

Prescribed Poetry – An Introduction

- Marks: There are 50 **marks** for this section.
- Time: You should allow about 45 **minutes** for this section.
- You are required to study six poems by each of the poets on your course.
- You are not expected to refer to all six in the same level of detail in your answer. Use your discretion. You may be desperate to show how hard you have studied and how much you know, but you risk losing marks by including material which is not relevant to the question.
- Everything you have learned about structuring essays should be brought into play here. This is not an exercise in proving to the examiner that you have studied your poems and learned your quotes – it is an opportunity for you to show that you can frame an argument based on the title given.
- Your answer should take up at least three pages of your answer booklet.
- Plan your answer carefully.
- Check your plan before you write. Does each point answer the question? Have you stayed focused?
- Make your point, develop it and support it with suitable quotation.

For many years, the questions were asked in quite a predictable way. Students were simply asked to write a personal response to the poet: *"The poetry of Elizabeth Bishop appeals to the modern reader for many reasons." Write an essay in which you outline why the poems by Elizabeth Bishop have this appeal. - 2002*

However, in recent years, the questions have become more focused: *"Elizabeth Bishop poses interesting questions delivered by means of a unique style." Do you agree with this assessment of her poetry? Your answer should focus on both themes and stylistic features. Support your point with the aid of suitable reference to the poems you have studied. - 2009*

The main thing to remember is that, no matter how the questions are phrased, they are all basically asking you to do the same thing – talk about the poet's themes and style. Each question also requires you to prove that you have engaged with the works of the selected poet.

Look at these questions from the 2011 Leaving Cert Paper. If you examine them closely, you will see that they all deal with (a) one or more of the poet's main themes, and (b) the poet's style.

1. Emily Dickinson

“Emily Dickinson’s original approach to poetry results in startling and thought-provoking moments in her work.”

Give your response to the poetry of Emily Dickinson in the light of this statement.

Support your points with suitable reference to the poems on your course.

2. William Butler Yeats

“Yeats can be a challenging poet to read, both in terms of style and subject matter.”

To what extent do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with

suitable reference to the poetry on your course.

3. Robert Frost

“Frost’s simple style is deceptive and a thoughtful reader will see layers of meaning in his poetry.”

Do you agree with this assessment of his poetry? Write a response, supporting your points with the aid of suitable reference to the poems on your course.

4. Eavan Boland

“Boland’s reflective insights are expressed through her precise use of language.”

Write your response to this statement, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the poetry on your course.

Remember, the poems you have studied only cover a certain number of themes, and the poet’s style is something you will have examined in detail, so it is easy to prepare for any possible question if you organise yourself and use a little common sense.

It can be very helpful to make a list of the poet’s themes and each poem in which these themes are covered. See the example I have started below, using Eavan Boland’s poetry:

Love / Relationships

Love

This Moment

The Pomegranate

The Black Lace Fan my Mother Gave me

The Shadow Doll

Politics / History

The War Horse

Child of Our Time

The Famine Road

Marginalised People – The Weak and Vulnerable

The Famine Road

The Shadow Doll

Child of Our Time

Past and Present

The War Horse

The Famine Road

The Black Lace Fan my Mother Gave me

Love

This is a far from exhaustive list but you should take the time to go through the poems you have covered and see what themes they share. The next thing you should do is see how those poems can be linked. Do they share features of style? For example, mythology plays a role in "The Pomegranate" and "Love". What other features of style do the poems share? What are the similarities and differences between them?

When it comes to writing the essay itself, you have a choice to make. Do you approach it poem by poem or point by point? In other words, do you deal with a poem in isolation for a paragraph or two, and then move on to another poem? Or do you deal with the themes/stylistic features and how they are treated in a number of different poems? It is a matter of personal choice.

Don't be afraid to mention links between the poet you have studied and other poets on your course. For example, Boland and Rich both deal with marginalised, vulnerable people. Think about the links between "The Shadow Doll" and "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers". Or, if you are discussing style, you might wish to point out that both Boland and Kavanagh celebrate the ordinary and make it magical in their writing. Think of Kavanagh talking about the beauty of "The tracks of cattle to a drinking-place".

When you are writing your essay, it is essential to show that you engaged with the poems on your course. You may find the following helpful when forming a personal response:

- I can empathise with the poet because...
- The theme of ... is a universal one, so I found it easy to relate to...
- The poet's eye for detail brings...to life, and evokes in me...
- What I most admire about the poetry of (selected poet) is...
- The theme is one which has a particular resonance for me because...
- The poem opened my eyes to...
- I was struck by the image of...
- This poem had a profound impact on me because...
- I found this image particularly poignant because...

Quotes

Philip Larkin:

“I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any - after all, most people are unhappy, don't you think?”

“Life has a practice of living you, if you don't live it.”

“Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth.”

“Death is no different whined at than withstood.”

“I'd like to think...that people in pubs would talk about my poems”

"Love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years." (on the manuscript draft of 'An Arundel Tomb'.

"Let me remember that the only married state I intimately know (i.e., that of my parents) is bloody hell. Never must it be forgotten."

Others on Larkin:

"[Larkin wrote] in clipped, lucid stanzas, about the failures and remorse of age, about stunted lives and spoiled desires." J.D. McClatchy

"[Larkin had] the scrupulous awareness of a man who refuses to be taken in by inflated notions of either art or life." Peter R. King: *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction*

"[Larkin wrote] the most technically brilliant and resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable, body of verse of any English poet in the last twenty-five years." Alan Brownjohn in *Philip Larkin*.

"Larkin spends a good deal of his time as a poet trying to escape his 'ordinary' social self; his lyricism is his salvation, not just his work." Andrew Motion in 'The Guardian'.

"Larkin was a person who had profound and unforgettable things to say about common experience." Andrew Motion in 'The Guardian'.

"[Larkin] avoided the literary, the metropolitan, the group label, and embraced the nonliterary, the provincial, and the purely personal." Alun R. Jones

"Philip Larkin has the power to make poetry out of material that might seem to be unpromising and intractable. Most of us live in urban or suburban landscapes among the constructions and the detritus of an industrial society. Larkin distills poetry from the elements that make up this society- an Odeon cinema, billboards, scrap heaps of disused cars, hospital waiting rooms, cut-price shops - which he presents without falsification or sentimentality. [He captures] in his poetry attitudes of heart and mind that seem peculiarly characteristic of our time: doubt, insecurity, boredom, aimlessness, and malaise.

Larkin is, like Tennyson, an artist of the first rank, who employs language with a rare freshness, precision, and resonance, and whose verse records with lyrical purity his experience of loneliness and anguish. He is both the unofficial laureate of post-war Britain and the poet who voices most articulately and poignantly the spiritual desolation of a world in which men have shed the last rags of religious faith that once lent meaning and hope to human lives. John Press, *The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, in *The Southern Review* (Edited for the purposes of these notes: AO'D)

"[No living poet] can equal Larkin on his own ground of the familiar English lyric, drastically and poignantly limited in its sense of any life beyond, before or after, life today in England." George Dekker

[Larkin's poetry] "expresses uncertainty" and "a feeling of rootlessness", but "his mood is never one of despair, and often there is a deep yearning for an escape from futility." C. B. Cox

"Because he is suspicious of any easy consolation, he is sparing of such moments, yet when they come they stream into the discursive and exacting world of his poetry with such trustworthy force that they call for attention." Seamus Heaney

"At the very least there is often a tension in his poetry between his desire for a quasi-religious experience and his sense that life is a mess. This tension is essentially that of many modern people and explains why Larkin speaks so powerfully to them. His is a secular voice crying in the wilderness, suspicious yet longing for the mysterious, the mystical, the sacramental."
Don W. King

Brief Biography of Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

Philip Arthur Larkin was born on August 9, 1922, in Coventry. He was the second child, and only son, of Sydney and Eva Larkin. Sydney Larkin was City Treasurer between the years 1922-44. Larkin's sister, some ten years his senior, was called Catherine, but was known as Kitty.

He attended the City's King Henry VIII School between 1930 and 1940, and made regular contributions to the school magazine, *The Coventrian*, which, between 1939 and 1940, he also helped to edit .

After leaving King Henry VIII, he went to St. John's College, Oxford, and despite the war (Larkin had failed his army medical because of his poor eyesight), was able to complete his degree without interruption, graduating in 1943 with First Class Honours in English. His closest friends at Oxford were Kingsley Amis and Bruce Montgomery.

After graduating, Larkin lived with his parents for a while, before being appointed Librarian at Wellington, Shropshire, in November of 1943. Here, he studied to qualify as a professional librarian, but continued to write and publish.

In 1946, Larkin became assistant Librarian at the University College of Leicester. He completed his professional studies and became an Associate of the Library Association in 1949. In October 1950, he became Sub-Librarian at Queen's University, Belfast.

Larkin took up the position of Librarian at the University of Hull on March 21, 1955, and it was in October of that year that *The Less Deceived* was published. It was this collection that would be the foundation of his reputation as one of the foremost figures in 20th Century poetry.

It wasn't until 1964 that his next collection, *The Whitsun Weddings* was published. Again, the collection was well received, and widely acclaimed, and the following year, Larkin was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

It was during the years 1961-71 that Larkin contributed monthly reviews of jazz recordings for the *Daily Telegraph*. He also edited the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, which was published in 1973.

His last collection *High Windows* was published in 1974, and confirmed him as one of the finest poets in English Literary history. 'Aubade', his last great poem, was published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in December 1977. If this had been the only poem Larkin had ever written, his place in English poetry would still be secure.

A collection of his essays and reviews was published in November 1983 as *Required Writing: miscellaneous pieces 1955-1982*, and won the W.H. Smith Literary Award for 1984. Larkin received many awards in recognition of his writing, especially in his later years. In 1975 he was awarded the CBE, and in 1976 was given the German Shakespeare-Preis. He chaired the Booker Prize Panel in 1977, was made Companion of Literature in 1978, and served on the Literature Panel of the Arts between 1980 and 1982. He was made an Honorary Fellow of the Library Association in 1980. In 1982 the University of Hull made him a Professor.

In 1984 he received an honorary D.Litt. from Oxford University, and was elected to the Board of the British Library. In December of 1984 he was offered the chance to succeed Sir John Betjeman as Poet Laureate but declined, being unwilling to accept the high public profile and associated media attention of the position.

In mid 1985 Larkin was admitted to hospital with an illness in his throat, and on June 11 an operation was carried out to remove his oesophagus. His health was deteriorating, and when he was awarded the much prized Order of the Companion of Honour he was unable, because of ill health, to attend the investiture, which was due to take place at Buckingham Palace on November 25. He received the official notification courtesy of the Royal Mail.

Philip Larkin died of cancer at 1.24 a.m. on Monday December 2 1985. He was 63 years old.

By James L. Orwin of The Philip Larkin Society. This biography has been slightly shortened for the purposes of these notes but the full version can be found on The Philip Larkin Society website. AO'D

Poems Arranged by Theme

Marriage:

The Whitsun Weddings
An Arundel Tomb
Wedding Wind
Church Going

Death/Transience of Life:

At Grass
An Arundel Tomb
MCMXIV
The Trees
Ambulances
The Explosion
Cut Grass
Church Going

Religion:

Church Going
An Arundel Tomb
The Explosion

The passing of the old world and its values:

Church Going
An Arundel Tomb
MCMXIV
The Whitsun Weddings

Man and nature:

At Grass
An Arundel Tomb
The Trees
The Explosion
Cut Grass
MCMXIV
The Whitsun Weddings
Church Going

Planning Your Essay on Larkin

After you have arranged your poems by **theme**, the next step is to look at the **tone** of the poems. This can be a good starting point for your essay plan. In other words if you were writing about Larkin's view of marriage or romantic love, which poems would you use and in which order? Look at the diagram below to give yourself an idea of one possible approach. The poems chosen *move from negative to positive*.

Marriage/Romantic Love

Introduction

*Larkin's view of marriage rather **cynical***

Use quote from Andrew Motion about married state being 'bloody hell'

In this essay... admire philosophical approach and acknowledgement that some questions cannot be answered

The Whitsun Weddings

*Seems to see ceremony/celebrations as **faintly ridiculous and almost damaging**,*



Church Going

***Yet** he recognises the **importance of ceremony** for people*



An Arundel Tomb

*He is **moved by the apparent love** that existed between the earl and countess but struggles with the idea of love surviving.*



Wedding Wind

*Quite **positive view***

Next, you should think about a) a personal response to each poem and b) link sentences which will lead you from one poem to the next. The link sentence can be at the end of one paragraph or the beginning of the next.

Sample Essay Plan and Full Essay

It is absolutely vital that you write an essay plan. Remember, it need not make sense to anyone but you. Don't waste your time writing full sentences. (I have written a reasonably detailed plan so that you can see what I wanted to say. If I were doing it for my own purposes only, then it would be full of abbreviations, crossing out, and hastily scribbled notes.) The plan will simply be a trigger for your memory when you are writing the essay. It will also keep you focused. There is much you could say about each poem, but you must confine yourself to those points that are relevant to the essay title. If you simply write all you know about each poem, you will get a low grade. Your essay must be going somewhere. Think of it as a persuasive piece. You are trying to convince the examiner that your approach and your interpretation is a valid one.

Try to move from poem to poem in some sort of logical order.

Note: This personal response to the poetry of Philip Larkin will be based on his search for meaning in life, particularly his rather bleak view of the transience and brevity of our time on earth. It will also explore the way in which he uses simple, colloquial language and beautiful descriptions drawn from nature to make his poetry appealing and accessible to all.

Introduction

Themes: *Life is short and brief. All changes. Does anything of us survive?*

Style: *Philosophical questions framed in simple language. Lack of overt sentimentality. Beautiful, sensitive descriptions balance sometimes bleak message. Asks questions and allows us to come to our own conclusions. Cynicism versus gentle contemplation.*

MCMXIV

*Death is near, the world is changing, the men in the picture are unaware of this.
Nature is all that will survive – it is indifferent to man's plight*



An Arundel Tomb

Link: Different approach to same topic. This time viewing transience of life / change from the perspective of the Earl and Countess. The world has changed so much that those who view them now have little understanding of who they were.

Question – what will survive of us is love? True or a lie? Ambiguity – no real answer.



Church Going

Link: Uncertainty. If an Arundel Tomb explored the idea of change, the passage of time and the meaning of life by looking to the past, then Church Going is a journey into a possible future.

Man erects churches, clings to idea of afterlife. Pointless, and people are beginning to drift away from religious approach. Larkin- mixed feelings about secularisation. He recognises that man needs to have meaning in his life, but does not believe in religion himself. Yet part of him mourns its passing and the security it offers many people.



At Grass

Link – While MCMXIV, An Arundel Tomb and Church Going looked at passing of time and fleeting nature of man's achievements from man's point of view, At Grass looks at it from natural world's point of view. More positive approach.

Life is short, fame does not last.

Horses do not care about man's definition of fame, neither are they concerned with the

past. Placid acceptance of the here and now. Horses can rest in 'unmolested' meadows. That which is natural survives.

Conclusion

Reflect wording of intro. Personal response reinforced. Does Larkin provide us with answers or does he simply raise questions? Making us think is perhaps the greatest gift a poet can give us.

Essay

We live in a time of change. Financially, politically and environmentally, nothing is guaranteed. At such times, we must question the meaning of life and our place in this world. What will be our legacy? What, in the words of Philip Larkin, 'will survive of us'? In the poems on our course, Larkin explores the nature of change and the transience of life. For this reason, I find his poetry thought-provoking and meaningful. He does not presume to have all the answers, but he does provide us with an honest and fascinating approach to the great questions, and balances suspicion and hope in a way I find both endearing and reassuring.

I think that what I most admire about Larkin's work is his ability to couch these difficult philosophical ideas in simple, colloquial language. Larkin hoped that 'people in pubs would talk about my poems'. I understand this to mean that he wanted his work to be accessible and for its themes to speak to everyone, not just intellectuals. I believe he succeeded in this. The honesty, the complex ideas framed in simple language, and the sheer beauty of his poems makes Larkin a poet whose work will stay with me long after I have finished my Leaving Cert studies.

(Note: You must reflect the wording of the title in your essay, so it should be included at this stage in your essay.)

'MCMIV' is a snapshot of a moment in time just before the world it portrays changes utterly. The men in the photo are queuing to enlist in the army and are 'Grinning as if it were all / An august Bank Holiday lark'. We, like Larkin, know that what they are facing is far from a game and that few of them will return to tend the gardens they left tidy before their departure.

One of the aspects of this poem that appeals to me most is the way in which Larkin blends the charming, nostalgic descriptions of England at the outbreak of World War I with the idea of a threat hanging over all of this beauty and all of this innocence. The England the men are leaving is beautifully, simply and nostalgically described. The children wear old-fashioned

clothes, and many are patriotically named after kings and queens. There is a holiday atmosphere as the shops are closed but the pubs are 'Wide open all day', suggesting welcome, inclusiveness and warmth. The countryside is mellow and relaxed in the sunshine: 'The place-names all hazed over / With flowering grasses and fields'. However, the spectre of war makes itself felt and a shadow hangs over the seemingly idyllic English towns and countryside. The children's clothes are not just old-fashioned, they are 'dark-coloured'; the wheat is 'restless'; and the reference to the 'Domesday lines' reminds us that although man may conquer lands, such victories are ultimately unimportant and in years to come all evidence of them will be eroded by nature.

There is little hope in this poem, only sadness for an era that has gone forever. The inexorable passage of time is emphasised by the fact that the poem comprises only one sentence. This reinforces the idea of time flowing on and gives the poem a sense of continuity. Yet all that really continues unchanged is 'the countryside not caring'. The pre-war world is gone forever and the men waiting in line are unaware that the chances are that their lives, their marriages and all they hold dear will last only 'a little while longer'. The men in the photo fought, and may well have died, for a way of life that was ended by the war itself. Those who returned faced a future in which there would never be 'such innocence again'. And yet, even though the message may be bleak, this poem is one of my favourites, perhaps because it presents its sobering message in such a gentle and beautiful way.

Like 'MCMXIV', 'An Arundel Tomb' shows us how brief our lives are and how our achievements, our way of life and all that we hold dear will inevitably vanish. In MCMXIV, however, Larkin examines the brevity of life and an inexorably changing world in terms of a generation devastated and a country transformed by war, while in 'An Arundel Tomb' it is a specific couple – 'the earl and countess' – who force him to wonder what, if anything, awaits us when our lives have faded into 'a scrap of history'.

It is the equivocal nature of this poem that makes me come back to it time and time again. It is almost as if Larkin himself is not sure what to believe. He said in a note on the manuscript draft of 'An Arundel Tomb' that 'love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years', but there is that in the poem which seems to say that he almost wishes he could believe love is that strong.

In the opening stanza of the poem Larkin's attitude to the tomb seems detached and even slightly amused by the 'faint hint of the absurd- / The little dogs under their feet.' He is not particularly engaged by the 'plainness of the pre-baroque' until he notices 'with a sharp tender shock' that the earl and countess are holding hands. I believe that this poem is Larkin's wrestling with an inner conflict between logic and emotion. He feels the 'sharp tender shock' but almost immediately begins to question his own reaction.

Having responded emotionally to the sight of the couple's joined hands, Larkin reflects more dispassionately on the changes time has wrought since they died. The world the earl and countess knew has vanished. The 'old tenantry' is no more, and the 'endless altered people' cannot even read the Latin inscription on their tomb. Seasons come and go, and nature continues, unheeding of the social and political changes all around. The people viewing the tomb now may be different to their predecessors, but they – like us - will all end up in 'the same / Bone-littered ground.'

The earl and countess did not think to 'lie so long' in view, and the poet imagines that they would never have expected to be the focus of such public attention. Probably, he says, they thought that 'Such faithfulness in effigy / Was just a detail friends would see'. The word 'lie', of course, has two meanings here. Not only are the couple lying in their tomb, but the idea that their love transcends death is most likely a lie too.

The final stanza of the poem does not give us a definitive answer to the great questions about life, love, death and the passing of time. The words 'hardly' and 'almost' may suggest that Larkin is less than convinced by the bleak message that love does not transcend death, and this may in part explain the fact that the final line of the poem: 'What will survive of us is love' is so often quoted out of context and taken as a definite statement. I find this intriguing, and I noticed with interest on the recent anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Centres in New York that an article, written in the *New Yorker*¹ shortly after the event, ended by quoting this final line in response to an image of two people jumping, hand in hand, from the blazing building. The writer called the line 'a celebrated condolence' and he clearly felt that 'An Arundel Tomb' shows us that love will most certainly triumph over death. I wonder if it is our need to believe this that makes so many readers ignore Larkin's references to the futility of life in the last stanzas of the poem? Ironically, 'What will survive of us is love' has become 'the final blazon' of this poem, showing that mankind has indeed a deep need 'to prove / Our almost-instinct almost true'.

'An Arundel Tomb' explores the idea of change, the passage of time and the meaning of life by looking into the past, while one of Larkin's other best-loved poems – 'Church Going' – is a journey into a possible future in search of answers. Here Larkin uses an impromptu visit to a church to examine the rise of secular values and the gradual setting aside of a belief system which has provided answers to life's great questions for thousands of years.

The ambiguous title of the poem gives us our first hint as to the theme. 'Church Going' could be taken to mean attending church or it could mean that churches are going; they are on the way out. Larkin wonders what will happen when churches 'fall completely out of use'. Will they be kept 'chronically on show' or will they fall into ruin and be assimilated by the natural world, becoming homes for 'rain and sheep'?

I find Larkin's attitude towards the subject of this poem interesting. As in 'An Arundel Tomb', he seems to be torn between two viewpoints. An agnostic for most of his life, Larkin nonetheless takes off his bicycle clips 'in awkward reverence' when he enters the church, and is embarrassed when he reads aloud from the lectern and hears his voice echoing back and seeming to 'snigger briefly'.

The language in the poem reinforces this dichotomy between Larkin's lack of religious belief and his sense that the church does provide something which it would be a shame to lose. The colloquial phrases such as : 'Someone would know, I don't', and 'I've no idea', convey Larkin's disinterest, bemusement and irreverence. The poem is written in iambic pentameter, a metre which lends itself to the normal rhythms of everyday speech, again emphasising the seemingly casual approach to a serious topic. It is almost as if Larkin is determined to show that he is unmoved and unaffected by this place which is sacred to others. However, he admits that visiting churches is a regular habit of his and that he always ends up 'much at a loss like this'. He reflects that churches can give our lives purpose; they are 'serious' places where 'all our compulsions meet, / Are recognised, and robed as destinies.' Without the tradition of the church, important moments in our lives – 'marriage, and birth, /And death' would occur 'in separation' from one another. Larkin may not have faith, but the tone of these lines shows that he recognises the need for man to find meaning in life and he admits that 'that much can never be obsolete'. Even if churches should be reduced to nothing but 'Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky', people will still have 'a hunger' to visit a place where people once took life seriously.

Much of Philip Larkin's poetry is detached and cynical, never quite believing in the happy ending. Yet, like most of us, there is a part of Larkin that longs for the 'happy ever after' and when he thinks he sees it he does not hesitate to bring it to our notice. In 'At Grass', Larkin takes a gentler and even more positive approach to the issue of the transience of life and the questions as to what, if anything, waits in store for us at the end.

The poem opens with the poet watching the horses from such a distance that 'the eye can scarcely pick them out'. The horses stand in 'the cold shade', which, together with the fact that they are almost invisible seems to indicate that they are slipping away from this world.

The poem now moves from its cinematic opening of the image of the horses grazing peacefully in the field to an image of the excitement of the racing world. All is colour and movement: 'silks at the start', 'numbers and parasols' and 'squadrons of empty cars'. There is a startling contrast between the pace and the vivid imagery in the descriptions of the horses' racing years and their present, anonymous, peaceful lives. While the races were clearly exciting and brought the horses fame, the poet hints that it was not a fame they

wanted or needed. He asks if memories 'plague their ears like flies'. The answer seems to be no, the horses do not remember or think about those days. Now they are in 'unmolesting' meadows, implying that the human interference in their lives brought them little happiness compared to the serenity of their present condition. Even the wind which ruffles their tails and manes 'distresses' them. Again, this leads me to believe that the horses are happiest when left alone.

The horses have shaken off their former associations, their former fame, in the way they might slip or shake themselves free of a bridle. Now they stand, resting and comfortable. And if they gallop, it is for joy, because they want to, not because they have to.

The ending of this poem is particularly touching. The pace is slowed down again by Larkin's use of complete phrases ended by commas, leading the reader to pause at the end of each line. This is most appropriate for the slow, meditative scenes the poet is describing. All is peaceful and there is a sense of natural closure with the arrival of 'the groom and the groom's boy' as the day ends. If the references to evening, shadow and being led home are hints of the horses' impending deaths, then they are very gentle and non-threatening. There is no sadness, just a soothing sense of a natural end, emphasised by the repeated assonance of the 'oo' sound in 'the groom and the groom's boy'. This is a wonderfully gentle, peaceful poem which offers a reassuring vision of the ending of life.

I began this essay by saying that Larkin explores the nature of change, death, and the meaning of life. He does not provide us with easy answers, but he does make us think. This, I believe, is one of the greatest gifts any poet can give us. Larkin's viewpoint is honest and unflinching and he does not shy from facing the negative aspects of life. However, I do not find his poems depressing. In fact, I find the glimmers of hope more persuasive because Larkin himself subjects them to close scrutiny and does not fob us off with facile assurances that all will be well. In the words of Seamus Heaney '*Because Larkin is suspicious of any easy consolation, he is sparing of such moments, yet when they come they stream into the discursive and exacting world of his poetry with such trustworthy force that they call for attention.*' It is this 'trustworthy force' of his poetry that makes Philip Larkin the poet on our course whose work has made the most profound impression on me.

Additional Reading:

¹September 24, 2001, *The New Yorker*

by Anthony Lane

“This is Not a Movie.”

[Final paragraph]

“We gazed upward, or at our TV screens, and we couldn’t believe our eyes; but maybe our eyes had been lied to for long enough. Thousands died on September 11th, and they died for real; but thousands died together, and therefore something lived. The most important, if distressing, images to emerge from those hours are not of the raging towers, or of the vacuum where they once stood; it is the shots of people falling from the ledges, and, in particular, of two people jumping in tandem. It is impossible to tell, from the blur, what age or sex these two are, nor does that matter. What matters is the one thing we can see for sure: they are falling hand in hand. Think of Philip Larkin’s poem about the stone figures carved on an English tomb, and the “sharp tender shock” of noticing that they are holding hands. The final line of the poem has become a celebrated condolence, and last Tuesday – in uncounted ways, in final phone calls, in the joined hands of that couple, in circumstances that Hollywood should no longer try to match – it was proved true all over again, and, in so doing, it calmly conquered the loathing and rage in which the crime was conceived. ‘What will survive of us is love’.”

Those long uneven lines
Standing as patiently
As if they were stretched outside
The Oval or Villa Park,
The crowns of hats, the sun
On moustached archaic faces
Grinning as if it were all
An August Bank Holiday lark;

And the shut shops, the bleached
Established names on the sunblinds,
The farthings and sovereigns,
And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,
The tin advertisements
For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
Wide open all day;

And the countryside not caring
The place-names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheat's restless silence;
The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word - the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again

At Grass

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and mane;
Then one crops grass, and moves about
- The other seeming to look on -
And stands anonymous again

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
Two dozen distances sufficed
To fable them : faint afternoons
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,
Whereby their names were artified
To inlay faded, classic Junes -

Silks at the start : against the sky
Numbers and parasols : outside,
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,
And littered grass : then the long cry
Hanging unhushed till it subside
To stop-press columns on the street.

Do memories plague their ears like flies?
They shake their heads. Dusk brims the shadows.
Summer by summer all stole away,
The starting-gates, the crowd and cries -
All but the unmolested meadows.
Almanacked, their names live; they

Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,
Or gallop for what must be joy,
And not a fieldglass sees them home,
Or curious stop-watch prophecies :
Only the groom, and the groom's boy,
With bridles in the evening come.

An Arundel Tomb

Side by side, their faces blurred,
The earl and countess lie in stone,
Their proper habits vaguely shown
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,
And that faint hint of the absurd -
The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque
Hardly involves the eye, until
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still
Clasped empty in the other; and
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace
Thrown off in helping to prolong
The Latin names around the base.

They would no guess how early in
Their supine stationary voyage
The air would change to soundless damage,
Turn the old tenantry away;
How soon succeeding eyes begin
To look, not read. Rigidly they

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths
Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light
Each summer thronged the grass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same

Bone-littered ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.
Now, helpless in the hollow of
An unarmorial age, a trough
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins
Above their scrap of history,
Only an attitude remains:

Time has transfigures them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

Published in 1956 as a part of *The Whitson Weddings*. The tomb is of Richard FitzAlan, 10th Earl of Arundel (ca. 1306-1376) and Eleanor of Lancaster (1318-1372), his second wife. The tomb is located in Chichester Cathedral after having been moved from Lewis Priory. In his will FitzAlan requested to be buried near his wife and that his tomb be no higher than hers.



Church Going

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-
Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate, and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort or other will go on

In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognizable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these - for whom was built
This special shell? For, though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

Ruin-bibber: *One who enjoys visiting ruins. Larkin coined the term 'ruin bibber' himself. The word 'bibber' is an archaic word, meaning drinker.*