

Course: English Literature (First Year)

Lesson Three: Poem Analysis: “Funeral Blues” by W.H Auden Semester:

Two

Lecturer: Dr Nihad LAOUAR

“Funeral blues” – W.H Auden:

I. General Summary:

This poem channels the suffering and distress of the speaker after the loss of a loved one. The poem begins by the speaker making certain requests for the sake of reaching some silence for a proper mourning. The speaker extends his demands to the external space where he/she tends to invite the whole world to mourn the death of their loved one. The speaker goes on to express how much this dead person used to mean to them and that life is devoid of meaning because of the deceased absence.

II. Poem Analysis :

Stanza One :

- As an old custom in 19th century Britain, people used to stop the clocks in their houses during the death of someone to prevent further bad luck. The poet here makes an indirect allusion to this old tradition in the first verse not necessarily with the aim to prevent further luck but to maintain silence and pave the way for a funeral. In addition, cutting off the telephone suggests that the speaker does not want to receive any calls and this is also part of the speaker’s preparation for the funeral.
- The following line “Prevent the dog from barking with juicy bone” shows further that all what the speaker wants at this moment is a complete silence.
- The last two lines: “Silence the pianos and with muffled drums”/”Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come” indicate that the speaker wants to replace the happy tunes of pianos by the stifled sounds of the drums. Historically, drums used to be played in military funerals in the past. Thus, this line foreshadows a funeral. This is confirmed in the last line, “Bring

out the coffin, let the mourners come”, where the speaker makes a pronouncement to the world to acknowledge the death of the speaker’s loved one.

Stanza Two:

- In this Stanza, it becomes clear that the speaker wants his overwhelming grief to be demonstrated to the public. He/she extends his grief to the external world in comparison to the first stanza where the speaker expresses their grief in their immediate surrounding that is the home space.
- The speaker’s longing for the expansion of their grief to the public can be directly seen from the first two lines that say: “Let the aeroplanes circle moaning overhead”/ “scribbling on the sky the message He is Dead,”. These two lines suggest a sort of exaggeration in the way in which the speaker wants the whole world to know about the death of their loved one.
- We also learn from the second line of this stanza about the gender of the dead person that appears to be a male by using the subject pronoun “He”.
- The following two lines express further exaggeration, in that the speaker would like bows of fabric to be tied around the necks of doves. Since “doves” symbolize peace and pureness, it can be argued that the speaker wants to let the world know how pure and peaceful their attachment was. Therefore, the deceased person deserves a collective grief by the public.
- In the last line, the speaker expects so many people to attend the funeral to the extent to which there will be a long concession of cars that may cause traffic and policemen will be needed, indicating that this person was very well known.
- To sum up this stanza, the speaker lists public signs of mourning they would like to see and this extends outside of the speaker’s home.

Stanza Three:

- The first three lines of this stanza mark how important this dead person was to the speaker. He was his “North”, his “South”, his “East” and “West”. These are directions and the speaker here uses a metaphor to imply that this deceased man used to give him directions, stability and offer him guidance in his life.

- The dead lover also used to be his “working week”, “Sunday”, “noon”, “midnight”, “talk”, etc. All of these time symbols indicate that the loved one used to fill his days and complete his life. Their bond was so powerful that the speaker thought it would last forever.
- The last line “I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong” shows that the speaker was ignorant of the inevitable death of a loved one and finally realized that death is inescapable. The colon in this line signifies the painful realization of the harsh reality of death.

Stanza Four:

- This last stanza affirms hopelessness of this poem. The use of commanding verbs in this stanza conveys a purposeless life without the deceased.
- The first three lines show that elements of the universe such as “stars”, “moon”, “sun”, and “ocean” are not wanted now. These elements are symbolic of romantic love and by wanting to destroy and dismantle them, the speaker wants to strip them of their meaning because “nothing now can come to any good”. This means that these tropes of love are meaningless after the death of her loved one.
- In short, the entire universe becomes of no worth since the deceased no longer makes part of this universe.

Poetic devices of this poem “funeral Blues”:

1. The Speaker: The speaker in this poem is not identified and does not refer a specific historical figure. It is a fictional persona created by the poet W. H. Auden.

2. Form: This is a strophic poem that consists of four stanzas and each stanza is a quatrain. Each break between two stanzas indicates a shift in tone and themes.

3. Thematic form of the poem: This poem is an elegy because it mourns the dead of a loved one. So, the general theme of the poem is **grief and loss of a loved one**.

4. Mood and tone: The tone of the speaker changes from stanza to another. In the first stanza, the tone is angry as the speaker makes his commands. The tone aggravates in stanza two and can be said to be hysterical in the way that the speaker gives further exaggerating commands. The tone becomes calmer in stanza three and rises again to become more upset and angry in the last stanza as the speaker expresses his frustration at the universe. The overall tone of the poem is a mixture between anger and hopelessness. The overall mood of the poem is despair.

5. Figures of Speech: there are many figures of speech in this poem as can be seen below:

- **Alliteration:** Repetition of the first consonant sound in two or more words in one line:
Line one: “the **cl**ocks, **cut** off”
Line ten: “my **w**orking **w**eek”
- **Assonance:** Repetition of a vowel sound in two or more words.
Line One: “**S**top all the **cl**ocks”
Line Three: “**M**uffled **D**rum”
- **Consonance:** Repetition of a consonant sound in two or more words:
Line One: “**S**top all of **cl**ocks, **cut** off the **t**elephone”
Line Four: “Let the **m**ourners **c**ome”
- **Personification:** an example of personification can be found in the first line of stanza two: “Let the aeroplanes circle moaning overhead”. The human quality of moaning, which means crying quietly, is given to an object that is the aeroplane.
- **Metaphor:** a vivid example of metaphor can be found in stanza three where the deceased lover is compared to a compass that is supposed to give directions to the speaker. The deceased lover is also compared to times of the week and days as occurs in lines two and three of the third stanza.

6. Rhyme: The rhyme scheme of this poem is (**aabb, ccdd, eeff, gghh**)

