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An Explication of a Poem: W. H. Auden's "Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone"

by Scott Hixson

(English 1130)

Explication

W. H. Auden [Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone]

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 crepe 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 for ever: 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.

W. H. Auden's poem, "Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone" conveys the meaning of overwhelming grief, tragic loss, and an unrelenting pessimism best exemplified in the last lines, "For nothing now can ever come to any good." The tone of the poem is that of a melancholy sadness enforced by the internal rhyme scheme (aabb) and the melodic iambic pentameter used.

The title and first line of the poem demonstrate the author's inconsolable grief by commanding the audience to do something which is not possible, "Stop all the clocks." This reference to time could also be an allusion to the death and brevity of life which cause the author such agony. The verbs of the first three lines of the first stanza represent how the author wants to eliminate the distractions; clocks ticking, telephones ringing, dogs barking, pianos playing, of the day in order that everyone may mourn this death. These imperative verbs are all forbidding something and not until the mention of the coffin in line 4 do the verbs begin to be more allowing; "Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come."

The next stanza continues to develop the idea of public mourning. The author has been so deeply touched by such a personal loss that he feels the entire world should share in his grief. The subjects of this stanza; the aeroplane, the sky, the white necks of the public doves, and the traffic policemen, are not typically associated with death. However, by incorporating these things into an

elaborate funeral procession, the author emphasizes the need for public mourning. Lines 5 and 6 illustrate the importance of the death to the author, for he wants news of it spread across the sky where everyone on Earth can see it. Also emphasizing the relationship between the two is the capitalization of the phrase "He Is Dead" from line 6, in which the author tries to deify the deceased. The funeral procession described in lines 7 and 8 serves to further represent both the importance of the deceased and the grief caused by this death.

The third stanza, particularly lines 9, 10, and 11, again conveys the intimacy of the relationship between the author and the deceased. The author shows reverence for this man by using exaggerated metaphors to imply his importance to the author. Line 9, "He was my North, my South, my East and West," demonstrates the relationship between the two men and combined with the next line, "My working week and my Sunday rest," implies this relationship to be of a very intimate nature. This is echoed in line 12, "I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong." This can be interpreted to represent the speaker's ignorance toward an inevitable death. The author's love for this man is so all encompassing he describes him as the points of the globe. This love is so strong that the speaker believes it will last forever, not until the death of his companion was the realization made that love, like everything else, will come to an end.

The last stanza and in particular line 16 affirms the hopelessness of the poem. The motif of commanding verbs concludes in this stanza where the author serves to convey a purposeless life without the deceased. The readers are instructed to again perform extraordinary tasks in order that the author may mourn. Lines 13 and 14, "The stars are not wanted now: Put out every one: Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;" express the despair of the author. A world without the sun and moon would be void of everything, including life. This sentiment is echoed in the following line, "Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;" Both these hyperbolic metaphors are again intended to symbolize the aimless feelings of the author and the void left by the death of this man. By commanding the audience to dispel of the oceans and remove the forests of the world, the speaker shows both how meaningless life is without his lover and how the world would be able to equate with such a loss.

The pessimism of the poem is captured best in line 16, "For nothing now can ever come to any good." The death of this man has devastated the speaker in such a way that he feels both without purpose and unable to see any good in the world. This line concludes the poem and emphasizes the melancholy tone evident throughout. Like the death of his lover, the last line emphasizes the finality of life and an end void of purpose.

Works Cited

Auden, W. H. "Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone." *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. Shorter Ninth Edition. Eds. Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, and Kelly J. Mays. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. 609-610.