

W. H. Auden in the movies :
a consideration of how successfully poems
can be incorporated in films

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This paper is part of a larger project investigating the use of poems in films. The earliest film I have found which makes use of a poem is the silent film, "Enoch Arden", of 1911, based on Lord Alfred Tennyson's eponymous poem; the most recent is 2003's "Sylvia", which, in dealing with the relationship between the poets Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, draws upon their poetry. There is a great variety of films in which poems appear. They range from art house films to blockbusters. Perhaps predictably most of these films are romances, but poems are also to be found in horror and comedy films. Poetry in films can consist of a one line excerpt, or the quotation of a whole poem, or the film itself may be based on a poem. Poetry is one of the oldest of the arts, and film one of the newest, and the incorporation of the former in the latter by film directors and scriptwriters seems to be done for various reasons, and is successful to varying degrees.

With so many poems in films to choose from, there were three reasons to choose films featuring poems by Wystan Hugh Auden, more usually known as W. H. Auden. Firstly, Auden is the only poet I know to have written poetry specifically for films. Secondly, his poems, and the films in which they appear, have a successful symbiotic relationship. Thirdly, Auden, who lived from 1907 until 1973, was a prescient writer, and thus his work continues to be found relevant by readers of the twenty-first century. He was, for example, much quoted in newspaper commentaries and on the internet¹⁾ following the terrorist attacks of September 11th in 2001, and his 1938 poem "Gare du Midi" prefigures the

modern plague of urban terrorists, such as Aum Shinri Kyo.

Yet Auden is also famous for his saying “poetry makes nothing happen”²⁾. It is rather unfair to take Auden’s words out of their original political context, but there is undoubtedly a contemporary debate about the relevance of poetry. It can be argued that poetry in English is facing some kind of neglect these days, because it is often viewed as a difficult, unapproachable and pointless art. Yet in her book “52 Ways of Looking at a Poem” Ruth Padel points out that her readers feel “appallingly unconfident” about reading modern poetry, because of its apparent obscurity, but are simultaneously “hungry . . . to be introduced to modern poems”³⁾. I deduce this hunger to be for the richness, consolation, dignity and exuberance that poetry and not other forms of words can provide. Poetry is perhaps often associated with the unglamorousness of school learning, and, while it has always been intended to have an entertaining as well as didactic purpose, poetry in old-fashioned book form finds it hard to compete with other forms of entertainment in an age which is intensely visual, and when the majority taste is for the sensational. Poetry has its visual pleasures, but they are quiet and tend to be solitary ; with the reader taking pleasure in the arrangement of verses upon the printed page. However, poetry is best appreciated by the ear as well as the eye. Poetry was first created to be recited (sometimes to the accompaniment of music) to an audience, and although it is perhaps rare to read aloud to oneself those who remain only readers of poetry and who do not become listeners to poetry will find a dimension of their pleasure in poetry lacking. The rhyme and rhythm which characterise poetry can be most fully appreciated by listening to them. Poetry then has much to gain from dissemination amongst a wider audience, if it is incorporated in suitable films.

The first poem I will examine is Auden’s “Night Mail”, and it is a consummate

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- 1) See Brendan Bernhard’s article “Poetry Among the Ruins”.
 - 2) Quoted from the poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, Auden, p. 242.
 - 3) Padel, p. 3.

example of a poem fitting rhyme and rhythm to its subject matter; a powerful steam locomotive pulling a long train up steep hills, and coasting down their inclines. "Night Mail" is the title of both the poem and the film it was written for, a black and white documentary film of 1936. Auden was commissioned to write the poem, and the aural pleasure of the film is also enhanced by the musical score commissioned from Benjamin Britten, who at that time was relatively unknown, but who became one of the greatest British composers of the twentieth century. Auden's poetical career was often linked with music, one of many examples being his 1951 libretto for Igor Stravinsky's opera "The Rake's Progress".

"Night Mail" is one of the early British documentary films, made by the G. P. O. (General Post Office) Film Unit, with the original intention of briefing its employees on the work done by postal workers collecting and sorting letters on the special night express travelling between London and Scotland. The film was also later successfully released commercially.

Film is an art form that necessitates multiple replication, and is destined for mass viewing. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Walter Benjamin warned, "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art"⁴⁾, referring to the uniqueness of the work of art that is lost in its copying. Benjamin's essay was originally published in 1936, the same year that the film "Night Mail" was released. Auden, however, was keen to write for film, and did not feel that he was demeaning his talents by writing for a mass audience. Like T. S. Eliot, he had turned to poetic dramas as a way of reaching a wider audience than could be reached by ordinary poetry, and film offered a still wider audience. In addition, it should be noted that Auden in his youth had socialist sympathies which he shared with the makers of the early documentaries, although he later became disillusioned and turned away from both the documentary film movement⁵⁾ and

4) Benjamin, p. 215.

social democracy⁶⁾.

Auden's poem occupies about 3 minutes and 20 seconds at the end of a 25 minute long film. Auden deserves acclaim for his success in meeting a demanding technical challenge: the film had already been shot and the musical score completed before he composed his poem, and he therefore had to fit the poem's images and lines to what was on screen. He described how he resorted to using a stopwatch to time his lines to ensure they would fit⁷⁾. According to Auden's biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, the commissioning of the poem was an afterthought because the directors of the film felt that the film conveyed the technical expertise involved in delivering so many letters, but that the human element concerning the writers and recipients of the letters was "missing"⁸⁾. Auden himself said of "Night Mail": "We were experimenting to see whether poetry could be used in films, and I think we showed it could"⁹⁾. However, interestingly, certain of Auden's lines had to be cut, such as the descriptions of hills "heaped like slaughtered horses" and Scotland as a country "whose scribbled coastline traps the wild Atlantic in a maze of stone."¹⁰⁾ This is because Harry Watt, one of the film's directors, felt that "No picture we put on the screen could be as strong as that."¹¹⁾ His comment makes two things clear: firstly, the concern that the documentary should function as a work of art as well as a work of fact; and, secondly, that the visual inspiration unleashed by a poem can outdo that garnered by a camera.

Nevertheless "Night Mail", and in particular its end sequence, has received much critical acclaim. The film's record of the complexity of organisation and

5) See Mendelson, p. 283.

6) See Mendelson, p. 359.

7) See Fuller, p. 188.

8) See Carpenter, p. 182.

9) *Ibid.*, p. 182.

10) *Ibid.*, pp. 182-3.

11) *Ibid.*, p. 183.

timing necessary to handle the volume of post is interesting enough, but as Ian Aitken notes it is the train itself “as a powerful image of technology, in its natural element speeding freely into the countryside, away from the dark city stations”¹²⁾ that compels the viewer’s admiration. The train (and by extension the technology it is associated with) also becomes a symbol of modernity and national integration: as it races along it links the countryside (the natural landscape) with various cities (and their industrial landscapes).

The power of the film and the poem combined perhaps derive from their themes of isolation and communication. In addition to its linking of town and country the *Night Mail* also links the very different peoples of the English south and the Scottish north, the latter with its proud spirit of independence from England. Moreover, the letters the train carries extend the communicative web to other countries and people—“Letters to Scotland from the South of France”. The poem’s conclusion with the delivery of letters to their addressees is probably what will appeal to all of us most: “. . . none will hear the postman’s knock/ Without a quickening of the heart. For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?”

The second poem by Auden that I will consider features in “*Four Weddings and a Funeral*”, a romantic comedy released in 1994, twenty-one years after Auden’s death. One reason for Auden’s enduring success in the twentieth century was his ability to adopt a poetic tone that suited the atmosphere of the times. Literary style had changed; Auden did not forgo beautiful words, but he avoided the elaborate diction and conventional subject matter of his predecessors. This he declared in his poem “*Letter to Lord Byron*”: “I want a form that’s large enough to swim in,/ And talk on any subject that I choose”¹³⁾. This light and deceptively matter-of-fact tone also makes his poems easy to incorporate in films, where their language is poetic enough to mark their appearance as special, but not so poetically challenging as to distract or alienate film viewers, who

12) Aitken, pp. 19-20.

13) See Auden, p. 172.

cannot stop and analyse a poem in depth during the screening of their film.

Auden can create beautiful and memorable poems from a selection of incongruous details. Much well-loved English poetry describes nature, but Auden took his stance as a modern and urban poet, as is made clear by his declaration in 1936 in approval of Byron, "... he was a townee, a European, and disliked Wordsworth and all that kind of [Romantic movement] approach to nature, and I find that very sympathetic"¹⁴). Again, Auden's modernity and his affinity for cities make him a congenial poet for the majority of us who are urban dwellers.

I have already pointed out Auden's affinity for music. In his interest in reviving everyday poetic forms to achieve a wider audience he drew on popular traditions of anonymous poems, skipping riddles, ballads and music hall songs. In "Four Weddings and a Funeral" Auden's untitled poem is composed in ballad form, one of Auden's favourite poetic forms. As the poem's soubriquet "Funeral Blues" suggests, it is also reminiscent of the blues. The bittersweet mood of the blues echoes in turn through the poem and the film, for which the film has much to be thankful. Without Auden's poem the succession of romances in the film would seem too trite and saccharine.

Auden's poem is recited in its entirety, as part of a eulogy by one of the film's minor characters at a funeral. This scene is one of the most moving in the film, and sales of Auden's poetry, and love poetry in general, jumped markedly in Britain after the release of this film.

The film follows the lives of a group of English friends as they seek happiness in romantic love, sealed by their weddings. Despite the film's many comic moments, it is interspersed with serious meditations upon the nature of love, to the effect that, after a certain age, life without a loved partner is empty, and life with a beloved partner is fulfilled. Because of the film's predominantly comic

14) See Carpenter, p. 199.

nature there are no sustained declarations of love apart from the recitation of Auden's love poem. The romantic leads of the film are played by Hugh Grant and Andie MacDowell, and they are but one couple of a veritable comedy of errors of heterosexual couples. In portraying their relationships the film concentrates on love's beginnings, its intoxications and its infatuations; it is left to Simon Callow and John Hannah, who portray the film's only homosexual partners, to convey the quiet and enduring love that is the hallmark of a settled and committed relationship. Gareth (Simon Callow's character) drops dead of a heart attack at the third of the film's weddings, and Matthew (John Hannah's character) is utterly grief-stricken at his funeral.

Auden's poem of bereavement is magnificent. It lives up to the poet Alexander Pope's 1711 dictum concerning writing: "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd,/ Something, whose truth convinc'd at sight we find./ That gives us back the image of our mind"¹⁵). John Hannah's rendition of the poem is equally magnificent. His tribute to his partner provokes tears—but also laughter, in the English style that refuses to be maudlin.

When he is too overcome to speak he says that he will borrow the words of Auden, "another splendid bugger". This neat word play both refers to Auden's and Gareth's admirable characters and indicates the parallel between their homosexualities. Thus Auden's poem brings the issue of homosexuality into focus at this point in the film. The writer Oscar Wilde was tried and imprisoned for homosexual offences in 1895, just twelve years before Auden's birth. While Auden's homosexuality did not pose him such a risk as it had done Wilde, he still lived in an era when it was advisable not to be overtly homosexual, and he was therefore not able to write openly about homosexual love in his poetry. Yet the compulsion to write of love in general terms perhaps adds to the universality of the appeal of Auden's love poems—lovers can read into them what they choose. The taboos surrounding gay love gradually weakened as the twentieth century

15) Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism" Part II, lines 298–300.

drew on, so that by the time "Four Weddings and a Funeral" was made in 1994 the inclusion of a gay couple among the straight couples was uncontroversial. This relaxed attitude to the individual's avowal of sexuality, and the celebration of love in more than just heterosexual manifestations marks both the poem's and the film's accord with modern lifestyle choices. The poem and the film succeed in their effect upon readers and viewers, who are drawn to their representation of modern love, in all its heterogeneity.

Auden wrote that "Light verse can be serious"¹⁶). Looked at closely, his "Funeral Blues" is an incongruous combination of heartbreak and wry humour, such as his proposal to coopt the "public doves" and "traffic policemen" in mourning for his lost beloved. His humour shows an endearing capacity for self mockery, a capacity shared by the film. The film does justice to Auden's poem in a faithful reflection of its themes and tone.

Auden probably took care to make his poem's details as universal as possible, so that any reader or listener, regardless of nationality or gender, could respond to its common human experience of grief. "Funeral Blues" is a short poem, 16 lines in 4 stanzas, but it includes several "scapes" or perspectives. Its first stanza provides a soundscape, but the ticking clocks, ringing telephone, barking dog and piano are all silenced, and in grief all sounds are drained from the world until all that remains is the "muffled drum" to accompany the funeral. With the second stanza there is a transition from sound to sight, as the funeral cortege moves through city streets, with the appearance of the elements of city life (overhead advertising planes, pigeons, policemen). In the third stanza the focus shifts to the beloved, and the perspective shifts, dizzily, to include all space ("my North, my South, my East and West") and all time ("My working week and my Sunday rest,/ My noon, my midnight . . .") Auden liked employing vast perspectives in his poetry, and this poem is impressive for the way the mourner's thought swings

16) From the Introduction to "The Oxford Book of Light Verse", edited by Auden in 1938. See Auden, p. 364.

out to the universe. The progression of thought is logical: in life lovers are absorbed in the bliss of their passion and give no thought to mortality. After bereavement, lacking the physical presence of the beloved, the rest of the universe is unbearable, unwanted—hence the lone lover’s grand and hyperbolic rejection: “Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun”. Life’s meaninglessness without the beloved drives the grieving lover to nihilistic feelings, but paradoxically the poet’s ability to commemorate the dead lover in words which will last for eternity does represent the triumph of frail human beings and their love over grim death.

The film wisely does not attempt to capture any of Auden’s poetic images during the recitation of the poem. The camera focuses on Matthew standing in the church behind the coffin as he recites from memory, which is followed by his voiceover as the coffin is carried outside in the graveyard. In this way the viewers see specific grief over one man’s death on screen, while their imaginations roam through the wider stage of world and universe as their ears follow the words of Auden’s poem. The genres of poem and film are successfully combined.

The third poem by Auden included in a film that I shall consider is excerpted in the 1995 film “Before Sunrise”. This simple but unusual romance stars Ethan Hawke as Jesse, a young American in Europe on his way to catch a plane home, and Julie Delphy as Celine, a graduate student at the Sorbonne on her way back to Paris after visiting her grandmother in Budapest. The two meet on a train, start talking, and Jesse persuades Celine to get off the train with him and spend the night together in Vienna until he has to go to the airport in the morning. They spend an enchanted night in the city: meeting amateur actors, a street poet and a fortune teller, exploring the streets and squares, spending time in cafes and bars, on a big wheel, in a record listening booth, by the river, in a cemetery and in a park, all the time talking, talking, talking, about books, the future, families, death, love and relationships, and all the things one can talk about endlessly when one is in one’s twenties. They are obviously attracted to each other, but decide that having sex would spoil their unique relationship. They would of course make a charming couple, and it’s evidently agonising for them when the

time comes to part in the morning. At the last moment before Celine's train leaves they make a pact to meet again on that very platform exactly six months later, and the film ends with no clue as to whether they will keep or break their bizarre promise to each other.

After their long night roaming Vienna, shortly after dawn, they are resting at the base of a statue, Celine with her head in Jesse's lap. He slightly misquotes part of a much longer Auden poem to her :

The years shall run like rabbits . . .

. . . all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime :
"O let not Time deceive you
You cannot conquer time . . .

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

Jesse's chosen quotation, duly following the chime of one of Vienna's clocks, is rather enigmatic, but perhaps tends more to an ominous rather than a positive interpretation. Yet Jesse and Celine have cheated Time : they have stayed up all night, using the dull hours normally allotted for sleep to instead explore each other and the city. Yet presumably both are aware that such stolen enchanted moments cannot be prolonged, and neither will risk disillusionment staining their quirky but beautiful time together by further postponing their return to their ordinary lives, and the ordinary world, of "headaches" and "worry".

The film ends not long after Jesse's quotation. If Auden's words linger in the viewer's mind as they have lingered in Jesse's mind, and Auden's original poem

is sought out, the enigmas of the poem and film deepen. "As I walked out one evening" is another of Auden's untitled poems, again written in ballad form. The poem's narrator overhears the triumphant love song of a lover singing to his beloved in an unnamed city, but is then warned by the city's clocks (representing Time) that human beings "cannot conquer Time". The clocks tell that our everyday world is not as reassuring as it seems: "The glacier knocks in the cupboard,/ The desert sighs in the bed".

However, when the poem's narrator shows signs of distress in the face of the threats of time the city clocks seem to offer some kind of redemption:

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

The poem finishes

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

implying that the human pattern of existence will be repeated throughout time, and that pairs of lovers will come and go time and time again.

This is one possible reading of an ambiguous poem, but knowledge of the poem and the film add resonance to each other, illuminate each other, make their interpretation more satisfyingly complex and help each to linger in the mind after they have finished.

Auden said of poetry that "it must move our emotions, or excite our intellect"¹⁷). I would argue that the best poems and films do both, and that if a

poem and a film are sensitively combined their sum is greater than the sum of their parts.

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17) From the Introduction to "The Poet's Tongue", edited by Auden and John Garrett in 1935. See Auden, p. 327.

APPENDIX : POEMS BY W. H. AUDEN

I. Night Mail

I

This is the Night Mail crossing the border,
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,

Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
The shop at the corner, the girl next door.

Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb :
The gradient's against her, but she's on time.

Past cotton-grass and moorland boulder,
Shovelling white steam over her shoulder,

Snorting noisily, she passes
Silent miles of wind-bent grasses.

Birds turn their heads as she approaches,
Stare from bushes at her blank-faced coaches.

Sheep-dogs cannot turn her course ;
They slumber on with paws across.

In the farm she passes no one wakes,
But a jug in a bedroom gently shakes.

II

Dawn freshens, the climb is done.
Down towards Glasgow she descends,
Towards the steam tugs yelping down a glade of cranes,

Towards the fields of apparatus, the furnaces
Set on the dark plain like gigantic chessmen.
All Scotland waits for her :
In dark glens, beside pale-green lochs,
Men long for news.

III

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
Letters of joy from girl and boy,
Receipted bills and invitations
To inspect new stock or to visit relations,
And applications for situations,
And timid lovers' declarations,
And gossip, gossip from all the nations,
News circumstantial, news financial,
Letters with holiday snaps to enlarge in,
Letters with faces scrawled in the margin,
Letters from uncles, cousins and aunts,
Letters to Scotland from the South of France,
Letters of condolence to Highlands and Lowlands,
Written on paper of every hue,
The pink, the violet, the white and the blue,
The chatty, the catty, the boring, the adoring,
The cold and official and the heart's outpouring,
Clever, stupid, short and long,
The typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong.

IV

Thousands are still asleep,
Dreaming of terrifying monsters
Or a friendly tea beside the band in Cranston's or Crawford's :
Asleep in working Glasgow, asleep in well-set Edinburgh,
Asleep in granite Aberdeen,

They continue their dreams,
But shall wake soon and hope for letters,
And none will hear the postman's knock
Without a quickening of the heart,
For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?

2. Twelve Songs, IX (sometimes known as Funeral Blues)

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song ;
I thought that love would last for ever : I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now : put out every one ;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun ;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can come to any good.

3. 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 banknotes
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.