

**SECTION A: ANALYSIS OF THE POEM**

**4. FUNERAL BLUES**

W H Auden

- 1 Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
- 2 Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
- 3 Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
- 4 Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.
  
- 5 Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
- 6 Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead
- 7 Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
- 8 Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.
  
- 9 He was my North, my South, my East and West,
- 10 My working week and my Sunday rest,
- 11 My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song:
- 12 I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.
  
- 13 The stars are not wanted now; put out every one;
- 14 Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
- 15 Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
- 16 For nothing now can ever come to any good.

**DICTION**

| WORD                       | MEANING   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Title - <i>blues</i>       | 1. ' <i>blues music</i> ': a genre of music invented by African Americans arising from songs sung by slaves in West Africa – reflective melodies, using the sorrows of life in lyrics. 2. ' <i>having the blues</i> ': feeling sad or depressed |
| Line 3 - <i>muffled</i>    | to wrap with something to deaden or prevent sound   |
| Line 4 - <i>mourners</i>   | people who attend a funeral, especially as relatives or friends of the dead person and express grief or sorrow  |
| Line 5 - <i>moaning</i>    | a long, low sound expressing suffering or complaining about something trivial   |
| Line 6 - <i>scribbling</i> | to write or draw (something) carelessly or hurriedly.   |
| Line 7 - <i>crêpe bows</i> | a light cotton or silk fabric with a fine ridged or crinkled surface; a black armband originally made of this, worn as a sign of mourning   |
| Line 14 - <i>dismantle</i> | disconnect or take apart the pieces of a machine  |

**THE POET**

Wystan Hugh Auden was one of the most influential English poets of the twentieth century. He went to Oxford University and obtained a degree in English. He was part of a group of poets who were all influenced by socialist ideas. Auden travelled to Spain, to support the struggle against the forces of fascism in the Spanish Civil War. He emigrated to the United States before the outbreak of World War II in 1939, and later became an American citizen. Auden wrote poetry in a wide variety of styles and forms, including long, book-length poems and elegies like '*Funeral Blues*'. In 1956, he became Professor of Poetry at Oxford

## SUMMARY

The speaker expresses his overpowering feelings of grief at the death of his loved one. He feels that there should be dramatic public displays of mourning, such as putting black bows around the necks of the doves flying around the city, to show the devastating extent of his loss. He describes how important his beloved was to him, in every possible context, and how he had assumed that their love would last his whole life. He ends the poem with an almost apocalyptic (imagining the complete destruction of the world) desire to pack away the entire natural world, because he feels that without his loved one, nothing good will ever happen.

## TITLE

The 'blues' is a genre of music originating in the United States among the African American community, arising from the songs sung by slaves from West Africa. It features slow, reflective melodies and lyrics and often uses the sorrows of life as a subject. From this we get the concept of 'having the blues', meaning to feel sad or depressed. The title therefore refers to the feeling of sadness associated with the death of a loved one.

## TYPE AND FORM

This could be classified as an elegy (a mournful funeral poem) or a dirge (a mournful funeral song) for someone who has died. The poem has four stanzas of four lines each. There is a consistent rhyme scheme of *aabb ccdd eeff gggh* (*heroic couplets*). An elegy often has a slow pace, but in this poem the pace is fast, as if the speaker is rushing to say everything he or she feels, until the pace slows down towards the end.

## THEME

- ▶ The poem concerns grief and mourning for a lost loved one, and the impulse to spread the dreadful news far and wide.
- ▶ It demonstrates how shocking it can be to realise that love may not, in fact, last forever.

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### Lines 1-2

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,*

- The poem begins with a series of harsh commands: stop the clocks! Cut off the telephones!
- The speaker sounds forceful, even angry.
- Whoever the speaker is, he sounds angry, and issues harsh commands. In the first line, he wants to stop the clocks and the telephone. These seem like physical representations of time and communication to us. He wants everything to just stop.
- In the next line, he asks for silence. He wants dogs to stop barking, too.

### Lines 3-4

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

- This is not a time for pianos. It's a time for muffled drums. Now that he has asked the dog and the phone to be silent, he has no problem extending that request to musical instruments.
- In the next line, he wants the coffin to be brought out and for mourners to come see it. Maybe the 'muffled drum', then, is the sound of mourners walking, or of pallbearers carrying a coffin or maybe it is a slow and stately drumming that the speaker wants, the kind of drumming that happens at military funerals.
- These lines are all commands, also known as imperatives. The speaker is making a big pronouncement to the world: someone has died, and we must acknowledge it in dramatic ways.
- These lines might even seem a little exaggerated. Should we really stop the clocks just because someone has died? Probably not. But the speaker's using a hyperbole or exaggeration to convey just how important all this mourning business is.

- Line 3 has eleven syllables, and line 4 has ten. It is safe to call this one iambic pentameter.
- And by the end of stanza 1, we've also got a clear rhyme scheme at work. 'Telephone' rhymes with 'bone' and 'drum' rhymes with 'come'.

### Lines 5-6

*Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead*

*Scribbling on the sky the message He is Dead,*

- As if stopping the clocks weren't enough, the speaker would like an airplane to write 'He is Dead' in skywriting to commemorate his grief. If a funeral is a public acknowledgment of death, then this is a super public acknowledgement of death.
- While earlier he asked for quiet, and for people to cut off their telephones (which are private communication devices), he wants the whole world to know that 'He Is Dead'.
- It's interesting that the speaker doesn't provide a name. He could have written, for example, 'John Is Dead'. He leaves the dead man's name anonymous. Maybe he wants more privacy after all or maybe he assumes that everyone already knows 'his name'. Either way, there's an interesting mixture between private and public acknowledgments of death.

### Lines 7-8

*Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public doves,*

*Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.*

- More public demands, as the speaker wants even the 'public doves' — we have a strong feeling that these are pigeons — to honour the dead man. He wants the traffic police to acknowledge him, too.
- Does the speaker really want us to put bows on pigeons? HYPERBOLE

### Lines 9-10

*He was my North, my South, my East and West,*

*My working week and my Sunday rest,*

- This speaker is so broken up (and wants everyone else to be broken up too) because he really loved the dead man. It doesn't seem like the dead man was important world-wide. The dead man is someone the speaker knew and loved in daily life.
- These lines are incredibly personal, especially when compared to the earlier lines that are mostly about public mourning. The dead man meant everything to the speaker, so it's no wonder he'd like the world around him to reflect the fact that the man is dead.
- Metaphor alert. Was the dead man really a calendar of days for the speaker? All the directions on a compass? But in a metaphor, we describe one thing by way of another thing. So here, the speaker describes the dead man by saying that he was like a compass for him, and also like every day of the week for him. He provided direction and filled his time.

### Lines 11-12

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

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

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

### Lines 13-14

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one,*

*Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,*

- The speaker grows even more depressed in these lines. He demands that someone, whomever he's talking to, put out the stars, pack up the moon, and take apart the sun. Now his grief is so extreme, it's affecting the way he sees the cosmos.
- His extreme, hyperbolic commands are his expressions of his extreme grief.
- Even though no one could ever 'dismantle the sun', the speaker's grief is so intense that he wishes that we could. All these romantic and natural images—the stars, the moon, the sun—are too painful for him. It's almost as if he wants to blot out everything in the world except his own mourning.

### Lines 15-16

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

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

## IMAGERY

**IN STANZA 1** the speaker describes the manner which he would like the death of his loved one to be noted. He alludes to old mourning customs, common in nineteenth century Britain but now seldom seen.

**Line 1:** He commands that we should ' *stop ... the clocks*' (which was a custom in a house in which someone had died, to signify that time had ceased for the departed person) and ' *cut off the telephone*' (this was also done, to prevent disturbance in a house of mourning).

**Line 2:** He shows the same desire for silence, and the need to stop inappropriate sounds when he speaks of preventing the dog from barking.

**Line 3:** Instead of happy or tuneful piano music he wants the slow, solemn beat of '*muffled drums*', which describes the drums used at funeral processions, with cloth around the drumsticks to soften the noise. (This is still done at some official or military funerals.)

**Line 4:** Then he is ready for the coffin to be brought out as the mourners arrive.

**IN STANZA 2** the speaker expresses his need for his own overwhelming grief to be demonstrated to the public.

**Line 5:** He would like to see '*aeroplanes ... overhead*',

**Line 6:** He would also like to see writing in the sky, for all to see, the bad news that '*He is Dead*'.

**Line 7:** He would like bows of black crêpe to be tied around the necks of doves (the custom was to display fabric bows on the door of the deceased's home, to alert any visitors to the death).

**Line 8:** Even the policemen should wear black gloves. These exaggerated desires emphasise how the speaker is almost wild with grief.

**STANZA 3** has several metaphors and this shows how much the speaker's loved one meant to him. They are images representing the completeness of their love.

**Line 9:** The speaker refers to all four compass directions (North, East, South and West), showing that the person's presence in his life gave him direction and stability.

**Lines 10 – 11:** Their love filled every day of the week and all hours of the day and all happy leisure activities.

**STANZA 4** shows the speaker's feelings of despair by referring to the wider context of stars, moon, sun, ocean and woods.

**Line 13:** He wants '*the stars*' to be '*put out*'(line 13) as their light has no relevance to him now.

## DICTION

► **Stanza 1:** After a death in the family during the nineteenth century, instructions would be given for the mourning customs to be observed, for example, black clothes were worn and crêpe bows were put on the front door.

- In Stanza 1, the speaker seems to be imitating these instructions – his words take the form of brief, authoritative commands (using imperative form).
- The words he uses describe the way in which a death halts the normal routine of life, and introduces a period of sadness and reflection, in which attention must be given to the necessary arrangements.
- The verbs indicate the ending the normal routine –  
line 1: '*stop*' & '*cut off*';  
line 2: '*prevent*';  
line 3: '*silence*'.

### ► Stanza 2:

- In this stanza, the speaker mentions aeroplanes '*moaning*' (line 5), a word that describes a noise of pain or grief.
- The message he would like the aeroplanes to '*scribble*' on the sky is '*He is Dead*' (line 6).
- This simple statement – the person's name is not mentioned, but '*He*' and '*Dead*' are given capital letters – seems to indicate that this person is so important (to the speaker, even if to no one else) that it is not necessary to use his name.
- He mentions '*crêpe bows*' and '*black cotton gloves*' (lines 7 and 8) which denote mourning.

### ► Stanza 3:

- The speaker describes what his loved one meant to him, beginning with '*He was ...*' (line 9) and then listing the images that show the completeness of their love.
- He repeats the word '*my*' many times in lines 9–11 to emphasise their closeness: '*My noon ... my song*' (line 11).
- In line 12, the speaker makes a simple statement using the word '*I*', which shows his new state of loneliness, and where he acknowledges how wrong he had been to think that his loved one would always be with him.

### ► Stanza 4:

- The words used in this stanza shows how the speaker has lost all enthusiasm for life – he feels as if the world may as well end, and uses words and phrases such as '*not wanted*' and '*put out*' (line 13), '*pack up*' and '*dismantle*' in line 14 and '*pour away*' and '*sweep up*' (line 15). This reminds us of someone packing up the belongings of a dead person or cleaning up after something is over and done. The phrase '*nothing now*' in the last line emphasises that the speaker feels there is nothing left for him after this loss.

## TONE

► **Stanza 1:** The speaker's tone is  **curt** (speaking shortly, almost angrily) as he issues the sad instructions about setting up the signs of mourning. He is stopping everything that represents everyday life; the only thing he welcomes is the coffin and the mourners.

► **Stanza 2:** His desire to share his loss with others, even the general public, leads to an almost **hysterical** tone as he suggests impossible ways of marking this death that means so much to him – writing '*He is Dead*' in the sky (line 6) and putting '*crêpe bows ... doves*' (line 7).

► **Stanza 3:** This stanza brings a still **sad but calmer mood** as the speaker describes **nostalgically** how his loved one meant everything to him. The stanza concludes with a moving statement in line 12: '*I ... wrong.*' This antithesis demonstrates what a shock the sudden and unexpected loss of his love has been to him.

► **Stanza 4:** The speaker then returns to his tone of **near-hysterical grief**, when he describes how he wants to ‘*put out*’ the stars and ‘*dismantle the sun*’ (lines 13 and 14). This demonstrates the depth of his grief and is reinforced by the bleak statement in the last line: ‘*nothing ... good*’.

### IMPORTANT POINTS CONTENT

|  | CONTENT  | POETIC DEVICES  | EFFECT  |
|--|--|---|---|
| <b>Stanza 1</b><br>Rhyme scheme:<br>aabb | The speaker describes how he wants to stop all everyday activity and observe strict mourning.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Allusion</u> to old-fashioned mourning practices</li> <li>• <u>Enjambment</u> in lines 3–4</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Emphasises</b> the depth of his <b>grief</b>.</li> <li>• Gives <b>smooth transition</b> to final line, puts <b>emphasis on ‘coffin’</b>.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Stanza 2</b><br>Rhyme scheme:<br>ccdd | He lists the public signs of mourning he would like to see.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Enjambment</u> in lines 1–2</li> <li>• Images of <u>exaggerated</u> public mourning – ‘<i>crêpe ... doves</i>’ (Hyperbole)</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creates <b>smooth transition</b> to line 2, puts <b>emphasis on ‘He is Dead’</b>.</li> <li>• <b>Emphasises</b> the extent of his <b>grief</b>.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Stanza 3</b><br>Rhyme scheme:<br>eeff | He describes how complete and absorbing their love was, and how devastated he is to find that this love will not, after all, last forever. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Metaphors</u>: ‘He ... West’; ‘My ... rest’, ‘noon ... song’</li> <li>• <u>Antithesis</u> in line 12</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Emphasises</b> how <b>close</b> he and his <b>beloved</b> were – they were part of every aspect of each other’s lives.</li> <li>• <b>Emphasises</b> his <b>shock</b> at the <b>sudden loss</b> of what he had assumed would always be there.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Stanza 4</b><br>Rhyme scheme:<br>gghh | He expresses the wish to end everything, even the stars and the sun, because he does not see any hope for the future.                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Metaphor</u>: the physical elements of our universe are compared to unwanted household items, to be swept up and put away.</li> <li>• <u>Alliteration</u> in line 16: ‘<i>Nothing now ...</i>’</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shows his feeling that <b>nothing is of any value now</b> that he has lost his loved one.</li> <li>• Emphasises that after his beloved’s death, <b>he finds no good in anything</b>.</li> </ul>  |

### SECTION B: ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS SET ON THE POEM:

#### QUESTIONS

- 1.1 Discuss how the use of the first person in stanza 3 contributes to the overall tone of the poem. (2)
- 1.2 Explain the symbolism contained in the poet’s use of colour in the poem. (2)
- 1.3 Comment on the effective use of imagery in line 9: ‘*He was my North and West*’ (3)
- 1.4 Critically evaluate the impact of this poem as an expression of loss and grief. Support your response with evidence from the poem. (3)

[10]

## SECTION C: MORE QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON THE POEM

1. Refer to Stanza 1.  
Explain why the speaker wants to do all the things he mentions in this stanza. (2)  
**He feels that these old-fashioned mourning traditions express perfectly his wish to show that for him, the world as he knew it has come to an end (1), and he needs everyone to acknowledge his need for a period of silent grief while he struggles to come to terms with his loss (1).**
  
2. Refer to Stanza 2.
  - 2.1 What effect is created by the word '*moaning*' in line 5? (2)  
**This word usually describes a sound made in pain or grief (1), so it gives us an idea of the way the speaker is feeling (1).**
  
  - 2.2 Account for the use of the capital letters in the phrase '*He is Dead*' (line 6). (2)  
**The capital letter in '*He*' shows us how important the speaker felt his beloved to be (1); the capital letter in '*Dead*' suggests the overwhelming effect that death has had on the speaker – it is the all-consuming concept that is filling his mind (1).**
  
  - 2.3 The idea of putting bows around the doves' necks is not a realistic one.  
Why does the speaker make the exaggerated suggestions in this stanza? (2)  
**These suggestions indicate how enormous his grief is (1) – he wants the whole world to acknowledge this tragic event (1).**
  
3. Refer to Stanza 3.
  - 3.1 In this stanza the speaker uses metaphors that mention one thing and its opposite – for example '*my North*' and then '*my South*' (as well as East and West). Identify two other examples of such metaphors. (2)  
**'*working week*' and '*Sunday rest*' (1); '*noon*' and '*midnight*' (1)**
  
  - 3.2 What does this tell us about the relationship between the speaker and his loved one? (2)  
**This indicates that the relationship was completely satisfying (1) and that they were a part of every aspect of each other's lives (1).**
  
4. Refer to Stanza 4.  
Discuss the effectiveness of the extended metaphor used in this stanza. (2)  
**The speaker wants to '*put out*', '*Pack up*', '*pour away*' and '*sweep up*' the world and the planets, which shows us that for him, everything has lost meaning (1); he has lost all faith in the future (1).**

## SECTION C: EXAMPLE OF AN ESSAY QUESTION

### ESSAY QUESTION

'*Funeral Blues*' is a powerful exploration of the devastating effects of grief and loss. By carefully examining the **diction**, **imagery** and **tone** of the poem, evaluate the validity of the above statement. Your response should take the form of a well-constructed essay of 250–300 words (about ONE page). (10)

The poem describes the immense loss felt by the speaker after the death of his loved one. It is a touching and effective description of his feelings of loss and hopelessness.

The **diction** used in the poem reinforces the idea that the speaker's world seems to have come to an end. He wants to '*Stop*' the clocks and '*cut off*' the telephone; '*Prevent*' the dog from barking (by giving it a bone) and '*Silence*' the pianos. He shows his lack of hope for the future by using phrases like '*put out*' the stars, '*Pack up*' and '*dismantle*' the moon and sun; '*Pour away*' and '*sweep up*'. He also uses words that speak of death and mourning – '*coffin*' and '*mourners*', '*crêpe bows*' and '*black cotton gloves*'.

The **imagery** in the first and second stanzas shows the speaker's need to tell the world of his enormous loss. Not only does he describe what were fairly standard mourning procedures, like stopping clocks and using muffled drums at the funeral procession, he even wants the policemen to wear '*black cotton gloves*' and for there to be black bows around the necks of the '*public doves*'. In the third stanza he gives a moving description of the scale of his relationship with his beloved – he is described as '*my North, my South, my East and West*'. The images in the last stanza show the speaker's feelings of despair and lack of will to live. He wants to '*Pack up*' or '*dismantle*' the entire universe, because, as he states in the poignant (sad and moving) last line, '*nothing now can ever come to any good.*'

The **tone** of the poem also reflects this sad and moving mood. In the first stanza, the references to mourning rituals highlight the tone of grief. Stanza 2 reinforces this, especially the simple phrase '*He is Dead*'. The touching descriptions in Stanza 3 lead up to the bleak statement describing his feelings of shock and pain ('*I thought ... wrong.*'). In the final stanza the speaker uses images that give a mood of despair and emotional trauma ('*The stars ... one*') as he describes how we might as well dismantle and put away the entire world. The final line of the poem reveals the extent of his hopelessness ('*For nothing ... good*'). Throughout the poem therefore, the tone emphasises the speaker's devastating feelings of grief and loss. '*Funeral Blues*', therefore, gives us a vivid and moving picture of the enormous pain and suffering that the loss of a loved one can bring.

MOI