

Love is a theme long  
explored by poets  
whether it is love won  
or lost, unrequited...

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Love poetry is one of the oldest and most used forms of verse, from Homer to Shakespeare, love has always been a central interest to the literarily-inclined. These poems take a wide variety of forms and features, and even subject matter, some focusing on the beauty of youthful love, the epic qualities of heroic love, or the quiet love between close friends. In “Funeral Blues” by Wystan Hugh Auden and “When You Are Old” by William Butler Yeats, two great poets explore the waning and collapse of love in old age and death.

Both of these poems focus on the way love changes in old age. “Funeral Blues” talks about how the extinguishing of one’s love in death seems to extinguish everything else in life, how one cannot imagine the world continuing when one’s beloved has died. “When You Are Old” takes a slightly different track, focusing on the wide variety of loves one experiences throughout one’s life, either “false or true” (l. 6) and from a wide variety of people. But this poem also contains a touch of the triste, asking the subject to remember how “Love fled” to be lost “among the stars,” which could either refer to an unrequited love (for example, in the subject’s youth) or losing one’s love “among the stars” through their death (l. 10-11).

One of the most interesting things about these poems is that they both adhere to a very strict rhyme scheme that they do not vary in the slightest throughout. Auden’s rhyme scheme is perhaps much more obvious, a simple A B A B pattern which draws the reader’s attention to itself, as opposed to Yeats’s more subtle A B B A which hits the reader a bit less forcefully.

Auden’s rhyme scheme, by being so obvious, somewhat removes the

speaker of the poem from its events. Rhyme, like any artifice takes time and energy to create, and thus makes its creator seem in control of their faculties and at the peak of their art. This, however, jars somewhat with aspects of the poem that make the pain of death seem immediate to the speaker.

Firstly, the speaker uses phrases like “ The stars are not wanted now” (emphasis mine) which create immediacy and make the reader think that the sorrow has just befallen the speaker (l. 13). Secondly, the speaker uses first person, “ I thought that love would last forever, I was wrong” which emphasizes that the speaker is indeed the person who has suffered the loss. This jarring contrast between the artifice of rhyme and the immediacy of pain seems somewhat problematic in this poem.

Yeats’s poem, however, uses rhyme to much greater effect. By placing the poem’s subject about old age, which is inherently retrospective, and making the poem almost sound like a letter addressed to its subject (by frequently using the second person) makes the artifice of rhyme seem appropriate to a well thought out and pre-thought piece of work. It also uses visual imagery to great effect, creating a place for all of the action to happen “ nodding by the fire” and constantly reminding the reader of this place all creates a visual imagery that the audience can connect to. This potent imagery grounds the audience and lets them create a potent image in their own head, perhaps of a loved one in old age or of any other image, which incredibly strengthens the poignancy of the poem.

Rhyme can be a fundamental part of any poem, but it must be used correctly to actually achieve full effects. While Auden is able to use rhyme to make a

aurally compelling poem, the artifice of the rhyme creates a mentally jarring effect in the reader. It also ties in well to the title of the poem's title, evoking a bluesy song through rhyme, but this is till probably not worth the mentally jarring effect. Yeats, however, uses rhyme to much greater impact to complete an internally coherent poem about the loss of love through age.