

MCMXIV

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.

Background:

This poem was written in 1960. Larkin was born a few years after the end of World War I, but he did see the changes it had wrought on his home country.

Analysis:

The title of the poem immediately creates a sense of distance and a connection with the past. Larkin deliberately used Roman numerals in the poem, saying he wanted to remind the reader of a date on a monument and because 'the emotional impact of nineteen-fourteen written in Arabic numerals [1914] was too great for anything I could possibly write myself'.

Note the way the poem is structured. It is written as one long sentence divided into four stanzas of eight lines each. The flow of the poem as the lines run into one another, and the gentle sibilance throughout create a soothing atmosphere which heightens the contrast between this idyllic place and the horrors that are to come. The long vowel sounds – 'moustached archaic faces – also contribute to the slow, gentle pace and atmosphere of the poem.

Do the uneven lines in the first stanza remind us of the 'uneven lines' queuing to enlist?

The first three stanzas are simple and straightforward. They evoke memories of an England long gone. It is a place of quiet loveliness. Larkin's accurate visual touches bring the scene to life for us. The description of the men's moustached faces as 'archaic' is an interesting one. After all, this poem was written only a few decades after the war, but because the world has changed so utterly, the men seem to belong to an archaic world.

The England Larkin describes is about to vanish forever, but the people in the poem have no idea of what is in store for them. They treat it as a 'lark'. (Larkin liked to play with his own name in his poetry.) The poem is incredibly moving when we consider that these images of near perfection are about to be obliterated.

The sun is blazing in both town and countryside. The impression is one of abundance, joy, relaxation and a sense of assurance that this state of affairs will remain unchanged. However, there is an ominous note raised by the mention of the Domesday lines. In 1086 William the Conqueror divided England into territories that the people at the time thought would last until Domesday. Of course, that did not happen any more than the lines drawn after the First World War lasted.

The reference to fields of wheat has a possible double meaning too. On the one hand it is a positive image but on the other hand it may hint at the men who were mown down like corn. (On the morning of July 1st 1916, in the first 30 minutes of the Battle of the Somme, 30,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded.)

The words 'differently dressed' suggest a critical attitude. The servants lived in small rooms in their masters' houses and did not enjoy the benefits that the upper classes did. This class distinction was about to be ended, however. The First World War effectively spelled an end to the 'upstairs downstairs' life for most people. It could be argued that Larkin is just commenting on this rather than approving or disapproving of it, however.

The word 'never' is repeated three times in the final stanza. The effect of this is to reinforce the idea that this war changed the world and that no matter what happened in the future, men would never again view war with such innocence and complacent belief in England's superiority.



