

At Grass

Background

Much of Philip Larkin's poetry is detached and cynical, never quite believing in the happy ending. This may be as a result of his upbringing with a cold, tyrannical father and a weak mother. He did not see that people could live together in contentment and happiness and this pessimism is reflected in much of his poetry. Yet, like all 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.

Summary

It is difficult to see them from this distance

They are sheltering in a cold shade

But then their manes and tails are ruffled or moved by the wind

One grazes and walks around

The other one looks at him

And then stands anonymous, almost invisible again.

Note: The poet is detached from the horses. He sees them from a distance which may be figurative or literal or perhaps both. This is typical of Larkin, to view his subjects from afar, it shows emotional detachment. When he does notice them it is because the wind has stirred their tails and manes. The use of the word 'distresses' is significant here, it implies unhappiness. Why does he hint at the fact that the horses might be miserable? Perhaps it is because they are happiest when left alone, untouched by man or nature.

But maybe fifteen years ago

They were set apart from other horses by the races they won and their names are legend

The memories of long-gone afternoon race meetings

Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps (types of horse races)

Led to their names being engraved on cups or on race programmes,

And now the names are faded although those June race days were wonderful.

Note: The horses, who are 'anonymous' now were famous once. They ran races and won. Although their names were recorded at the time, they are faded now.

There were the bright colours of the jockeys' silks, highlighted against the sky

The numbers of the bookies and the horses, the parasols protecting the ladies from the sun

And the car park full of empty cars lined up row after row,

The grass littered with used tickets and bookies' slips, and the roar of the crowd

Hanging in the air as they cheered on their horses and the noise dying away as the race ended,

The results became newspaper headlines.

Note: The poet tells us of the horses' racing past. He imagines the excitement, the colours, the action and the fame. This is in stark contrast with their quiet lives today, grazing together in a field away from prying eyes.

Do the memories of those days torment the horses as flies do, buzzing around their heads?

They shake their heads. The shadows lengthen, the evening becomes darker.

As the summers of their past fade, so does the daylight. The summers fade in memory.

The starting gates from which the horses sprang to begin the race, the crowds, the shouts of encouragement -

All that is left is the quiet fields which do not bother or harass the horses,

Their names live on in racing history, in books while they...

Note: The poet wonders if the horses are disturbed by the memories of their racing days, if they long for the fame of those times. His comment that, 'They shake their heads' has a double meaning. It could simply be the horses' response to flies, shaking their heads to get

rid of them or it could be their way of saying that they are not bothered by the memories of their former glory. It is interesting to note the use of the word 'unmolesting' to describe the meadows the horses graze in. Does it tell us that the horses were molested, or bothered by humans in their racing days and are at peace at last? Is the world they live in now more natural and peaceful?

It is also important to note that the poet now seems to be closer to the horses. He could barely see them in the first stanza, now he is close enough to see their heads shaking. This is probably a sign that the poet feels emotionally closer to the horses rather than an actual physical closeness.

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.

Nobody watches them through binoculars,

Nobody tries to work out how likely they are to win their next race by timing them with a stopwatch:

It is only the groom and his assistant who come to see them now

With bridles to lead or ride them home to their stables.

Note: Now the horses are free to be horses. All the pressures of racing are gone, nobody is interested in them any more and they can do what they like. If they want to gallop, they can, but because they want to, not because they have to. The only people who see them now are the groom and his boy. The references to evening, shadow and being led home may be hints of the horses' impending deaths as they are elderly. If so, it is a very gentle hint and doesn't imply any real sadness, just a natural end.

Theme

The theme of this poem is the way in which life moves on and time passes regardless of fame or glory.

Tone

The tone of this poem is nostalgic, the poet wonders about the horses' heyday, their most glorious wins and at the same time he celebrates their freedom and happiness now; they are free to be horses, not instruments of human ambition.

Imagery

There is a strong contrast between the imagery used to describe the horses in their natural state, at grass, and the racing days of their past. 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' them. The answer seems to be no, the horses do not remember or think about those days. Now they are in 'unmolested' meadows, implying that the human interference in their lives was not entirely welcomed, the fields now do not bother them. Even the wind which ruffles their tails and manes 'distresses' them. Again, this leads us to believe that the horses are happiest when left alone.

Assonance and alliteration

In the second line, there are the repeated 'sh' sounds of "shade" and "shelter", and the repeated 'a' sound of "they" and "shade". In the third line the 't' sound is repeated in "till", "distress", and "tail", and the 'a' sound is again repeated in "tail" and "mane". These repetitions of consonants and vowels continue through the poem, and they connect words and lines by sound. This pushes the action of the poem forward. In the last verse the word 'groom' is repeated, this repeated 'oo' sound is soothing and makes us feel that the horses are content and calm in their world now.

Points to note

- The poem is written in such a way that the stresses on the words make the same beats as would a galloping horse.
- The action of the poem begins slowly with the horses standing in the field, it speeds up when the races are described and it slows down again towards the end, echoing the pace of the horses' lives.

- The poet uses enjambment (continuation of a sentence or clause over a line break) to speed up the action in the second and third stanzas, phrases are not completed at the end of a line but rather continue into the next line without any pause. This fast pace is appropriate for the scene the poet is describing.
- In the first, fourth and fifth stanzas, the poet uses complete phrases ended by commas. This causes the reader to pause at the end of each line and this is most appropriate for the slow, meditative scenes the poet is describing.