

## *As I walked out one Evening*

*As I walked out one evening,  
Walking down Bristol Street,  
The crowds upon the pavement  
Were fields of harvest wheat.*

*And down by the brimming river  
I heard a lover sing  
Under an arch of the railway:  
'Love has no ending.*

*'I'll love you dear, I'll love you  
Till China and Africa meet,  
And the river jumps over the  
mountain  
And the salmon sing in the street,*

*'I'll love you till the ocean  
Is folded and hung up to dry  
And the seven stars go squawking  
Like geese about the sky.*

*'The years shall run like rabbits,  
For in my arms I hold  
The Flower of the Ages,  
And the first love of the world.'*

*But all the clocks in the city  
Began to whirr and chime:  
'O let not Time deceive you,  
You cannot conquer Time.*

*'In the burrows of the Nightmare  
Where justice naked is,  
Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss.*

*'In headaches and in worry  
Vaguely life leaks away,  
And time will have his fancy  
Tomorrow or today.*

*'Into many a green valley  
Drifts the appalling snow;  
Time breaks the threaded dances  
And the diver's brilliant bow.*

*O plunge your hands in water,  
Plunge them in up to the wrist;  
Stare, stare in the basin  
And wonder what you've missed.*

*The glacier knocks in the  
cupboard,  
The desert sighs in the bed,  
And the crack in the tea-cup  
opens  
A lane to the land of the dead.*

*'Where the beggars raffle the  
bank-notes  
And the Giant is enchanting to  
Jack,  
And the Lily white Boy is a Roarer,  
And Jill goes down on her back.*

*'O look, look in the mirror,  
O look in your distress;  
Life remains a blessing  
Although you cannot bless.*

*'O stand, stand at the window  
As the tears scald and start;  
You shall love your crooked  
neighbour  
With your crooked heart.'*

*It was late, late in the evening,  
The lovers they were gone;  
The clocks had ceased their  
chiming.  
And the deep river ran on.*

**W.H. Auden** (1938)

## *As I walked out one Evening: a running commentary*

The first verse of the poem is set at dusk. The first metaphor:

*The crowds upon the pavement  
Were fields of harvest wheat.*

is very blunt in its syntax, and results in a very vivid depiction of the setting. One visualises a golden summer evening. Then, the scene changes for the dampness, darkness and cold of the river banks:

*And down by the brimming river...*

There stand the lovers. One of them, the boy, one gathers, is in the middle of his love speech:

*I heard a lover sing*

, a love song marked by extreme romanticism, and in sharp contrast with the immediate surroundings:

*Under an arch of the railway*

, the grim outskirts of the city. The boy's first line:

*Love has no ending*

, sets the mood and states the core belief of young loving. The following three stanzas are a depiction of youth's enthusiasm and mad romantic love, as expressed through daring images and foolish imaginations:

*'I'll love you. dear, I'll love you  
Till China and Africa meet,  
And the river jumps over the mountain  
And the salmon sing in the street...  
I'll love you till the ocean  
Is folded and hung up to dry  
And the seven stars go squawking  
Like geese about the sky.'*

After this, the sixth stanza is a first turning point in the poem, with the discordant intervention of a very different voice:

*But all the clocks in the city  
Began to whirr and chime...*

The clocks reply as clocks would, with a strict regularity of diction meant to evoke the very beat of a chronometer. Their opening statement:

*'O let not Time deceive you,  
You cannot conquer Time...*

makes up the most rhythmically regular passage in the poem, with a massive predominance of short vowels separated by simple, very energetic, plosive consonants. The main theme of the poem appears now: it is the passing of time as measured by the whirr and chime of the city clocks.

In replying to the lover's romantic song, the clocks, too, have in store a few images of their own:

*'In the burrows of the Nightmare  
Where justice naked is,*

Far from relying on clichés, Auden seems to enjoy subverting standard allegories: Justice is naked, (one would rather expect Truth to be naked), and Time is said to cough when he sees the overconfident lovers, instead of devouring them, as Chronos in the standard myth would.

*Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss.*

This shift in the choice of attributes and attitudes corresponds to the change in human condition in the modern world. In the affluent, pacified, society of today, brutality has largely been replaced with solitude and boredom, suicide is far more common than murder, and death in battle more or less replaced by death in a road accident or from some pollution induced disease. In daily life, the prospect of death is remote and takes the form of an ill-defined anxiety. The accumulation of images: "burrows, "shadow", "leaks away", adds up to a global allegory of Time as some sort of slow moving, quiet and seemingly harmless, yet inexorable monster:

*In headaches and in worry  
Vaguely life leaks away...*

Time, like a rodent, eats life away unawares, and, despite being very slow and nearly imperceptible, the process will be over even before it has been noticed. Particularly striking to that effect the logically reversed order of adverbs in these lines:

*And time will have his fancy  
Tomorrow or today.*

The rhyming pattern of verse eight is worth noticing. In other stanzas, line two rhymes with line four, lines one and three being left without a match: XaYa / ZbWb etc... The rhyming line is two typographic lines. It follows that the rhyming of "worry" with "fancy" in:

*In headaches and in worry  
Vaguely life leaks away,  
And time will have his fancy  
Tomorrow or today.*

, or the last stanza:

*It was late, late in the evening,  
The lovers they were gone;  
The clocks had ceased their chiming.  
And the deep river ran on.*

show instances of internal rhyming, that is, a special case of assonance, reinforcing the rhythmical pattern at these crucial points of the narrative.

The lovers have grown silent, we won't hear them again, and maybe they have not even noticed the interruption. Maybe they are already gone. Beneath the whirring and chiming of the clocks we can more and more insistently hear the voice of the poet himself, asserting himself as the main character of the story. We now discover that the first half of the poem was nothing else than a long introduction to his own meditation of life and death. This was the real topic of the poem.

The next verse is a description of the effects of Time as a destroyer of everything human: human environment as symbolised by the fertile valley, human companionship and social life, as symbolised by the village dance, and individual achievements, as symbolised by the sportsman's performance:

*'Into many a green valley  
Drifts the appalling snow;  
Time breaks the threaded dances  
And the diver's brilliant bow.*

Snow under the form of the glacier –a symbolism that Auden is to use again a few lines further down- is a perfect allegory of the slow but inexorable operation of time: what is more harmless than a flake of snow, after all? Yet, accumulated along time and under the form of the glacier, it will slowly ('drift') yet inexorably crush all that stands in its way. To describe the feeling of helplessness experienced by humans confronted with the slowly drifting glacier, Auden resorts to one of the strongest words -'appalling'- that the English language possesses to refer to what is both terrible and unbelievable.

The next stanza shows a change in narrative style. Here we have an imperative: the poet is no longer describing. One might be tempted to say that he is now giving some kind of advice: a recipe to avoid or delay death is out of the question, though. What then? Actually, if we look at the actions he refers to, and the order in which they are set, we find that they are strangely organised once again:

*O plunge your hands in water,  
Plunge them in up to the wrist;  
Stare, stare in the basin  
And wonder what you've missed.*

We are not dealing here with action towards a result. For one thing, the author is talking to himself and for himself in the first place. Then, "plunge" –a real action- comes before "stare" –a less active one- which leads to "wonder" –a definitely passive attitude- whose result is not any kind of 'solution', but a renewed mood of melancholy. Action was but an attempt: it has failed, and with the last line we are back to the description of a self mesmerised by its own past, and engulfed in nostalgia.

We are back to the metaphoric description of distress. The basic experience allusively depicted in the next stanza is that of the lonely individual as trapped in the prison of his home and the prison of his own mind:

*The glacier knocks in the cupboard,  
The desert sighs in the bed,  
And the crack in the tea-cup opens  
A lane to the land of the dead...*

The spick-and-span but lonesome and lifeless kitchen, the empty bed for only one sleeper –or insomniac-, the absent-minded contemplation of an empty cup of tea generate dark brooding. Yet dark brooding is about a country of fulfilled expectations. Auden's references here are from the world of folk-tales and the series of fantastic happy-endings that he lists seem to echo the naive optimism of the lovers earlier on:

*Where the beggars raffle the bank-notes  
And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,  
And the Lily white Boy is a Roarer,  
And Jill goes down on her back.*

Yet we are dealing here with a mature and balanced form of optimism: a form of optimism which amounts to resignation, as the rest of the poem will develop. Distress will remain part of life: it is, in fact, the very medium that the reflecting mind explores in its search for a sense to life: the metaphoric 'water mirror' of verse ten is eventually given its real name and that name is distress:

*'O look, look in the mirror,  
O look in your distress;*

Distress, then, is not purely negative. It is only the unavoidable result of life itself for a limited, flawed, human being. It results from the limitations of existence -basically a good thing:

*Life remains a blessing  
Although you cannot bless.*

Auden's limited optimism, or resignation, which is the core message of the poem is stated in a gnomic form, that is, as a maxim. This passage, and the one that follows, another maxim are a new turning-point, and the climax of the poem:

*Stand, stand at the window  
As the tears scald and start;*

The reiterated use of repetition in these two stanzas is worth noticing. It applies to Auden's imperatives and gives them rhythmical insistence in prolongation of the insistent beat of the clocks earlier on. The human recipe for the good use of distress has overtaken and recovered the mechanical phrasing and dispiriting warning of the clocks. The human voice has won in the end, and we are back to the supremacy of love:

*You shall love your crooked neighbour  
With your crooked heart.'*

Yet the love we are dealing with here is not the self-seeking passion of the beginning. It is the Christian, universal love for fellow-creatures in general. In a final stanza of great beauty, Auden evokes the main protagonists of his poem once again, as for a final salute to the audience. He separates the winners of the argument from the losers:

*It was late, late in the evening,  
The lovers they were gone;  
The clocks had ceased their chiming,  
And the deep river ran on.*

The poet is still there: in spite of his sadness, or thanks to his sad meditation, he has outlasted both the lovers and the clocks. He is still by the river, an image of the everlasting flow of life, whose brimful abundance he once feared, and whose depth he has now learnt to like.

## 'As I walked out one Evening': exercise on a running commentary

The exercise is this: read the following commentary together with the poem itself and insert numbers referring to the lines in the poem that each remark bears upon.

The first verse of the poem is set at dusk. The first metaphor is very blunt in its syntax, and results in a very vivid depiction of the setting. One visualises a golden summer evening. Then, the scene changes for the dampness, darkness and cold of the river banks: there the lovers stand. One of them, the boy, one gathers, is in the middle of his love speech, a love song marked by extreme romanticism, and in sharp contrast with the immediate surroundings: the grim outskirts of the city. The boy's first line sets the mood and states the core belief of young loving. The following three stanzas are a depiction of youth's enthusiasm and mad romantic love, as expressed through daring images and foolish imaginations. The sixth stanza is a first turning point in the poem, with the discordant intervention of a very different voice. The clocks reply as clocks would, with a strict regularity of diction meant to evoke the very beat of a chronometer. Their opening statement makes up the most rhythmically regular passage in the poem, with a massive predominance of short vowels separated by simple, very energetic, plosive consonants. The main theme of the poem appears now: it is the passing of time as measured by the whirr and chime of the city clocks. In reproving response to the lover's romantic song, the clocks, too, have in store a few images of their own. Far from relying on clichés, Auden seems to enjoy subverting standard allegories: Justice is naked, (one would rather expect Truth to be naked), and Time is said to cough when he sees the overconfident lovers, instead of devouring them, as Chronos in the standard myth would. This shift in the choice of attributes and attitudes corresponds to the change in human condition in the modern world. In the affluent, pacified, society of today, brutality has largely been replaced with solitude and boredom, suicide is far more common than murder, and death in battle more or less replaced by death in a road accident or from some pollution induced disease. In daily life, the prospect of death is remote and takes the form of an ill-defined anxiety. The accumulation of images: "burrows", "shadow", "leaks away", adds up to a global allegory of Time as some sort of slow moving, quiet and seemingly harmless, yet inexorable monster: Time, like a rodent, eats life away unawares, and, despite being very slow and nearly imperceptible, the process will be over even before it has been noticed. Particularly striking to that effect the logically reversed order of adverbs in the last lines of the eighth stanza. The rhyming pattern of verse eight is worth noticing. In other stanzas, line two rhymes with line four, lines one and three being left without a match: XaYa / ZbWb etc... The rhyming line is two typographic lines. It follows that the rhyming of "worry" with "fancy", or 'evening' and 'chiming' in the last stanza are instances of internal rhyming, that is, a special case of assonance, reinforcing the rhythmical pattern at these crucial points of the narrative.

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## Questions

1. Examine the rhyming pattern of the poem. Give an example. Comment.
2. Comment on the simile in the first stanza.
3. Describe and justify the images taken from Nature in verses 7, 9 and 11.
4. Explain the symbolism of verse 10. Where is it used again?
5. Find an alliteration in verse 14.
6. Make explicit the philosophy of life implied by the gnomic statements in verse 13 and 14.