sense of meaning!) could easily be a lifetime's work.

Where Understatement appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "But on earth indifference is the least / We have to dread from man or beast."
- Line 16: "Though this might take me a little time."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Having reflected that, while the stars are indifferent to humanity, "indifference is the least / We have to dread" in this world, the poem's speaker asks:

How should we like it were stars to burn With a passion for us we could not return?

The implied answer to this <u>rhetorical question</u> is: We wouldn't like that one bit. Being the object of unrequited love, this speaker seems to feel, is far worse than unrequitedly loving.

Presenting this idea as a rhetorical question produces several different effects at once. Firstly, the question helps to create the poem's dry, resigned tone. That "How should we like it [...]?" sounds rather like a gentle scolding, something along the lines of, "How would you like it if someone pulled *your* hair?" Though the speaker is clearly grappling with the serious pain of unrequited love and/or the sadness of facing an indifferent universe, they're not going to make a fuss about it; instead, they briskly talk themselves into accepting what they can't change.

The question also invites readers to imagine their way into the strange predicament these lines describe. What would it be like to feel the unrequited passion of the stars burning down on you from above? Overwhelming, claustrophobic, inescapably awkward? This surreal image thus also suggests the speaker's





empathy for an unresponsive beloved, their ability to imagine what it's like to be loved by someone you can't love back.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

• **Lines 5-6:** "How should we like it were stars to burn / With a passion for us we could not return?"

IRONY

<u>Irony</u> is the unlikely vehicle for this poem's deep feeling.

From the start, the poem takes an ironic perspective on its subject: the stars. Traditionally, speakers who "look[] up at the stars" see visions of <u>fate</u>, <u>divinity</u>, or <u>love</u>; vanishingly few observe that "for all [the stars] care, I can go to hell." Seeing only indifference in the stars, the speaker paints a resigned picture of a universe that has no feeling for humanity (and, simultaneously, a picture of a beloved who has no time for the speaker).

By ironically undercutting the ancient <u>symbolism</u> of the stars, then, the speaker sets the stage for the poem's big dilemma: what can people do in the face of an indifferent universe (or an indifferent lover)? To this speaker, the answer is to be "the more loving one," embracing a sense of feeling and meaning even if the beloved doesn't offer any in return.

Note, though, that the poem's ironic tone allows the speaker to introduce this grand idea quietly and simply. Rather than making a passionate declaration—I shall love in spite of it all, by the heavens!—this speaker commits to love with dry humor and quiet sorrow. The human predicament, this poem's irony suggests, might be as absurd as it is difficult.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

• Lines 1-16

VOCABULARY

Indifference (Lines 3-4) - A lack of caring or interest. **Sublime** (Lines 14-15) - Awe-inspiring, overwhelmingly moving.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many of Auden's poems, "The More Loving One" uses a traditional form to explore a complex, arch, witty, and understatedly melancholy idea. Written in four quatrains of rhymed <u>couplets</u>, the poem has the rhythms and sounds of an old song—or perhaps a series of dry jokes, every couplet a setup and punchline.

This simple form puts a mild face on a complicated progression of thoughts. The speaker wanders through several ideas over the poem's four short stanzas:

- That the heavens are indifferent to humanity;
- That it's better that the heavens should be indifferent to humanity than the other way around;
- That, honestly, the speaker can't claim such a deep or abiding love of the heavens anyway;
- And that, were the stars to completely vanish, the speaker might learn to love utter darkness in their place.

The poem's form suggests that loving that which can't love you back—and learning to find something "sublime" even in the absence of a beloved—is a common, absurd, and ruefully funny human predicament.

METER

"The More Loving One" is written in accentual tetrameter. That means that each of its lines uses four **strong** beats, but doesn't stick to any particular flavor of metrical foot.

For instance, listen to the rhythms of line 2:

That, for all | they care, | I can go | to hell,

Here, those four steady beats per line appear alongside plenty of snappy, pattering unstressed syllables, through a mixture of anapests (metrical feet with a da-da-DUM rhythm, as in "at the stars") and iambs (feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "to hell"). The quick-paced density of the rhythm here helps to give these lines their casual, dryly funny tone: the speaker's voice sounds rather jaunty even in a description of the indifferent universe.

Compare that busy rhythm to the simplicity of lines 9-10:

Admi- | rer as | | think | | am Of stars | that do | not give | a damn,

Here, the poem resolves into straight-ahead iambic tetrameter, four iambs per line—a fittingly even, steady tone for the speaker's honest admission that, really, their admiration of the stars only goes so far.

RHYME SCHEME

"The More Loving One" is written in rhymed <u>couplets</u>, like this:

AABB

In other words, each quatrain uses two paired rhymes in a row:

Looking up at the stars, I know quite **well** (A) That, for all they care, I can go to **hell**, (A) But on earth indifference is the *least* (B) We have to dread from man or *beast*. (B)



This <u>rhyme scheme</u> lends itself to humor: each of the speaker's dry assertions about the indifferent stars resolves with a punchline.

Sometimes, of course, those punchlines feel more rueful than hilarious. Consider the rhymes in the lines from which the poem draws its title:

If equal affection cannot be, Let the more loving one be me.

Auden could have phrased the same idea all sorts of different ways—"Let me be the more loving one," to name the most obvious example. By saving up the revelation that the speaker would prefer the "more loving one" to be "me," attracting attention to the word with the end rhyme, the poem deepens the poignancy of this moment. What the speaker wishes for, after all, is not quite ideal: it's a preference one only has to state "if equal affection cannot be."



SPEAKER

Readers might be tempted to read this poem's first-person speaker as Auden himself. Certainly, the speaker uses Auden's rueful, elegant voice. Auden or not, this speaker takes an Audenish perspective on the world's beauties and sorrows.

Reflecting on the stars' indifference to worshipful humanity, the speaker decides it's preferable to be the "more loving one" in any unevenly balanced relationship—a decision that suggests the speaker has had some experience on both sides of the romantic scales. That sense that it's better to love unrequitedly than to be disagreeably beloved reflects a quiet embrace of strong feeling *in spite* of indifference.

That feeling, though, is just about concealed beneath a tone of dry resignation. Even if all the stars winked out, the speaker declares at the end of the poem, it might just about be possible to discover the beauty in the darkness they left behind—"though this might take me a little time."

This worldly-wise speaker knows that things don't always go quite as one might wish: "equal affection" often "cannot be." But even denied their wishes, the speaker feels driven to find sublimity in the dark.



SETTING

It would be fair to say that "The More Loving One" could take place anywhere that the stars shine. It would be equally fair to say that it takes place in the speaker's imagination.

The poem certainly treats its perspective as universal. For all the stars care, the speaker feels, *everyone* can "go to hell." But the speaker's wish to be "the more loving one" in any unequally

balanced relationship hints that the speaker sees the stars through the lens of personal experience. To this speaker, it's better to love something that can't love you back than to feel no love at all.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) had such a distinctive and unusual poetic voice that many critics see him as a school of his own: he and his contemporaries Cecil Day-Lewis, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, and Louis MacNeice are sometimes classed together as the "Auden group."

Unlike many of the Modernist poets of his generation, Auden didn't abandon <u>metered</u> poetry for <u>free verse</u>. Instead, Auden was a great proponent of old poetic forms, plain and approachable language, and <u>light verse</u>. Poetry, he believed, didn't have to be highfalutin to be meaningful. His poems often deal with <u>death</u> and <u>suffering</u> in a voice that's equal parts crisp, witty, and melancholic. He also delighted in writing everything from pantoums to <u>villanelles</u> to scandalous <u>limericks</u>.

Auden was particularly interested in music, and wrote not only poems that responded to musical traditions (like "As I Walked Out One Evening," which quotes old ballads in its first lines), but libretti—that is, lyrics for operas or pieces of classical music. He was also a noted essayist, and his book *The Dyer's Hand* collects his reflections on the art and craft of poetry. Some of these he wrote when he was Oxford University's Professor of Poetry, a ceremonial position awarded to notable writers and critics.

Auden remains a well-known and well-loved poet. Writers like James Merrill and John Ashbery credit him as a major influence, and his poetry even makes some <u>famous</u> <u>appearances</u> in pop culture.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Auden lived through some of the most chaotic years of the 20th century: he saw two world wars, the Great Depression, and the post-war cultural upheaval of the 1950s and 1960s. With this backdrop, perhaps it makes sense that the late collection in which this poem appears, *Homage to Clio* (1960), reflects on history.

"The More Loving One," however, doesn't feel attached to any particular place or time (though the speaker's voice does suggest Auden's own 20th-century middle-class Englishness). Rather, it draws on—and questions—the ancient symbolism of the stars.

Some of the poem's thoughts on love, however, might reflect Auden's own experiences; he suffered terribly over his longest and most serious romantic relationship. His great love, fellow poet Chester Kallman, couldn't commit to the monogamy



Auden needed. Although the pair lived together on and off until Auden's death, what Auden called their "marriage" (though gay marriages weren't legally recognized at the time) ended in 1941. Auden well knew what it was to feel like the "more loving one."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud Listen to Auden reading this poem aloud in his wonderful laconic voice. (https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7474255)
- A Brief Biography Learn more about Auden in a short biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- Auden's Legacy Visit the Auden Society's website to learn what contemporary scholars are saying and thinking about Auden. (https://audensociety.org/)
- A Celebration of Auden Listen to a radio program about Auden in which he reads from his collected works. (https://youtu.be/U3dYKICFURA)
- An Interview with Auden Read an interview with Auden and learn more about his poetic philosophy (and his sense of humor). (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/

sep/04/wh-auden-only-duty-as-poet-is-efend-use-of-language-1970)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- As I Walked Out One Evening
- Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)
- Musée des Beaux Arts
- Refugee Blues
- September 1, 1939
- The Shield of Achilles
- The Unknown Citizen

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HOW TO CITE

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