

An Arundel Tomb

Background

Philip Larkin wrote this poem in 1956 after a visit to Chichester Cathedral. The monument is of an earl and countess of Arundel.

The joined hands of the couple were actually a later addition by a 19th century sculptor who was making repairs to the tomb which had been badly damaged during the Reformation and the Civil War. Before he began to repair them the earl had no arms and the countess' right hand was missing. They weren't even lying together but were on separate tombs. When Larkin found out, he was amused by the historical inaccuracies of his poem.

This poem, published in 'The Whitsun Weddings' in 1964, was one of three read at Larkin's funeral service in Westminster Abbey.

A copy of the poem is now placed at the base of the tomb for visitors to read.

Summary

The earl and the countess are lying together, carved in stone. They are side by side, their facial features difficult to pick out clearly as they have been eroded over the centuries.

They are wearing clothes which are appropriate to their status but they too are difficult to see clearly now.

He is wearing a suit of armour, jointed at the places where it meets the body's joints, she is wearing a pleated dress: the pleats are stiff because they are made of stone

And there is a hint of something ridiculous

The little dogs at their feet.

Note: When Larkin sees the tomb first, he is unimpressed. It is blurred and unclear and nothing about its plainness attracts his notice particularly. It seems a typical mediaeval monument, stiff and dull. When he notices the little dogs at their feet, he thinks them slightly silly; he is definitely not moved or in any way drawn to the couple on the tomb.

.....

The tomb is plain (Baroque was a more ornate style of art and architecture that flourished from about 1550 to 1750 – this tomb was before that time)

Nothing about it seems to catch the eye or interest the poet particularly until

He notices the earl's left hand gauntlet, (long glove from a suit of armour) it is still

Together with the other glove in the earl's hand but it is empty, his hand is not in it, and

One sees, with a sense of surprise and sharp tenderness

His hand is withdrawn from the gauntlet and is holding his wife's hand

Note: When the poet suddenly notices the earl's hand withdrawn from his gauntlet and holding his wife's hand, he is struck by the gesture and is extremely moved. Now his attention begins to focus on the couple. His interest has been piqued and he is not as detached as he was in the first stanza.

.....

The couple would not have imagined they would lie together for so long

Such faithfulness, commemorated in a stone monument

Was something one would only have expected their friends to notice about them

The sculptor probably decided to add the hand holding himself, without being told to

It was just a casual decision to add that touch, he was really commissioned to record

Their names in Latin around the base of the tomb.

Note: The couple would hardly have imagined that this was how they would be remembered or that this gesture would be the only thing visitors would particularly notice. The idea of the tomb was to record their names for posterity as they were important people in their time.

.....

The couple would not have imagined how soon

In their journey through time, as they lay on their backs, motionless in stone

The air would silently begin to erode their features on the tomb

The old feudal system would vanish

The many visitors, one group succeeding, or taking over from the last, would begin

To look at their inscription but not be able to read it because it was in Latin, and instead they would only look at the couple holding hands. Stiffly cast in stone, unmoving, they...

Note: They could not have imagined how times would change, that the feudal system would pass away and that visitors to the tomb would only look at them with mild interest; they would not be able to read or understand the Latin inscription around the base of the tomb. The couple remain unchanged, however. Cast in stone, they lie together.

.....

Persisted, joined together through centuries

Snow fell, winter after countless winter. Sunlight

Filled the stained glass windows every summer, a cheerful

Sound of birdsong filled the air above

The graveyard, filled with bones, the graveyard never changed. And up the paths

Came visitors, differently dressed according to the fashions of the times.

Note: The couple's monument survived the passing of centuries. Seasons came and went, visitors in the different fashions of the last several hundred years came to the cathedral. The only thing apart from themselves that remained unchanged was the graveyard.

.....

The visitors somehow eroded the identity of the couple (perhaps literally by physically touching the monument or figuratively by not understanding the Latin and not knowing who the couple were)

Now, they lie powerless in an age they would probably regard as shallow

It is an age where knights in armour no longer exist,

All that remains of their age is a memory, as unsubstantial as coils of smoke

Hanging above their monument which is a tiny piece of that bygone age

All that is left is them lying in that 'attitude' or posed position.

Note: The times have changed so much that the couple would not relate to anything about modern day England. All the values they held dear are gone forever. The image of the coils of smoke above the tomb has two possible meanings, it could refer to the memories of their time, which are as insubstantial as wisps of smoke now, or it could refer to the values of this modern age, which are shallow and worthless and as vague as coils of smoke above the tomb.

.....

The passage of time had changed them into

Something they probably never wanted to be. The image of them lying together, hands clasped in faithful love

Has become what they are known for

Their coat of arms has faded from the armour; this gesture is what they are known for now

And we like it because we believe it proves

Our theory that love survives, even if that is a flawed belief

The only thing that will survive when we die is love.

Note: This is the most controversial stanza in the poem. Critics differ on whether the poem ends on a note of hope or of pessimism. Larkin may be saying that love will survive, that it will last beyond death or he may be saying, by his references to 'almost' that this is what we'd like to believe, but it's not true. I feel the second explanation is probably correct. Does the couple's love survive because a sculptor, on a whim, joined their hands together? We might like to think so, but Larkin doubts it. The idea of love survives; we want to believe it is the most important thing about us but is it just an 'attitude', like the couple's pose? Larkin was certainly moved when he saw the joined hands, his initial reaction was one of tender surprise but on deeper reflection, he seems to be saying that he fell into the same trap as all of us; the romantic side of him wanted to believe the gesture was intentional and that it symbolised eternal, undying love. His comment that the couple would hardly have wanted to be remembered that way and that the pose was probably chosen without their knowledge proves he doesn't really believe the monument is a testimony to everlasting love.

Theme

There are several themes in this poem, the most important are the enduring nature of love and the passing of time.

Love: Whether or not Larkin fully agrees with the notion that love survives after we are long gone, he does acknowledge that this is the message modern visitors get from seeing the couple on the tomb holding hands.

Time: Time changes so many things; nothing about today's society would be recognisable to the mediaeval couple. The theme of time is bound up with the theme of love, which is the only thing that has not changed.

Tone

Like all of Larkin's poems on the course, the tone is detached at the start. He describes the tombs but without any particular feeling apart from a fleeting reference to the absurdity of the little dogs. Then when he notices their clasped hands, the poet becomes more emotionally involved with the couple, he feels tenderness and surprise. The ending may be seen as optimistic or as an ironic view of our longing for everlasting love.

Imagery

The poem contains images of love, of life and death all intertwined. Look at the fifth stanza, the poet gives us the beautiful image of the birdsong filling the air but then says they are singing in the graveyard. This juxtaposition (positioning side by side) of the two seemingly unconnected images is powerful; Larkin is reminding us of the realities of life. He never allows himself to become completely swept up in the idea of perfect, everlasting love and happiness in this poem.

The metaphor comparing time to a 'voyage' in the fourth stanza is particularly effective, it gives us an impression of the couple travelling through time together and makes us imagine them in 20th century England and wonder what they would think of it.

'Love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years.'

Philip Larkin

