As I Walked Out One Evening

SUMMARY

The speaker recalls going out for a stroll in the city one evening and imagining all the crowds of people on the sidewalk as fields ripe grain, ready to be reaped.

Near the overflowing river, under a railway arch, the speaker hears a young lover singing, "Love lasts forever."

The singer says that they will continue to adore their beloved until all sorts of impossible things happen: until China and Africa collide, rivers hop over mountains, and salmon sing.

In fact, the singer's love will last until the end of the world, when (as predicted in the biblical book of Revelations) the ocean dries up and seven symbolic stars go flying around in the sky like geese.

The singer concludes that time will run as quickly as a startled rabbit from the sheer force of their love: the singer's beloved is the absolute most beautiful person ever to live, in the singer's eyes, and their love might as well be the first and best love that ever existed.

The speaker then hears all of the city's clocks beginning to sing their own response to this young lover. "Don't be fooled," the clocks say: "Nobody wins against Time."

The clocks warn that, down in the dark caverns of nightmares, where Justice sits naked, Time watches young lovers and goes "ahem" as they kiss, alerting them to its presence.

And the exhilaration of love doesn't last: worries and annoyance gradually eat away one's life, and Time and mortality always win out eventually.

Even fresh spring valleys, the clocks go on, fill up, shockingly, with snow. Time breaks up every dance and brings an end to the elegant curve of every diver's fall.

The clocks seem, now, to speak to everyone, telling all and sundry to wash their hands, gaze into the sink, and think about everything they've missed out on.

Every ordinary cupboard and bed, the clocks sing, contains a metaphorical frozen glacier or an empty desert, reminding people of mortality and loss—and even a cracked teacup can open the path to the underworld.

Down in this land of the dead, the clocks go on, everything feels meaningless, nonsensical, and corrupt: panhandlers hold auctions to sell the money they've collected, the murderous fairy-tale giant of "Jack and the Beanstalk" is strangely charming, the innocent "lily-white boy" from an old folk song is a noisy drunkard, and Jill from "Jack and Jill" is promiscuous.

Look in the mirror, the clocks tell whoever's listening: face up to your unhappiness over all these disappointments, and acknowledge that life is a gift, even when you're so dejected that you can't believe this.

Go and look out the window, the clocks go on, and feel yourself starting to cry hot tears: you have to go on trying to love your imperfect, fallible fellow people with your own imperfect, fallible heart.

By the time the clocks stopped singing, the speaker finishes, it was very late in the evening. The lovers had left, and the river flowed on just as it always did.

THEMES

THE POWER OF LOVE VS. THE POWER OF TIME

"As I Walked Out One Evening" suggests that love isn't a blissful escape from the world, but rather a difficult and worthy endeavor that people take on in spite of time, change, and mortality.

Out for a stroll one day, the poem's speaker overhears a debate between the personified forces of love and time. First, the speaker hears a young lover singing about their immortal passion: this singer will love their "dear," they declare, until "the salmon sing in the street." Then, the speaker hears all the "clocks" of the city countering that nothing is immortal: time conquers all, and an awareness of this haunting fact spoils not just delusions of eternal love, but a lot of everyday life. And yet, despite the fact that time always wins, the clocks go on, life remains a "blessing," and people must do their best to "love" each other even in a "crooked," imperfect, and impermanent world. By undermining airy wishful thinking about immortal loves, the poem makes a subtle case for a deeper, more difficult kind of love: a love of the world, its people, and its "blessings" that persists even in the face of death, disillusionment, and defeat.

Right from the start, the young lover's song of eternal passion sounds delusional. All around this lover are crowds of people that the speaker perceives as "fields of harvest wheat," ripe grain that's about to be cut down, perhaps by the Grim Reaper himself. The lover is also standing next to a river and a railway—both symbols of the unstoppable onward rush of time—at "evening," when the sun is setting and the day is ending.

But the lover ignores all of these reminders of mortality, too caught up in a fantasy that "Love has no ending" to see them. The images of the singer's beloved as the "Flower of the Ages," the loveliest person ever to live, suggest that this person is

living in a childish dreamworld, cut off from reality. Life and love might look beautiful and eternal in this fairy-tale land, the poem hints, but that's all an illusion.

When the clocks speak up and tell the lover that "you cannot conquer time," they bring such fantasies sharply to earth. In an ominous answering song, the clocks warn that not only does love not last forever, *nothing* does: "Time" is always lurking in the background to "cough[] when you would kiss." This realization can make everyday life feel pretty grim, empty, and disillusioning. Anyone who lives long enough, the poem suggests, will at some point stare gloomily into the bathroom sink and "wonder what [they've] missed," and see their youthful fantasies as mere shadows from the "land of the dead."

But that doesn't mean that people should give up on love or hope. Rather, the clocks declare, people must come to terms with mortality and disillusionment, learning to see life as a "blessing" even when they're too unhappy to "bless" it themselves, and to "love [their] crooked neighbour / With [their] crooked heart." In other words, everyone has to learn that love isn't a blissful, timeless escape from grim reality. Rather, it's a humble, tiring, eternal, and eminently worthwhile task—one that involves reckoning with death, imperfection, and disappointment, not fantasizing that they can be defeated.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-60

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

As I walked ...
... of harvest wheat.

The first lines of "As I Walked Out One Evening" plunge readers into a world where the ordinary and the fantastical interweave—that is, the world we live in.

As the poem begins, a speaker tells the tale of an evening stroll "down Bristol Street," an unremarkable road that runs through the English city of Birmingham. But the speaker describes this ordinary walk in the language of an old song: the words "As I walked out one evening" are a traditional ballad opener. Whatever happened as the speaker "walked out" on this perfectly normal evening, the reader senses, it's going to be a *tale*.

And almost immediately, the scene of the speaker's walk transforms. All at once:

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

This metaphor feels more like a metamorphosis! The image of the wheat fields appears so suddenly that it's as if the speaker has had a kind of epiphany, a lightning-quick realization. Seeing the "crowds" as "fields of harvest wheat," the speaker paints a picture of a vast expanse of faces, all similar as one wheat-stalk to another, all golden in the low "evening" light—and all ripe and ready to be "harvest[ed]." And only the Grim Reaper himself harvests humans.

This metaphor subtly shows that the speaker, looking over the crowds at sunset, has just realized two things at once:

- People are all more or less the same—all in the same "field" together, all dealing with the same problems.
- No one is ever too far from death.

In other words, this speaker's ballad will be a tale of the human condition. And by mingling images and styles from folk songs, fairy tales, and everyday life, the speaker will suggest that coming to terms with being alive means understanding how fantasy and reality interweave—and clash.

LINES 5-12

And down by ...
... in the street,

Strolling onward down Bristol Street, the speaker comes upon a curious sight: "down by the brimming river," "under an arch of the railway," a young lover is singing a song that sounds like a clever reply to the speaker's autumn-colored vision of mortality. Everyone who lives might be doomed to die—but "Love," the singer proclaims, "has no ending."

That's all very romantic. But everything around this lover suggests that it's also wrong. Both the "river" and the "railway" the lover stands beside, for instance, symbolically suggest the unstoppable onward flow of time—a journey that inevitably ends in death.

And listen to the way the speaker chooses to declare that this love is eternal:

> "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,

These nonsense images are meant to say, in essence: "I will only stop loving you when completely impossible things happen—that is, never!" But their very absurdity makes the lover sound so giddy as to be delusional. At least part of the lover is living in an imaginative fantasy world—a land of dreams. These repetitions make the lover sound a little crazed, too: notice the insistent anaphora and diacope (highlighted above).

Those repetitions are also musical, making this passage feel like a song within a song. The speaker has already begun the poem

with allusions to old ballads—in the words "As I walked out one evening," and in the singsong ABCB rhyme scheme and pulsing trimeter (that is, lines of three strong stresses apiece). Now, the lover's song continues in that pattern, and heightens it with plenty of harmonious sounds—the alliteration of "the salmon sing in the street," for instance.

All this music might invite readers to think about the *nature* of music—and the way that this song itself undermines the singer's claims that *anything* could be eternal! After all, music isn't music *without time*: change, a beat, and—like it or not—an eventual ending.

However, the poem's folk-song allusions also suggest that the singer (and the speaker) are dealing with *timeless* matters. Lovers *always* sing that their love is eternal, the poem's shape suggests, and they're always wrong. There's a paradox here!

LINES 13-20

"I'll love you ...
... of the world."

The lover's song goes on much as it began: with big claims of eternal love that undermine themselves through their very intensity.

Having vowed to love until "the salmon sing in the street," the lover starts a whole new round of outlandish claims. This love, the singer declares, will endure until the literal end of the universe.

Confidently proclaiming that this passion will burn on until the seas themselves are "folded and hung up to dry" like laundry and the "seven stars go squawking / Like geese about the sky," the lover makes a cheeky allusion to some grand source material: the biblical book of Revelations. These images of nature in a tumult draw on images from that apocalyptic vision, in which seven symbolic stars glitter in God's hand, and the ocean (along with the earth, the sky, and everything else) gets packed up for good.

The lover treats these awe-inspiring images with a lightness that again suggests that this person is giddy with love: even the idea of the world's end feels like a joke in the face of such passion. In other words, this lover might be getting a little cocky.

The next simile underlines that feeling. "The years," the lover blithely declares, will run like frightened "rabbits" from the sheer power of this love; time simply won't make any difference to the lover's feelings. In saying so, the lover doesn't seem to notice that these words have a double meaning. The years *will* "run like rabbits"—but not in fear. Instead, they'll *escape* the lover, quickly slipping away.

But the lover is clearly beyond any such ideas. To this person (and, the poem suggests, to many lovers before and since), love is perfect and eternal. The singer's beloved is the "Flower of the Ages" itself, the most beautiful blossom ever to live, and it's as if the two of them have discovered the "first love of the world" together—that is, both the first true love ever to exist, and the first-place, absolute best love there could be.

While the lover's song rather undermines itself, it's also lovely and poignant. Anyone who's been head-over-heels in love can confirm that it *does* feel a lot like one has discovered a great big shining eternal golden perfect truth. And again, the poem's musical sounds and ballad-like form suggest that there is something lasting about this feeling—just not in the way the lover means. The lover and beloved will inevitably change, and even more inevitably die. But people, like "fields of harvest wheat," are always the same: some other lover will one day sing the same song in the same place. Even the lover's naïvety is itself part of a grand old tradition.

But this is far from the poem's last word on the matter.

LINES 21-24

But all the ...
... cannot conquer Time.

After the lover brings his song to its exultant conclusion, a new voice enters the poem. Or rather, new *voices*: as if the speaker's song awoke them, "all the clocks in the city" suddenly spring to life, and begin to sing as one, like a Greek chorus.

This moment feels more than a little startling. The onomatopoeia of all those "**whirr**[ing]," "**chim**[ing]" clocks makes readers feel as if they're on the street next to the speaker—a street that's suddenly full of voices, coming from every window and every corner. (Just think how many hundreds of thousands of clocks there might be in a city!)

And all those voices are delivering a sobering message:

> "O let not **Time** deceive you,
> You **c**annot **c**onquer **Time**.

Even the alliterative /k/ sounds and the diacope on "Time" here seem to say: *tick-tock*. Time, the clocks warn, will win out over any love in the end. And Time isn't just an impersonal force, but a personified being, a "deceive[r]" and an unconquerable foe. Time might, in other words, trick lovers into believing that he (that is, this capital-T Time) is at the mercy of their love, that love can beat him—perhaps by making the years seem to "run like rabbits." (Time flies when you're having fun, as they say!) But he always gets his due in the end.

The clocks' song will go on to describe Time's many triumphs over humanity—and the disillusionments that, given enough Time, every living person will suffer, no matter how eternal they believe their love, hope, and joy to be.

Once again, the poem brings the fantastical and the ordinary together in the image of this clock chorus. Read in the light of the everyday world, the image of all the clocks in the city "chim[ing]" at once might merely suggest that it's just turned

7:00 and the clocks are striking the hour. But the speaker's dream-vision turns this normal moment into a confrontation with what it means to be human.

LINES 25-28

"In the burrows ...
... you would kiss.

As the clocks continue their song, the personified figure of Time begins to come into focus.

On the one hand, Time seems like a kind of god of the underworld. He lurks "in the burrows of the Nightmare," a dark, dank lair, far beneath the surface of waking life. Down in those depths, he keeps company with "Justice," who lies "naked"—a word that might suggest she's a kind of metaphorical "naked truth," another all-powerful figure, seen without any veils of illusion.

The "burrows of the Nightmare," then, are the places where people are forced to confront realities they'd rather ignore: time and consequences.

But perhaps the most sinister thing about this moment is the fact that Time isn't a monster or a murderer, lying toothily in wait. Instead, he sounds almost gentlemanly, a lord amused by the folly of humankind. Confident in his own absolute power, he doesn't need to make a show of force.

Listen to the sounds in these lines:

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

The combination of sibilant /s/, /sh/, and /z/ sounds and clipped alliterative /k/ sounds here feels both sinister and funny: those /k/ sounds break into this stanza's whispery texture just like Time's polite little cough.

And that droll "ahem" is all that it takes to spoil any kiss. Without making a big production of it, Time lightly reminds the unwary lover: *Of course, I'll win out in the end*.

LINES 29-32

"In headaches and ...
... To-morrow or to-day.

When the sudden awareness of Time interrupts one's dreamy romances, the clocks sing, the world starts to look a lot less like a fairy tale. Life isn't all kisses and embraces and fantasies: it's also boredom, aimlessness, and anxiety.

Listen to the sounds in these lines:

> "In headaches and in worry
> Vaguely life leaks away,

The drawn-out /l/ consonance and /ay/ assonance here make these lines feel dreary and drained as yet another "vague," fretful day.

These lines get at an acute anxiety: a sense that life is "leak[ing] away" on days like these, utterly wasted. An awareness of Time and his polite little cough might make a person feel especially unhappy after a day of "headaches" and "worry"—a day that doesn't live up to those times when one feels that one holds the "Flower of the Ages" in one's arms.

In other words, living in a world governed by Time means feeling anxious about mortality for all the obvious reasons: grief, the fear of oblivion, worries about an afterlife, and so on. But it also means feeling *disappointed*.

Again, Time seems unmoved by mortal melancholy. It's merely his casual "fancy" to bring everything to an end. "To-morrow or to-day," he'll do what he likes. And the movement of that line from "To-morrow" toward "to-day" reminds readers that their own time is always ticking down, always getting shorter. The unimaginable "to-morrow" when everything ends will one day be "to-day."

LINES 33-36

"Into many a ...
... diver's brilliant bow.

Now, the clocks take a wider view, expanding beyond Time's effect on day-to-day life and into his mastery over the whole world.

First, the clocks' song visits symbolic "green valley[s]"—fertile places of springy growth, suggesting youth and new life. But into all such valleys, the clocks caution, "the appalling snow" sooner or later "drifts": that is, the symbolic winter of old age and death always comes.

The choice of the word "appalling" here is a great example of the poem's tone. Already, this speaker's world feels both melancholy and mannerly. Time, remember, isn't presented as a demon or a robed god, but as an amused, cynical gentleman—who nevertheless has terrible power over the whole world. The word "appalling" is similarly double-sided:

- On the one hand, it feels like polite mid-century British hyperbole: *My dear, what appalling weather!*
- On the other hand, there truly is something "appalling" about mortality: it's genuinely shocking, genuinely disturbing.

In other words, the tone here again underlines the intersection of two worlds: the humdrum everyday and the terrifying absolute. Time and death are ordinary and around us all the time; time and death are vast, grand, cosmic forces.

"Appalling," indeed! But the closing lines of this stanza also hint at Time's more generative role: its relationship to beauty.

At first, Time's role here seems utterly destructive:

Time breaks the threaded dances
And the diver's brilliant bow.

But these lines also might encourage readers to ask: where would a dance or a dive be *without* Time? Dance, like music, needs movement and a beat—that is, it has to *keep time*. And a dive isn't a dive if the diver never hits the water.

In other words, even though these lines focus on the melancholy and anxiety of endings, Time's "fancy" isn't just destruction.

LINES 37-40

"O plunge your ...
... what you've missed.

The clocks now end their portrait of their master Time and turn back to the young lover, addressing him directly, telling him what to do in the face of his new, unhappy knowledge. And there's a feeling here that those clocks aren't just talking to the lover, but to anyone and everyone who happens to be listening: their message is equally applicable to all humanity.

"O plunge your hands in water," the clocks sing—an instruction that sounds, at first, like it might be part of some ritual purification, a ceremony for dealing with all the disappointment and grief of being a mortal in Time's world.

But then, the clocks' instructions get more mundane:

Stare, stare in the basin
And wonder what you've missed.

Now, the clocks are telling their listeners to do something that, they seem to suggest, everyone in the world will do at some point or another: pause in hand-washing to zone out over the "basin" (that is, the bathroom sink), thinking about all of life's lost possibilities and disillusionments. The epizeuxis of "stare, stare" evokes the intense, hollow-eyed gaze of a person coming to terms with their own limitations.

This is awfully specific! The particularity of this melancholy bathroom scene suggests that the poem's original speaker, the one who hears both the lover and the clocks singing, might be working some things out in their own mind here. The clocks might well be describing something that happened to the speaker this very evening, right before they "walked out." In other words: the clocks might be a voice for one side of the speaker's mind, and the lover a voice for the other. Perhaps romantic idealism and world-weary realism are duking it out in there.

But by ascribing this vivid, particular moment of grief to the universal voice of the clocks, the speaker also reminds readers that, truly, *everyone* has moments like these. Humanity, remember, is just a "field[] of harvest wheat," full of people who grow, feel, and die in much the same ways. Everyone, in one way or another, will eventually have to confront their own mortality over the bathroom sink—that is, in the course of their everyday life.

Note, too, that the clocks are *telling* listeners to go through this confrontation: "Stare, stare in the basin" is a command! There's something important and meaningful, they suggest, about recognizing one's sorrow—about refusing to live in a fantasy.

LINES 41-44

"The glacier knocks ...
... of the dead.

Staring grimly into the bathroom sink and "wonder[ing] what you've missed," the clocks go on, isn't just a one-off incident. Daily life is full of reminders that one's life will end, and that many of one's hopes and dreams will come to nothing.

The clocks make this point with a metaphorical image that would be right at home in a Surrealist painting:

"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.

Reminders of death and disappointment, these images suggest, haunt the most ordinary things. That "glacier" in the cupboard has an icy, death-like chill; that "desert" in the bed is a vast, lifeless waste; and that trifling little "crack in the tea-cup" makes it clear that everything shatters in the end.

All these reminders pop up in the places where one is trying to eat, sleep, and have a nice cup of tea—that is, places where one is doing the things one does every day, the things that mark out one's beat-by-beat march toward death. And what's more, they don't just sit there passively, waiting to be noticed: they actively "knock," "sigh," and "open" a terrible path.

Listen to the sounds in those last two lines:

And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

The /k/ consonance here feels both clipped and quiet, evoking both the sharp edges and the seeming insignificance of that little "crack in the tea-cup." Then, /l/ alliteration makes the terrible "lane to the land of the dead" stretch out long—and /d/ consonance echoes the thud of unwilling footsteps down that path.

LINES 45-48

"Where the beggars ...
... on her back.

Down in the "land of the dead" that one can reach even through a cracked teacup, the clocks sing, one might encounter all the

dreams of one's childhood—now as broken as the teacup itself.

At first, this stanza feels as nonsensical as the lover's earlier visions of squawking stars and singing salmon—especially in its first image, in which "beggars" try to "raffle the banknotes"—that is, to sell money for different money, a cycle of absurd, meaningless activity. In the "land of the dead," it seems, *value* doesn't exist.

But the rest of this stanza's images allude to fairy tales, folk songs, and nursery rhymes—all hopelessly corrupted:

- Jack—of "Jack and the Beanstalk" fame—now finds his foe, the murderous Giant, perfectly "enchanting" (another moment in which mannerly language has a sinister effect). Here, Jack seems to have allied himself with his enemy, perhaps in the same way that people grow up to do things they swore they'd never do.
- The "Lily-white Boy" of the old counting song "Green Grow the Rushes O"—an innocent child that some even imagine might be Christ himself—is nothing but a "Roarer," a rowdy drunk.
- Jill, who once went up the hill to fetch a pail of water, here "goes down on her back"—a pretty unromantic way to describe having sex! And it doesn't seem like Jill is especially enjoying herself at it.

In the "land of the dead," in other words, one doesn't only find dead souls, but dead dreams and dead innocence. Time doesn't just "break" the thread of life: it shatters illusions.

All of this is a round rejoinder to the lover's belief that he'll adore his beloved until the end of the universe itself. *Good luck*, the clocks seem to say all through their song: *even the dreams you had ten years ago are dead now*.

But that, the poem is about to conclude, doesn't mean that all of humanity ought to despair of love forever.

LINES 49-56

"O look, look ...
... your crooked heart."

Here at the poem's heart, the clocks return to the language they used earlier when they urged their listeners, "O plunge your hands in water" and "Stare, stare in the basin." Now, they have new commands: "O look, look in the mirror" and "O stand, stand at the window." The parallelism of these lines suggests that they're all part of the same process, all stages in the same urgent task.

First, the clocks urge whoever's listening to "look, look in the mirror"—an image that suggests the listener is still standing grimly over the "basin" in the bathroom. After confronting all their sorrow and their disillusionments, the clocks say, the listener will see their own "distress" on their reflected faces. But the clocks also have a new message now:

> Life remains a blessing
> Although you cannot bless.

Even when one can't even summon a single good feeling about the world, the clocks sing, "life remains a blessing." Deep down, under both airy fantasies of immortal love and the crushing reality of loss and disappointment, there's still some fundamental goodness—a "blessing" beneath it all.

Then, the clocks instruct the listener to turn from one pane of glass to another: from the "mirror" to the "window." Instead of looking inward, they must look outward—and see the outside world as a mirror, too, full of "crowds" of other people who are all suffering just the same griefs. Both one's own pain and the sight of the wide, suffering world, the clocks suggest, will make "the tears scald and start" in one's eyes. But perhaps these hot, sudden tears aren't only tears of grief.

The realization one must come to, through a long process of bringing dreams down to earth, confronting a disappointing reality, and seeing one's own condition as just like everyone else's, is this command:

> You shall love your crooked neighbour
> With your crooked heart."

These moving lines make an allusion to one of the two great commandments of the New Testament: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." But they also allude to an old nursery rhyme, "There was a crooked man." And it's the unlikely fusion of these allusions that brings the poem home.

Loving one's fellow person, these lines suggest, is *the* work of life: a task one can only take on when one has given up on flighty illusions of a soaring, eternal, romantic, wish-fulfilling kind of love. But it's also a task as old, familiar, simple, and comforting as a nursery rhyme—the very kind of nursery rhyme that seemed so hopelessly broken back in the "land of the dead." And it involves throwing oneself into the "crooked," imperfect, everyday world.

Real love, in other words, is a fusion of realism, sorrow, and hope. Loving means acknowledging that nothing lasts forever and nothing is perfect—and "blessing" life anyway.

LINES 57-60

It was late, ...
... river ran on.

In the final stanza, it's "late, late in the evening." The clocks stop "chiming," the lovers are "gone": the original speaker is left alone in a quiet street. In other words: just as the poem has been saying all along, Time is rushing right along, carrying the speaker with it.

And once again, Time is as necessary and benevolent as it is frightening. This poem has traced the speaker's profound

epiphany—their new understanding of the way that deep love demands a confrontation with all humanity's shared sorrows, failures, and disillusionments, not just indulgence in pleasures and fantasies. This new understanding has arrived through the song of *clocks*: in some sense, Time himself has taught the speaker this much.

Those singing clocks knew that this knowledge would make "the tears scald and start" in the speaker's eyes. In the quiet of this last stanza, the reader might well imagine the speaker brushing away a tear in Bristol Street.

Beside the speaker, as it ever does, the "deep river [runs] on." The speaker's new understanding of time and love is a lot like those symbolic waters: deep and continuous. This poem finally suggests, just as the young lover sang, that "Love has no ending"—just not in the sense the lover meant. All love ends in death: but the work of Love, like the work of Time, is deathless as an old song.

SYMBOLS

THE RIVER

The poem's "deep," "brimming" river is a symbol of life itself. Always flowing onward in the background, the river reflects the personified clocks' sober reminders that time conquers everything in the end: much like time, the river is never going to stop or turn back.

But the image of the river softens the clocks' grim images a bit, hinting that this constant flow is perfectly natural—and has its beauty, too.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "down by the brimming river"
- **Line 60:** "the deep river ran on"

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

In this poem, personification transforms time into Time: a calm, patient destroyer, lying in wait to bring an end to everything.

Time gets introduced here by a chorus of similarly personified clocks—"all the clocks in the city," in fact. As they "whirr and chime" their reply to the idealistic young lover, they seem like Time's cowed servants or messengers, warning anyone who cares to listen that—as they well know—"You cannot conquer Time."

The clocks go on to describe Time as a lurking presence who hangs out in the dark "burrows of the Nightmare" and "coughs" when young lovers are just about to "kiss." This personification casts Time as both a sinister figure and a curiously droll one: that little "ahem" of a cough makes Time sound as if he finds it pretty funny to interfere with lovers' pleasures. In fact, it's merely Time's "fancy" to bring an end to all human endeavor, "break[ing]" every dance and every dive. Time's amusement is humanity's destruction.

All this personification presents Time as a rather heartless fellow, toying with those who are "deceive[d]" into thinking they can cheat him. But the poem also hints that he's essential: one can't have either a dance or a dive without him, even if he also brings these lovely activities to an end.

And anyway, as the clocks say, Time is just a reality—a presence that everyone has to learn to live with. What's important, the clocks insist, is to "bless" life as best as one can in spite of the fact that Time always wins in the end.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-24:** "But all the clocks in the city / Began to whirr and chime: / "O let not Time deceive you, / You cannot conquer Time."
- **Lines 25-28:** ""In the burrows of the Nightmare / Where Justice naked is, / Time watches from the shadow / And coughs when you would kiss."
- **Lines 31-32:** "And Time will have his fancy / To-morrow or to-day."
- **Lines 35-36:** "Time breaks the threaded dances / And the diver's brilliant bow."

ALLUSION

The poem's first allusion is a reference to "Bristol Street"—a perfectly ordinary street in Birmingham, Auden's hometown in the English Midlands. But even regular old Bristol Street, this poem's later allusions will suggest, is a stage for both fantasies and for confrontations with the great forces of time and death. In this poem, daydreams and terrible realities collide in the everyday world.

The poem makes that point pretty emphatically when the speaker overhears a young lover's song. Completely besotted, this lover is certain that such passion will last:

> [...] till the ocean
> Is folded and hung up to dry
> And the seven stars go squawking
> Like geese about the sky.

This absurd passage makes a pretty grand allusion: its images come from the biblical book of Revelation, in which the sea dries up and seven symbolic stars flicker in God's hand. (The "seven stars" might also be an allusion to Pleiades, a constellation also called the "Seven Sisters.") This young lover, in other words, is certain that only the Apocalypse itself could

bring an end to their love.

And the lover's flippant portrait of that apocalypse as a kind of countryside laundry day suggests just how delusional this person is: not only does this singer think their love will only end when the world does, they don't take even the idea of the end of the world seriously. In other words: swept up in love, the singer doesn't really believe in death, even though death is life's sole certainty.

The poem's other major flavor of allusion touches on a similar idea of childlike innocence—and its loss. As the clocks sing their reply to the lover, they refer to all sorts of fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and folk songs, from "Jack and the Beanstalk" to "Green Grow the Rushes O." But each of these references to childhood stories and songs suggests disillusionment: Jack starts to find the murderous giant "enchanting," the innocent "lily-white boy" becomes a rowdy drunk, and the "Jill" who once went up the hill to fetch a pail of water starts sleeping around joylessly. Nothing, these allusions suggest, stays hopeful and pure forever.

But the clocks' final allusion clings to a strange kind of hope. Borrowing the language of one of the two Great Commandments ("Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself") and of the nursery rhyme "There was a crooked man," the clocks urge even disillusioned adults to go on trying to love, however imperfectly. Life in the real world is hopelessly flawed—but even a "crooked" love is still worth striving for.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "As I walked out one evening,"
- **Line 2:** " Walking down Bristol Street,"
- **Lines 13-16:** ""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."
- **Lines 46-48:** " And the Giant is enchanting to Jack, / And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer, / And Jill goes down on her back."
- **Lines 55-56:** "You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart.""

SIMILE

Both of the poem's similes appear in the lover's song.

First, the lover imagines that their love will last until:

> [...] the seven stars go squawking
> Like geese about the sky.

This simile makes a cosmic image into a silly one. Those "seven stars" might either be the Pleiades, a constellation sometimes called the "Seven Sisters," or the seven symbolic stars that appear in the biblical book of Revelation. Either way, it's a big allusion, conjuring up infinite space or the apocalypse itself. So when the lover imagines that these awe-inspiring "seven stars" will flap around "squawking" like geese before he'll stop loving, they're suggesting that it's absurd to think their love will ever end.

But the lover's flippancy with these grand images also suggests that they might be more than a little naïve, unable to confront the realities that the stars and the Apocalypse suggest: that is, that time and space stretch out infinitely around any person's little life, and everything has an "ending."

The lover's naïvety becomes even clearer in the poem's next simile:

> "The years shall run like rabbits,
> For in my arms I hold
> The Flower of the Ages,

It seems as if the lover means that the years will flee in rabbity terror before the sheer force of their (the lover's) passion. Time, the lover suggests, simply can't stand up to their adoration for the "Flower of the Ages," a.k.a. this person's utterly wonderful beloved: their love is eternal. But in making this impossible claim, the lover accidentally introduces a double meaning. The years certainly *will* run as fast as rabbits, but not in the sense the lover means. Rather, those years will be gone before this person knows it—and their love, inevitably, will change (and likely die) over time.

The lover's similes thus cast this person as someone living in beautiful, doomed fantasy.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "And the seven stars go squawking / Like geese about the sky."
- **Line 17:** ""The years shall run like rabbits,"

METAPHOR

Metaphors make the poem's reflections on time, love, and disappointment feel rich and immediate.

The poem's first metaphor seems to come out of nowhere:

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

The first three lines of this stanza seem to be describing a perfectly ordinary evening stroll. But all at once, a metaphor transforms the everyday "crowds" into "fields of harvest wheat." This image conjures up, not just a picture of multitudes of people, but a whole atmosphere: those golden "fields" evoke warm sunset light hitting all those faces.

Crucially, this metaphor also presents these wheat-like crowds as ripe and ready for the "harvest": in other words, ready for the Grim Reaper to mow them right down! This metaphor thus creates both a vivid image of a crowd at sunset and a reminder that life doesn't go on forever.

But that idea is lost on the young lover who sings that they hold "the Flower of the Ages" in their arms. The lover means, by this metaphor, to compliment their beloved, who seems not just as beautiful as a flower, but *eternally* beautiful, lasting through all the "ages." Sadly for these lovers, flowers are an ancient symbol of youth, love, and beauty for a reason: in reality, time and death wither them all.

The poem doubles down on these themes of transience and mortality in this surrealistic passage of metaphor:

> "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.

Here, the "glacier," the "desert," and the "lane to the land of the dead" are all metaphors for the grim realizations that open up as one looks around one's ordinary home: even the "cupboard," the "bed," and the cracked "tea-cup" can feel like they contain reminders of the chill, the barrenness, and the inevitability of death.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The crowds upon the pavement / Were fields of harvest wheat."
- **Lines 18-19:** " For in my arms I hold / The Flower of the Ages,"
- **Lines 41-44:** ""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."

REPETITION

Different forms of repetition make this poem feel urgent and poignant.

For instance, take a look at the polyptoton in the first two lines:

> As I **walked** out one evening,
> **Walking** down Bristol Street,

The first line of the poem already sounds like a ballad: countless folk songs start with exactly these words. The repetition of "**walk**ed" and "**walk**ing" strengthens that musical feeling, suggesting that the speaker is about to sing a timeless song.

But then, it's not the speaker but the overheard lover who starts to sing. This song returns over and over to the word "love," and more specifically to the words "I'll love you." This insistent anaphora and diacope make the singer sound fervently focused on their love—but they also might hint that all these passionate declarations are built on shaky ground. After all, one doesn't need to insist on something that's matter-of-factly true!

When "all the clocks in the city" sing their reply to this lover, their own repetitions most often return to the word "Time"—whether in the diacope of "O let not **Time** deceive you / You cannot conquer **Time**" or in the anaphora of lines that describe what time does: "**Time** watches from the shadow," "**Time** breaks the threaded dances," "**Time** will have his fancy." These repetitions make Time feel not just powerful, but ever-present, lurking in the background of all the lover's wishful thinking.

The clocks also use anaphora to evoke the total destruction of childhood fantasies in the "land of the dead":

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

With every "and," another beloved fairy-tale figure falls to corruption.

But repetitions also help the clocks to deliver the poem's most moving lines. As the clocks exhort the lover (and anyone else who happens to be listening) to "**look**, **look** in the mirror" and "**stand**, **stand** at the window," their epizeuxis demands attention for two major messages:

- "Life remains a **blessing** / Although you cannot **bless**" (which uses more polyptoton);
- and "You shall love your **crooked** neighbor with your **crooked** heart (which uses more diacope).

In these lines, the clocks declare that love is life's central work—not because love fixes everything, but because love means embracing the real, imperfect world, even when it's hard.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "walked"
- **Line 2:** "Walking"
- **Line 9:** ""I'll love you, dear, I'll love you"
- **Line 13:** ""I'll love you"
- **Line 23:** "Time"
- **Line 24:** "Time"
- **Line 27:** "Time watches"
- **Line 31:** "Time will have"
- **Line 35:** "Time breaks"
- **Line 46:** "And"

- **Line 47:** "And"
- **Line 48:** "And"
- **Line 49:** "look, look"
- **Line 50:** "look"
- **Line 51:** "blessing"
- **Line 52:** "bless"
- **Line 53:** "stand, stand"
- **Lines 55-56:** "You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart.""
- **Line 57:** "late, late"

ALLITERATION

Punchy alliteration gives this poem a ringing, singsong sound that fits in with its allusions to folk songs and nursery rhymes.

For instance, when the young lover imagines that their love will last until "the salmon sing in the street," the "seven stars go squawking / Like geese about the sky," and the "years run like rabbits," this alliteration makes the nonsense images sound like they came straight out of a nursery rhyme—an effect that subtly underlines the lover's naïvety.

Later on, alliteration makes important lines land with extra force. The singing clocks, for instance, use the same hard /k/ sound twice to deliver the unwelcome news that "you cannot conquer Time," and that Time lurks in the shadows "and coughs when you would kiss." That sharp /k/ slices through the lover's illusions like a razor through an artery.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "salmon sing," "street"
- **Line 15:** "seven stars," "squawking"
- **Line 16:** "sky"
- **Line 17:** "run," "rabbits"
- **Line 24:** "cannot conquer"
- **Line 28:** "coughs," "kiss"
- **Line 30:** "life leaks"
- **Line 31:** "Time"
- **Line 32:** "To-morrow," "to-day"
- **Line 35:** "dances"
- **Line 36:** "diver's," "brilliant bow"
- **Line 43:** "crack," "cup"
- **Line 44:** "lane," "land"
- **Line 45:** "beggars," "banknotes"
- **Line 53:** "stand," "stand"
- **Line 54:** "scald," "start"
- **Line 57:** "late," "late"
- **Line 58:** "lovers"
- **Line 60:** "river ran"

ASSONANCE

Occasional assonance gives this poem flickers of music.

For instance, when the speaker sees the "crowds" as "fields of harvest wheat," that luxuriously long /ee/ assonance suggests that those crowds stretch out for miles and miles—and draws attention to the speaker's hint that every person in the crowd will one day be "harvest[ed]" by the Grim Reaper himself.

And listen to this assonant passage:

> "In headaches and in worry
> Vaguely life leaks away,

Those drawn-out /ay/ sounds evoke just what these lines describe: the way that time and hope drain gradually away as life stretches on.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "fields," "wheat"
- **Line 5:** "brimming river"
- **Line 14:** "hung up"
- **Line 29:** "headaches"
- **Line 30:** "Vaguely," "away"
- **Line 31:** "have," "fancy"
- **Line 45:** "raffle," "banknotes"
- **Line 46:** "enchanting," "Jack"
- **Line 59:** "ceased"
- **Line 60:** "deep"

CONSONANCE

Subtler than the poem's emphatic alliteration, consonance nevertheless shapes the speaker's voice, giving this poem its exact, alert tone.

For instance, listen to the consonance in the first stanza:

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

The speaker's metaphor could sound romantic. But the clipped /t/ and precise /p/ *sounds* make the speaker's voice feel, not fanciful, but brisk and observant. The speaker's vision thus ends up seeming oddly matter-of-fact: seeing everyone as soon-to-be-reaped grain, the speaker's crisp voice suggests, is just plain accurate.

Later on, consonance helps to evoke a bleak, surrealist vision:

> "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 consonant sounds in each of these lines mirror what they

describe:

- The hard /k/ of that glacier "knock[ing]" at a "cupboard" door and the sharp "crack in the tea-cup";
- the sibilant sighs of the desert sands;
- and the thudding finality of the /d/ sounds in the" land of the dead."

The consonance here thus helps readers to sink into the poem's atmosphere—and to get a sense of the speaker's clear-eyed perspective on time, love, and mortality.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Bristol Street"
- **Line 3:** "pavement"
- **Line 4:** "harvest wheat"
- **Line 5:** "brimming river"
- **Line 7:** "Under," "arch," "railway"
- **Line 12:** "salmon sing," "street"
- **Line 15:** "seven stars," "squawking"
- **Line 16:** "geese," "sky"
- **Line 17:** "run," "rabbits"
- **Line 19:** "Flower"
- **Line 20:** "first love"
- **Line 24:** "cannot conquer"
- **Line 26:** "Justice," "is"
- **Line 28:** "coughs," "kiss"
- **Line 29:** "headaches"
- **Line 30:** "Vaguely life leaks"
- **Line 33:** "valley"
- **Line 34:** "appalling"
- **Line 35:** "threaded dances"
- **Line 36:** "diver's," "brilliant bow"
- **Line 40:** "wonder what"
- **Line 41:** "knocks," "cupboard"
- **Line 42:** "desert sighs"
- **Line 43:** "crack," "tea-cup," "opens"
- **Line 44:** "land," "dead"
- **Line 45:** "beggars," "banknotes"
- **Line 46:** "Giant," "enchanting," "Jack"
- **Line 47:** "Lily"
- **Line 48:** "Jill"
- **Line 53:** "stand, stand"
- **Line 54:** "tears," "scald," "start"
- **Line 60:** "river ran"

VOCABULARY

Brimming (Lines 5-6) - Full almost to overflowing.

The Flower of the Ages (Lines 18-19) - This official-sounding title simply suggests that the singer's beloved is the most beautiful person ever to live.

Burrows (Line 25) - Tunnels, folds.

The diver's brilliant bow (Lines 35-36) - That is, the perfect arc divers makes with their bodies.

Jack (Line 46) - An allusion to Jack from the fairytale "Jack and the Beanstalk."

Roarer (Line 47) - A noisy drunkard.

The Lily-white Boy (Line 47) - An allusion to "Green Grow the Rushes O," an old folk song. Some speculate that the "lily-white boys" in the song are Jesus and John the Baptist.

Jill (Line 48) - An allusion to Jill from the famous nursery rhyme "Jack and Jill."

Scald (Line 54) - Burn with a hot liquid.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"As I Walked Out One Evening" is built like a long ballad: it uses fifteen four-line stanzas, or quatrains, with a singsong rhyme scheme and a deceptively simple meter.

This song-like form fits the poem's events. In the poem, the speaker first overhears a man singing about his (supposedly) immortal love, then hears "all the clocks in the city" whirring and chiming their way through a clever reply: "O let not Time deceive you, / You cannot conquer time," they sing.

Because the speaker's own voice takes the same simple, musical form as the songs of the lover and the clocks, the whole poem ends up feeling like an old folk song—a tale not just as old as time, but *about* time. Learning that time breaks down everyone and everything, the poem's simple form suggests, is a fundamental part of being a person.

METER

The meter in "As I Walked Out One Evening" fits right in with the poem's allusions to ballads and nursery rhymes. Like a lot of those old forms, this poem uses trimeter, a meter in which each line has three strong stresses, as in line 49:

O look, look in the mirror

While each line has three stressed beats, for the most part, those beats don't always fall in the same pattern; the poem doesn't stick to a single kind of metrical foot throughout. This accentual meter means the poem can build all sorts of different rhythms around those three constant beats. This is a "crooked" meter to describe a "crooked" world!

However, a lot of the poem does fall into the rhythm of iambic trimeter, a meter in which each line uses three iambs—metrical feet that go da-DUM, as in lines 3-4:

The crowds | upon | the pavement
Were fields | of har- | vest wheat.

But listen to the different rhythm of line 44:

A lane | to the land | of the dead.

Here, the poem uses both iambs and anapests (feet that go da-da-DUM) to create a rumbling, urgent rhythm, like wheels rolling inexorably down that frightening "lane."

RHYME SCHEME

"As I Walked Out One Evening" uses a musical ABCB rhyme scheme. In other words, the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme, but the first and third don't:

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

This familiar old pattern makes the poem sound like a ballad, a folk song, or a nursery rhyme—an effect that contrasts with the poem's sophisticated language and its very 20th-century images of staring gloomily into the bathroom sink in a town full of crowds and railway bridges.

This choice of a simple pattern of rhyme to communicate complex (and, paradoxically, timeless) ideas about time reflects the poem's world-weary tenderness. Trying to love a disappointing world with one's "crooked heart," this rhyme scheme suggests, is an ancient and universal task, no matter what modern trappings it comes disguised in.

SPEAKER

The speaker doesn't clearly identify themselves in this poem. In fact, most of what the speaker does is listen: first to a young lover singing under a railway bridge, then to the city's "clocks," which counter the lover's idealism with reminders of mortality and disappointment.

But the *way* the speaker listens—and the words assigned to the clocks—suggest that this speaker might be feeling rather disillusioned and dejected. When the clocks instruct anyone listening to stand gloomily over the bathroom sink and "wonder what you've missed," the image is so very specific that it seems likely the speaker must sometimes do just this.

One might even read the poem as a dialogue between two parts of the speaker's own mind: an idealistic (and perhaps foolish) younger side, and a wearier, wiser, older side. In any case, keeping the speaker anonymous reflects the poem's idea that time comes for *everyone*.

SETTING

"As I Walked Out One Evening" is set at night on "Bristol Street"—an unremarkable road in Birmingham, the city where Auden spent most of his childhood. "Crowd[ed]" and industrial, sliced through by a "railway" bridge, Bristol Street is a pretty mundane setting. But its sheer urban normality is all part of the speaker's point. Ordinary life, with all its disappointments, worries, and wearinesses, is the stage upon which big questions of love, time, and death play out. The poem's setting suggests that the work of "lov[ing] your crooked neighbor / With your crooked heart" falls to everyone, everywhere, on every normal street.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) first published "As I Walked Out One Evening" in his 1940 collection *Another Time*. Auden 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 metered poetry for free verse. Instead, Auden was a great proponent of old poetic forms, plain and approachable language, and light verse: poetry, he believed, didn't have to be highfalutin to be serious and meaningful. His own poems often deal with death and suffering in a voice that's equal parts crisp, witty, and melancholic. But he also delighted in writing everything from pantoums to villanelles to scandalous limericks.

Auden was particularly interested in music, and wrote not only poems that responded to musical traditions (like this one, 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 famous appearances in pop culture.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Auden published "As I Walked Out One Evening" in 1940, he would have had every reason to feel world-weary, disillusioned, and heartbroken. By this time, World War II was in full swing, and all sorts of comfortable old certainties about

the order of the world were in doubt. Many of Auden's poems from the war years, "As I Walked Out One Evening" included, grapple with the world's weaknesses and failings—and urge that people strive, in spite and because of those failings, to love each other.

Auden was horrified when war broke out in 1939, and wrote one of his most famous poems in response to the news (though he himself didn't have an especially high opinion of this poem in later years). By this time, he'd already left England for the U.S.—a move that some saw as a betrayal, though in fact Auden volunteered to return to England and join the army if he was needed. (The military politely turned him down: he was a little too old and untrained.) By leaving when he did, he just missed the Blitz, the infamous German bombing campaign that killed thousands of civilians and destroyed countless buildings all across the UK.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Auden's Influence — Read an appreciation of Auden that discusses his lasting influence. (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/26/how-i-fell-in-love-with-wh-auden-again-and-again)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Auden's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- Auden on Film — Watch footage of Auden reciting some of his light verse (and enjoy both his sense of humor and his wonderfully craggy face). (https://youtu.be/wezbEBxA6X4)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Auden himself reading this poem out loud. (https://youtu.be/0q__Z185H8I)
- Auden and Music — Visit the British Library's website to learn more about how popular music influenced Auden's poetry—including this poem, which was originally titled "Song." (https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/auden-and-song)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- 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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