



AP[®] English Literature 2002 Sample Student Responses Form B

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Why do pain and suffering exist? Is there a purpose behind humanity's existence? Questions asked as many times as the sun has risen, yet never truly answered to man's satisfaction. W.H. Auden pits the blame on Time, that ever-watching and endlessly silent being, personified as holding the secrets, the keys of understanding, yet coldly and distantly holding its tongue content to say "I told you so." In Auden's villanelle "If I Could Tell You," formal elements of poetry, including end rhyme and strict iambic pentameter, as well as the extensive repetition of words characteristic of the villanelle, create a certain coldness and lack of emotion that characterizes Time's behavior.

"Time will say nothing but I told you so," a phrase repeated in several forms throughout the poem, reveals the speaker's almost angry entreaty for answers. He says "If I could tell you I would let you know," another repeated phrase, evidence of the speaker's desire to reveal whatever universal truths he might glean from time to the rest of humanity. Lines four and five exhibit similar syntax and describe scenes of disorder: weeping during a clown's performance and a chaotic, stumbling dance. Yet the third line repeats and mirrors the first: Time says nothing but I told you so. Pain and disorder exist, yet man is left in the dark as to their purpose, reminded almost mockingly by Time that the ways of the world, like the strict structure of the poem, are

all but set in stone. Line seven reveals that the speaker does not believe in predestination, yet due to his love for his fellow man would give all to know the rules of existence. The third line of the third stanza, however, reminds of the sheer ignorance of these rules the speaker has.

There must be a reason for suffering and death. Auden uses the metaphors of decaying leaves and blinding winds, as well as more parallel syntax, in lines ten and eleven as examples of suffering and death, and the speaker is sure that "reasons" must exist. Time however, must keep to its pattern, and "say nothing but I told you so." A glimmer of hope appears in stanza five, changing the mood of the poem slightly. The speaker conjectures that nature might actually intend for pain to end, that the "roses really want to grow." Perhaps this affirmation that the universe shares in man's hopes for understanding and truth is enough to satiate ~~man's~~ his curiosity. However, the affirmation never arrives: "If I could tell you, I would let you know."

Auden breaks from the three-line stanza structure in the sixth stanza, adding a fourth line. This effectively illustrates the chaos of "lions all [getting] up and [going]" and "brooks and soldiers [running] away." In times of disorder, when three lines become four and man is in desperate need of answers, one question dominates: "Will time say nothing but I told you so?" Auden seems to suggest, by breaking the strict

structural rules imposed in the previous stanzas, yet still repeating the two phrases mirrored throughout the poem, in the last stanza, that no matter what boundaries are breached, the secrets of existence will be forever guarded, and never revealed.

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The strict poetic rules in W.H. Auden's "If I Could Tell You" work to emphasize the poem's underlying motif of man's ultimate submission to time's enigmas. The formal use of rhyme, meter and repetition provide the rigid backbone for this powerful poem.

Throughout the poem (except for a slight variation in the last stanza) a strict rhyme scheme of ABA is maintained. This contributes to the poem's meaning by continually building up to, and placing emphasis on, two recurring lines, "Time will say nothing but I told you so," and "if I could tell you I would let you know." The repetition of these two lines, and the rhyme-scheme based predictability of their placement parallels Auden's discourse on life. These two lines speak of man's vulnerability to the will of time, and by repeating them and making them predictable, Auden relates that the only certainty man can have is in the inherent uncertainty of the future. The first two lines of each stanza describe some aspect of existence, and man's self-created institutions of importance and man's pursuit of truth is a discovery of 'where the winds come from' or 'why do roses grow' but each stanza is brought back to the absolute truth: that despite man's intellect, the future is never foreseeable. The poem's ~~constant~~ consistent meter also contributes to the poem's meaning.

by drawing emphasis to the two repeated lines. The meter parallels life in that it appears routine, comprehensible and rhythmic, but at life's core lies the certainty that "Time will say nothing but I told you so," and ~~the~~ future's fortune controls the existence of man.

The formal elements of rhyme, meter and repetition work to elaborate Auden's meaning by emphasizing that man is always subject to times incomprehensible intentions-

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The purpose of "If I could tell you" by W.H. Auden is to demonstrate the theme that time passes by without revealing the mysteries of life directed at general audiences who might ponder vainly about the meaning of things, ~~the~~ who may wonder why time has the power to change things. The strategy that Auden used in order to convey this message of his is to write a 19-line poem with 5 stanzas consisting of three lines ~~and~~ while the final 6th stanza being a quatrain. The rules of poetry are also strictly used, as the poem follows the rhyme scheme aba/bab/aba/bab/aba/abab, and is written throughout in iambic pentameter. Also, ~~the use of~~ repetition is significantly used, not only in repetition of rhyme schemes, but also in ~~the~~ repetitions of lines.

Firstly, as stated earlier, the theme of the poem is that time passes by without sharing the mysteries of life. It is known that ~~the~~ Time, who is personified in this poem (line 1, "Time will say nothing but I told you so"), has the answers from line 2, "Time only knows the price we have to pay". However, lines 1 and 3 ("If I could tell you I would let you know") imply that people don't know what ~~the~~ Time knows and won't ever in their lifetime. This point is enforced throughout the poem, as the lines "Time will say nothing but I told you so" and "If I could tell you I would let you know" are repeated throughout the poem, both first appearing together in stanza 1 ~~is~~ and not appearing together again until stanza

6, while in between, they alternate from one stanza to the next (line 1 repeats ~~at~~ at the end of stanzas 2 (line 6), and 4 (line 12) and line 3 repeats at the end of stanzas 3 (line 9) and 5 (line 15)). Not only do lines repeat in an alternating fashion, but the rhyme scheme also repeats: the first stanza follows the pattern aba while the second stanza follows bab (the ~~3rd~~ 3rd stanzas following that of stanza 1, and the ~~4th~~ 4th stanza following that of stanza 2). The objective of the repetition is to enforce the fact that neither the speaker of the poem, nor anyone else, knows the answers to why certain things occur in life. It seems to be something not within the human realm to understand but one in which the abstract "Time" could. The ~~rules~~ rules that applied to the whole poem restrict it, ~~and~~ ~~present~~ thus illustrating the limit of knowledge on the part of the humans. Therefore, it is not just the words presented in the poem, but the whole structure of it as well that ties together the meaning of it.

As seen, ~~and~~ Auden ~~is~~ conveys the message in his poem ~~by~~ through all of its elements. He does not deviate until the last stanza, where he adds in the extra line and rhyme scheme, and uses line 1 to be a question in line 18 "Will Time say nothing but I told you so?". In any case, the answer given in the last line of the poem presents no answer at all, again demonstrating the theme of the poem ("If I could tell you, I would let you know", line 19).