



O Tell Me the Truth About Love

Wystan Hugh Auden
Another Time
(1940)

This poem was written after Auden had moved to the United States. It deals with love as an experience of reality rather than of imagination: a sublime form of public interiority.

Some say Love's a little boy,
And some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go round¹
And some say that's absurd,
5 And when I asked the man next-door,
Who looked as if he knew,
His wife got very **cross** indeed²,
And said it wouldn't do³.

Does it look like a pair of pyjamas,
10 Or the ham in a temperance hotel⁴?
Does its odour remind one of llamas,
Or has it a comforting smell?
Is it **prickly** to touch as a hedge⁵ is,
Or soft as eiderdown fluff⁶?
15 Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges⁷?
O tell me the truth about love.

Our history books refer to it
In **cryptic** little notes,
It's quite a common topic on
20 The Transatlantic boats;
I've found the subject mentioned in
Accounts⁸ of suicides,
And even seen it **scribbled** on
The backs of railway guides⁹.

25 Does it howl¹⁰ like a hungry Alsatian,
Or boom like a military band?
Could one give a first-rate imitation
On a saw¹¹ or a Steinway Grand¹²?
Is its singing at parties a riot¹³?
30 Does it only like Classical stuff¹⁴?
Will it stop when one wants to be quiet?
O tell me the truth about love.

I looked inside the summer-house¹⁵;
It wasn't ever there;
35 I tried the Thames at Maidenhead,
And Brighton's **bracing** air.
I don't know what the blackbird¹⁶ sang,
Or what the tulip said;
But it wasn't in the chicken-run¹⁷,
40 Or underneath the bed.

Can it pull extraordinary faces¹⁸?
Is it usually sick on a swing¹⁹?
Does it spend all its time at the races²⁰,
or fiddling with pieces of string²¹?
45 Has it views of its own about money?
Does it think Patriotism enough²²?
Are its stories vulgar but funny?
O tell me the truth about love.

When it comes, will it come without warning²³?
50 Just as I'm picking my nose²⁴?
Will it knock on my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes²⁵?
Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting²⁶ be courteous or **rough**?
55 Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love.

1 it makes the world go round. Fa girare il mondo.
2 indeed. Davvero.
3 it wouldn't do. Non era il caso.
4 temperance hotel. Albergo dove non si vendono alcolici.
5 hedge. Siepe spinosa.
6 eiderdown fluff. Batuffolo di piume d'oca.
7 smooth at the edges. Dai bordi smussati.
8 Accounts. Resoconti.
9 railway guides. Orari ferroviari.
10 Does it howl. Ulula.
11 saw. Sega.
12 Steinway Grand. Pianoforte a coda Steinway.
13 riot. Spasso.

14 stuff. Roba.
15 summer-house. Casa di campagna.
16 blackbird. Merlo.
17 chicken-run. Pollaio.
18 pull extraordinary faces. Fare smorfie straordinarie.
19 Is ... swing. Di solito ha la nausea sull'altalena.
20 races. Corse.
21 fiddling with pieces of string. Suonando corde rovinare.
22 Does ... enough. Pensa abbastanza al patriottismo?
23 warning. Preavviso.
24 I'm picking my nose. Mi sto mettendo le dita nel naso.
25 tread ... on my toes. Mi calpesterà i piedi sull'autobus.
26 greeting. Saluto.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY****1 READ** the poem and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | rude | 4 | written carelessly |
| 2 | invigorating | 5 | annoyed |
| 3 | sharp | 6 | obscure |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT**2 READ** each stanza again and do the following activities.

- Stanza 1.
 - Underline a commonplace about love used by the poet.
 - Who does the poet ask? Why? Does he get any answer?
- Stanza 2. What aspects of love does the poet wonder about?
- Stanza 3. List the places where the poet has found love mentioned.
.....
.....
.....
.....
- Stanza 4. Point out the terms of the contrast presented in these lines and answer the question below.
..... ↔
Which of the comparisons do you find most unusual?
- Stanza 5. Say where the poet looked for love. What was he not able to understand?
- Stanza 6. Explain what people the poet identifies love with in every line.
- Stanza 7. How does the poet expect love to come?

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**3 DESCRIBE** the layout of the poem. Is there a regular rhyme scheme?**4 ANALYSE** the sound features by focusing on repetition, alliteration, onomatopoeia, run-on-line. What is their effect?**5 TICK** as appropriate.

The poem is

- ☐ a ballad.
☐ a sort of monologue.
☐ a narrative poem.

6 FIND examples of similes.



7 COMPLETE the table below with words or phrases linking love to sensory perceptions.

Sight	Hearing	Smell	Taste	Touch

8 DISCUSS whether the images of love given by Auden can be regarded as stereotypes or not. Quote from the text. What images do you find most impressive?

9 SAY in which stanzas love is identified with the following, then answer the question below.

People:
 Animals:
 Objects:
 Sensations:
 Feelings:
 Words:
 Music:
 What does this mean?

➤ COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

10 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph to sum up the idea/s of love conveyed in the poem. You can use some of the following words.

freshness • freedom • routine • monotony • pleasure • suffering • mystery • loneliness • sadness • coincidence • fear • tumult • harmony • calm • warmth • creativity • conformism • vulgarity • search • an • unforeseen • event

➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

11 EXPLAIN how this poem compares to the other poems by Auden you have read. Consider

- style;
- language;
- choice of subject;
- the poet's attitude.

➤ COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

12 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph as a sort of monologue in which you identify with the speaking voice. Explain what the people you know usually think of love, say what you wonder about when you think of it and what your expectations are.