

## AMBIGUITY AND TIME IN W. H. AUDEN'S *IF I COULD TELL YOU* THROUGH A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS USING LEECH AND SHORT'S MODEL

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### Abstract

*This study examines the ambiguity and deeper meanings in W. H. Auden's poem *If I Could Tell You* by exploring the literary techniques and devices employed by the poet. The analysis adopts the stylistic approach proposed by Leech and Short (2007), with particular attention to lexical choices and figures of speech in the poem. The study demonstrates that Auden deliberately employs simple language and a restrained use of figurative devices the most notably anaphora and personification to convey underlying themes of greater complexity. These themes relate to the unknowability of time, uncertainty, and the limitations of language. Furthermore, these stylistic techniques help elucidate the poem's complex meanings by addressing its ambiguities, while the poem's structural elements emphasise the tension between human longing and the relentless passage of time. By highlighting the close interplay between form and content, this article contributes to existing scholarship on Auden's work and shows how stylistic devices strengthen the poem's engagement with universal concerns such as time and existence.*

**Keywords:** *Ambiguity, Meaning, Figures of Speech, Symbols, Themes, Uncertainty, Leech and Short Model*

### Introduction

W. H. Auden (1907–1973) is one of the celebrated literary icons from the 20th century. His approach to poetry differed from one period to another, capturing different moments of his life history, from the confusion of the Spanish Civil War to the post-war Cold War period. Originating from England, Auden was influenced by a blend of modernist and antecedent literary schools, owing to his training at the prestigious Oxford University. While aligned to modernism, Auden later distanced himself from the allusive and dense poetry of his contemporaries T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and chose a style that was more accessible to the average person. In a number of his works, he handles complicated issues, but uses a language that is very eloquent and simplistic.

The poem *If I Could Tell You* (1940) was created in the time of the world's first manifestation of the world's most terrible wars and an unprecedented and profound global loss in civilised order and political subsystems of interrelated nations. His internalisation of the timelessness of time and the consequences of lived experience reflect a capacity to deal with the posing of fundamental questions through a highly individualised and deeply personal emotive rationalisation and existential internal conflict. This is precisely the focus of the present study that aims to illustrate the resolution of outstanding contradictions through the use of stylistic devices, particularly of speech and symbols, that Auden imagines in *If I Could Tell You*. In the context of Leech and Short's (2007) model of a stylistic analysis, the present paper seeks to address the central questions of the poem through an in-depth examination of the collocation, syntactic forms, and use of figures of speech.

### Theoretical Framework

Defending Leech and Short (2007) against being placed in the field of literary theory and literary criticism presumes the specificity and relevance of their model in stylistic analysis. This model, essentially devoted to the systematic examination of linguistic elements in a text, provides a distinct approach to the analysis of a text's language, without the ambition of theories of literary criticism and literary theory.

Leech and Short's model emphasises the relevance of certain stylistic elements, evidencing the relevance of diction and syntax, and figurative language to the understanding of the subtleties of a text. In the analysis of literary texts, for instance, their approach details the contribution of selected lexicons to the text's theme and the emotions to be evoked. This specificity permits the review of a single literary text and not a theoretical comprehensive one that seeks to cover the analysis of all literary texts.

Leech and Short's model works exceptionally with a poem like "*If I Could Tell You*" by W. H. Auden. The stylistic analysis of this poem showcases how, unlike many other literary works, it is quite simplistic and its lexical choices too are not elaborate.

Auden employs a simple vocabulary, enabling readers to engage in his intricate ideas about time, uncertainty, and the human condition. Such close reading, focusing purely on the vocabulary, analyses how specific combinations in Auden's word choices affect the emotions in the poem, and how those emotions affect the themes and issues in the poem. This would demonstrate how the model works, and how it is not trying to be a model in and of itself.

Additionally, in contrast to the many symbolically and thematically complex works of literature, Auden's poem is a good example of what overly simple and economised style in prose would look like. The difference in writing style could be explained by Auden's poetic purpose, and the emotions he wanted to map out. There is a clear conclusion to be drawn from a close stylistic analysis like the one Leech and Short have done, that is, their model might not be the best to use to examine all works of literature in the world, but it is undoubtedly a good model for analysing a single work, particularly to those works that try to say complex things through their choice of words.

Although Leech and Short's model does not cover all of theories of literature and literary criticism, it offers valuable contributions in the field of style analysis as in the case of the analysis of the poem "*If I Could Tell You*" where the simplicity of the poem and the choice of words speaks of deep themes which is different from many other complex literary works.

### Research Objective

- To examine how W. H. Auden's use of figures of speech and lexical choices in *If I Could Tell You*, analyzed through Leech and Short's stylistic model, contributes to meaning-making and the construction of ambiguity surrounding time, uncertainty, and the limits of human understanding.

### Research Question

How do Auden's figures of speech and stylistic choices in *If I Could Tell You*, as analyzed using Leech and Short's model, function to create ambiguity and articulate themes of time, uncertainty, and human limitation?

### Literature Review

The balance that W. H. Auden maintained between technical focus and philosophical inquiry has been attributed to his artistry. The ease with which Auden's poetry is able to communicate complex

existential issues has been attributed to his modernist experimentation and lucid communication in poetry. Auden scholarship of the 1980s, including but not limited to Mendelson 1981, argues that *If I Could Tell You* and other poems concerned with 'time, history and ethics' make formal choices that reflect the content of the poems. This foundational view has been important and highly influential, especially with poems such as *If I Could Tell You*, where formal repetition and restrained diction foreground uncertainty rather than resolution and are primarily concerned with time, history, and ethics.

Auden is the subject of an ongoing discussion of both the criticism of the author and the criticism of the critics on the author. Hynes (1992) explains that there is a temporality and spatiality within Auden's poetic production of the war and the early forties that transitions from a political urgency to a more metaphysical reflection on time as a temporality that cannot be controlled by humans. In this sense, the poem is often referred to as an exercise in the limits of knowledge and an inability to "tell" that is not an emotional reticence, but one that is the result of an extreme ontological situation. This is consistent with the present research study's observation that a repetition of the same element and a statement of clarity does not, in the ordinary sense, render meaning more visible, but does in fact render more visible the condition of ambiguity as the core of that meaning. Research on the villanelle form has also helped shed light on Auden's poem. Fussell (1979) claims that certain fixed poetic forms, and especially those that involve some kind of repetition, lend themselves particularly well to the expression of an obsession, uncertainty, and/or circular thought. This insight has been taken up in the case of *If I Could Tell You*, where the repetition of the refrains in the villanelle is thought to reflect the paradox of the forward motion of time even as one is stuck in some kind of repetitive loop. This line of thinking has been recently taken up by Attridge (2013) who argues that the repetition of particular forms in a poem shapes the reader's experience of that poem by forcing the reader to suspend meaning in a state of deferral throughout the poem. This line of thought has helped in providing the present analysis, where Auden's refrains promise to provide knowledge, and the knowledge that the reader is seeking is knowledge that the speaker of the poem actually holds, only to strip that knowledge away.

Conversational language structures in Auden's works have consistently inspired scholarly critiques on stylistic arguments regarding the blatant ordinariness at the level and choice of diction. According to Empson, a renowned critic, Auden's simplicity conceals possible interpretations in analysis through what he refers to as 'ambiguous control'. This perspective has come to influence a considerable number of stylistic critiques on the lexical restraint intricacies in analysis. In the context of Auden's *If I Could Tell You*, a number of critics, Fuller, for instance, have argued that a simplistic, ordinary vocabulary use results in a placid, stabilising surface as 'philosophically rational conflation', a notion that directly complements the results of the study on Auden's works, which indicate that a simple choice of vocabulary is deliberately ambiguous in that it takes away the possible choice for pronouncements through ornamental language.

Given the wide range of Auden's works, stylistic methodology offers the most potential for analysing Auden's works. Leech and Short's framework from *Style in Fiction* (2007) has been utilised in multiple studies analysing poetry and prose, particularly in research addressing the construction of meaning and reader response. Leech and Short's focus on figurative language and lexical patterns paves the way for critics to navigate the tensions between formal and thematic analyses without subsuming literary meaning into the realm of individual impression. Recent scholarship, including Simpson (2014), and Jeffries and McIntyre (2019), stylistically illustrates

the continued relevance of this framework in analysing the patterns of language used to express and conceal ideology, feeling, and power.

Khan et al. (2021) argue that although ambiguity in modern poetry frequently arises through the use of vague language, ambiguity can also stem from the use of certain literary devices like repetition and personification. This study also considers various manifestations of repetition and personification in *If I Could Tell You*, where time is alluded to as an immensely powerful yet always absent entity when it comes to knowledge. Additionally, Ali and Rahman (2022) expand on the works of lyric poetry through the explanation of the use of personification in extrapolating various fears to create a spectacle and, ultimately, to remove human agency over time, fate, and death.

The attention given to Auden's work as poetry has been drawing the public's attention with a growing interest. Specifically, in the early period, the symbolic interpretation of nature, animals, and weather patterns folded into a unit with little to no distinction. However, this has been countered by the most recent critics of Auden. As O'Neill explains in 2018, this is, in fact, due to Auden's symbols being rather loose and open. In *If I Could Tell You*, the symbols being the wind and the roses, this study interprets such symbols to signify the ultimate in uncertainty and temporariness. This viewpoint also accompanies recent musical theory in literature, which is most often preferred, and suggests that there is an inherent underlying meaning with the double complexities intertwined within a symbol. The most recent Auden scholarship pertaining to Auden has, in recent times, focused on Auden's uncertainties, particularly emphasising the ethical implications within his work.

As Taylor (2020) has asserted, in his later poetry, Auden points to the paradox of uncertainty as an ethical position, rather than a failure of knowledge and a relinquishing of ownership to the certainty. Such a reading also provides a helpful contextual frame to balance stylistic approaches, which view ambiguity as a lack of focus but rather as a deliberate stylistic choice. In this case, the speaker's repeated refusal, or inability, to tell becomes an ethical acknowledgment of the paradox of human limitation, which arguably promotes this study. The findings of this study support the view that stylistic elements within *If I Could Tell You* exercise restraint and acceptance rather than revelation.

Auden's works, especially his poetry, positionality, and stylistic approach data, like all poetry, and stylistic studies present a paradigmatic base for retrospective analyses. Previous studies suggest *If I Could Tell You* hovers on the boundary marking the convergence of structural reiteration, simplicity on the order of diction, and a philosophical depth. However, a plethora of studies tend to address either one aspect of the triad – theme, formation, context, and symbolism. The present work aims to augment this corpus of studies on stylistics and the theme interaction by showing through other of Samuel Beckett's indulgences and his chimera diction, liquid metaphoricisms, the sense of meaning that is firmly coherent along gradients of indeterminacy. The extent to which this corpus of studies align besides presenting novel strands of application of the stylistics model by Leech and Short to this corpus of works on Auden's writings strengthens the understanding of the thematic preoccupations primarily vis-à-vis the stylistic precision in the works of Auden to articulate "in/metaphysical concerns" which discourse the temporality, indeterminacy, and the African phenomenological limit of consciousness.

### Methodology

This paper employs the close reading technique alongside the model of stylistic analysis proposed by Leech and Short to engage with the poem *If I Could Tell You*. Leech and Short's model is composed of five components: words and sentence structure, context and cohesion, figures of speech, and discourse. This study will specifically focus on words and figures of speech.

### Textual Analysis

Villanelles are a type of poem that feature a specific rhyme scheme and structure which incorporates a sequence of refrains and recurring lines throughout the work. Among the variety of poetic forms, the best-known of which is the villanelle, '*If I Could Tell You*' is made up of 5 tercets and a quatrain which form 19 lines in total. In the poem, the first and third lines of the first stanza repeat throughout the work. This unique structure contributes to the overall themes of the poem and the way the poem flows. The lines that repeat, '*Time will say nothing but I told you so*' and '*If I Could Tell You I would let you know*' represent the main themes of the poem. These lines represent the passage of time and the inability of the speaker to completely articulate his thoughts. This creates a desire within the speaker to communicate his thoughts and the tension of the poem is the inability to overcome time's passage and uncertainty.

### Word Choices

At first glance, the word choices present in the poem *If I Could Tell You* seem simplistic and straightforward, when in fact they add layers of complexity and ambiguity, substantially enhancing the meaning of the poem. None of Auden's contemporaries of the modernist era made the same choice of employing plain speech, choosing instead to use the elevation of abstract speech. This choice on Auden's part made poetry accessible to the everyman, devoid of allusions and form. In conjunction with the theme of the poem, were the motifs, in this case, the dramatic juxtaposition of plain speech to the profound theme of the poem. Among many things, the poem's rhythmic quality and the personified inner world of the speaker were made richer by the repetition of the line *If I Could Tell You*. *If I Could Tell You* eloquently encapsulated the speaker's profound inner world and frustration, the very frustration that stems from being unable to articulate the thoughts one already possesses.

The poem reflects the author's real belief that the future is not knowable and that the future is probably not knowable is expressed in simple declaratives as in the sentence "*There are no fortunes to be told.*" To the mind of the poet, this is the primary line of the poem, and this is the line which captures the essence of the poem as expressed by the narrator. To the narrator, the imposition of the understanding of time, and the fate which surrounds it, is incomprehensible.

There is an intimacy that comes with the speaker's use of common, vernacular words as if to suggest that he is confiding in the reader. This is important for the theme of love, loss, and time in the poem. The coherence and the readability of the poem is brilliant, for there is an inherent contradiction between the simple, unassuming words and the mass of emotions and ideas which are packed into the poem. That tension is indeed the essence of the human condition.

### Figures of Speech

The various elements of style and use of speech are particularly important and significant in the given poem. The poem is full of metaphors, personifications, and other symbols that increase the level of sophistication of the poem. It is this use of symbols that completes the poem.



### **Anaphora**

Of all the poetic techniques employed by the author, the most prominent is most definitely anaphora. The author repeats the words "*If I Could Tell You...*" to create a pattern that evokes the frustration of the speaker, who is trying to convey a specific feeling yet cannot. The author is trying to get the reader to understand the uncertainty of feeling overwhelmed and the inability to communicate one's thoughts. In lines 3, 6, 12, and 16, the meaning of the anaphoric lines changes. First, it reflects the speaker's loss of hope. However, the reader soon realises that it is not one of hope.

The same anaphora also enhances the overall effect of the poem and allows the reader to experience the feeling of the speaker. It is a contributing factor to the musicality of the poem.

The repetition gives a sense of continuity that helps bring a gradual unfolding of ideas on the themes of the poem. It also gives a sense of inevitability that accompanies the speaker's frustration with the inability to communicate.

### **Personification**

Yet another manifestation of the composition's character is the assignment of human characteristics to non-human objects. Time takes on the human characteristic of the artifice's refrain, "*Time will say nothing but I told you so.*" Here, time is characterised as though it has the capacity to make decisions for itself. This construction emphasises the omnipotence and callousness of time; it is a sovereign entity that breathes defiance towards humanity. Within these limits, time exemplifies the perfect embodiment of everything there is to know and understand but cannot.

Other elements of the poem, such as the wind and the roses, are also ascribed human characteristics. This is evident in the line, "*Perhaps the roses really want to grow,*" which allows the roses to possess a human trait of will. This even further complicates the contrast of the natural world and that of civilisation. This allows the reader to have an emotional connection through the inanimate elements of the poem as these constructs serve to allow the reader to understand the abstract themes of the poem in a more tangible manner.

### **Symbolism**

In order to understand the poem in its full capacity, the use of symbolism is more profound than one may think. *If I Could Tell You* is full of symbols. Each and every one of them is not only filled with imagery but also goes hand in hand with the themes of time and uncertainty, as well as the human quality of incomprehensibility intertwined within control.

**Wind:** An unexplained phenomenon, the wind signifies both transformation and enigma. Everyone can feel the impact. The line "*The winds must come from somewhere when they blow*" indicates that it is a mystery and that the reason for the change is unknown. The lines reiterate the poem's central topic of unknowable time and destiny.

**Roses:** A conventional representation of effulgence and transience, the line 'Perhaps the roses really want to grow' embodies the dichotomy of human yearning for eternalism and the natural world's ephemeral. Their thwarted impulse to grow means that the fleeting attributes of life and beauty are the roses.

**Lions and Brooks:** Lions denote supremacy and authority, and brooks connote the current of life. These symbols due to the last stanza show that time is indifferent to human activities and actions whether they are great or small, whatever the dominating lions do or if the brooks are flowing at all, time will keep moving on and will not care at all.

'*If I Could Tell You*' showcases Auden's reflection on vital human emotions such as love, time, and also delves into human existence. Through Auden's plethora of literary devices, however, he is thoughtful, philosophical, and easy to fully understand. The analysis of the poem's diction and figures of speech illustrates, in stark clarity, Auden's particular literary style, showing discursive strengths to simplify language in advancing discussions of the mysterious nature of time and the confines of the human mind.

The poem's central concerns of human existence, time, and love are timeless. Auden employs repetition, personification, and his endless literary arsenal to create profound layers of meaning allowing the audience to experience the poem and be part of the poet's existential struggle. The poem alludes to the fact that through time and existence, the human mind seeks understanding, an existence in which we can experience the totality of life. Auden's masterpiece is, at its core, a deep reflection, but also a vital understanding of life.

### Conclusion

This study has shown that *If I Could Tell You* achieves its depth through restraint rather than ornamentation: plain diction, the villanelle's repeating refrains, and carefully selected figures of speech work together to sustain ambiguity as the poem's central meaning. Read through Leech and Short's stylistic framework, Auden's lexical simplicity and patterned repetition foreground the limits of knowledge and expression, while anaphora intensifies the speaker's inability to "tell," and personification renders time as an indifferent force that outlasts human desire. The symbols of wind, roses, lions, and brooks further reinforce the poem's contrast between human longing and the impersonal continuities of nature and time. Ultimately, the poem's form is not merely decorative but functional: it enacts the very uncertainty it describes, clarifying that what remains certain is not what time will reveal, but the human condition of seeking meaning under temporal constraint.

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