

The Explosion

On the day of the explosion
Shadows pointed towards the pithead:
In the sun the slagheap slept.

Down the lane came men in pitboots
Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke
Shouldering off the freshened silence.

One chased after rabbits; lost them;
Came back with a nest of lark's eggs;
Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.

So they passed in beards and moleskins
Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter
Through the tall gates standing open.

At noon there came a tremor; cows
Stopped chewing for a second; sun
Scarfed as in a heat-haze dimmed.

*The dead go on before us they
Are sitting in God's house in comfort
We shall see them face to face-*

plain as lettering in the chapels
It was said and for a second
Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed-
Gold as on a coin or walking
Somehow from the sun towards them

One showing the eggs unbroken.

Background

Philip Larkin wrote this poem in 1969 after hearing of a mining tragedy in the north of England. He felt great sympathy for the miners and wanted to write this elegy in their honour.

Summary

On the day of the explosion

Shadows pointed towards the mine where the men worked

The slagheap, the huge pile of dusty, gritty waste generated by mining, seemed to sleep in the sunshine of the morning.

Note

We know from the title that the poem is about an explosion, now, having read the first stanza, we know it's an explosion in a coal mine. The repetition of the word 'explosion' in the first line reinforces the sense of foreboding. The alliteration in the first stanza creates a gentle, peaceful atmosphere that is at odds with what we know will happen. The repeated 's' sound is calming and creates a gentle, soothing mood. However, the hint of underlying danger is created by referring to the slagheap 'sleeping' as if it were a dormant volcano a drowsy monster. By personifying the pile of coal dust and shale in this way, Larkin adds to the sense of menace something dangerous is lurking, something is threatening the miners. The shadows pointing towards the pithead are sinister. This is a very dark image of a sunny morning; the shadows are perhaps foreshadowing the impending deaths of the miners. The language of the poem is deliberately casual and informal, 'On the day of the explosion' tells us of a dramatic event in a deliberately understated way. The event is allowed to speak for itself; the poet makes no attempt to stir our emotions with strong words. Note the way the word 'explosion' stands out in the description of a calm, sunny, quiet morning. There is no other mention of sound; everything is still at this point, even if there is a sense of dread suggested by the mention of shadows and a sleeping slagheap.

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Summary

The men came down the lane in mining boots,

Coughing and swearing and smoking pipes,

Filling the silent morning with noise.

Note

Into this calm, quiet, sunny morning come the miners. They are rough, uneducated men,

coughing, swearing and ignoring the beauty and silence of the early morning. They have no idea of their imminent deaths, naturally, but we do and the tension of the poem is mounting with each stanza.

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One of them chased rabbits, he didn't manage to catch them,
He came back with a nest of larks eggs he had found,
He showed them to the others and then put them back safely in the grass.

Note

This is a charming image of one of the young men playfully chasing rabbits and delightedly showing a nest of eggs to his fellow miners. The details are touching and sweet and the gentleness and playfulness only make the impending catastrophe more poignant. Although Larkin is remaining a detached observer in this poem, his sympathy for the miners is clear. He gives us positive images of them, moving details which bring them to life for us. Note the use of verbs in this stanza, 'chased', 'lost', 'came', 'showed', 'lodged', all adding the the sense of movement, of vibrancy and of life. Knowing as we do that this vibrancy, this life will soon end, we are moved.

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Summary

On they walked, bearded men in rough trousers,
Fathers, brothers, several members of the same family, laughing and calling each other by their nicknames,
Through the tall, open gates to the mine.

Note

The miners pass by, but the word 'passed' is also used to talk of those who have died or 'passed away'. The men belong to a close-knit community, tied together by bonds of family and friendship. We know this because they are referred to as fathers and brothers and use nicknames when talking amongst themselves. They pass into the tall gates which may reflect the gates of heaven or of hell. The gates are 'standing open', almost as if the miners are being invited to their deaths. They walk through the gates, oblivious.

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At noon, the earth shook, cows
Stopped grazing for a second when they sensed it, the sun
Was dimmed as if a scarf was held over it or a heat haze blurred its brightness

Note

The actual explosion is described in a very detached way. There is no mention of the noise, the pain, the fear, the grief or the horror. Instead, Larkin only tells us that the cows stopped grazing for a moment when they sensed the vibration and the sun appeared dim. The fact that the cows continued grazing is proof that life goes on regardless. The sun dimmed because the dust from the explosion rose into the air and created a haze or smog. It may also be a reference to the description of Jesus' death in the Bible: the sun darkened when he died, according to St. Luke. The simple language doesn't take from the emotional impact of the tragedy, rather, it adds to it. We use our own imaginations to fill the gaps. The miners were straightforward, simple men and it is only fitting that their deaths should be described in language they could understand, in language they would find accessible.

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Summary

*The dead go to heaven to wait for us, they
Are sitting with God in comfort
We will meet them again in heaven*

Note

This is a prayer from a funeral service, it may be in italics to emphasise that it is not the poet's own words being used here but rather a quote from the Bible. It may also be because Larkin – an agnostic - wants to distance himself slightly from the quote or it may be because he is highlighting the significance of these words. The quote itself introduces a note of hope in the midst of despair. The message is a comforting one and brings some solace to the miners' wives.

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Summary

(These two stanzas run together in meaning so I will treat them as one for the purposes of the notes.)

It was said that the wives saw these words as plainly as if they were written on the chapel wall and that they also had a vision of their dead husbands walking towards them, transfigured into golden images of brightness, larger than life and walking with the sun glowing behind them, creating a halo of light.

The vision the wives have of their husbands is a glorious one, of men transformed into heavenly beings, bathed in a golden light and larger than life. The sun, which had been

dimmed at the moment of their deaths, now shines brighter than ever and surrounds them with a halo.

One of the men in the vision is holding the eggs. The eggs are unbroken.

Note

There is hope now: the men are born again to a new life in the next world and the tone is optimistic. It is significant, too, that the poet refers to all the wives as having the vision at the same time: this strengthens the idea of community which the men shared in the second, third and fourth stanzas.

This final line is important. The eggs are a symbol of new life, of continuity and of hope for the future. They are unbroken and they, like the men, have been transformed into something wonderful, a vision of immortality. Death is not the end.



Theme

The theme of this poem is the triumph of life over death. The men led hard lives and died horribly yet the main message is one of hope, of a vision of immortality.

Tone

The tone of this poem is detached and impersonal at the start but a clear sense of the poet's sympathy for the miners emerges as he gives us touching details of their lives. The ending is optimistic: there is hope for the future.

Features of style

- The language in this poem is simple and straightforward, Larkin wanted his poetry to be accessible to all and deliberately wrote in a way that people could relate to. Even when the sun itself is dimmed by the explosion, it is 'Scarfed as in a heat-haze', a simple comparison with no great sense of drama. A scarf is an everyday object; the poet uses such understated language to great effect. It reinforces the miners' simple lives and the fact that they were ordinary men doing a difficult job.
- The only divergence from this simplistic imagery is the description of the wives' vision of the men. They are transformed into heavenly beings, larger than life, bathed in a golden light.
- The poem begins quietly, nothing moves until the men appear, they are loud and active and fill the morning's silence with their talk and their activity.
- All is silent and calm again after the explosion.
- In the wives' vision, the men are moving again, walking towards them in an echo of their journey in the earlier part of the poem.
- The description of the men in the second, third and fourth stanzas is of larger than life characters. In the wives' vision, they are actually larger than life; death has not diminished them.
- The eggs are an important symbol of hope, of continuity.
- The first five stanzas end with full stops, as if the poet hopes to delay the catastrophe by slowing down the poem. The pauses add to the sense of tension. The last line stands alone and in so doing reinforces the hopeful note on which the poem ends.



Ambulances

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
They come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited.

Then children strewn on steps or road,
Or women coming from the shops
Past smells of different dinners, see
A wild white face that overtops
Red stretcher-blankets momentarily
As it is carried in and stowed,

And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true.
The fastened doors recede. *Poor soul*,
They whisper at their own distress;

For borne away in deadened air
May go the sudden shut of loss
Round something nearly at an end,
And what cohered in it across
The years, the unique random blend
Of families and fashions, there

At last begin to loosen. Far
From the exchange of love to lie
Unreachable inside a room
The traffic parts to let go by

Brings closer what is left to come,
And dulls to distance all we are.

Summary

Ambulances move through the city streets at noon, their doors and windows preventing anyone from seeing what is happening inside them. People look at them curiously, but they give nothing away. They are shiny and grey in colour, with a crest or plaque showing which organisation they belong to. They might stop at any kerb; nobody knows where they will visit next, but they will visit everyone, eventually.

Note

This is a rather grim and bleak poem about death. The ambulances move through the city streets in the middle of the day, emphasising the fact that death can come at any time. People are drawn to the ambulances, but they are 'closed' like confessionals. They are similar to confessionals in that those outside cannot see what is happening inside. There is also the connection between the fact that when people are in a confessional or in an ambulance, their outer self is stripped away to some extent. They are vulnerable and in need of help or consolation. Larkin was an agnostic, but he did not underestimate the power of religion.

The ambulances are not threatening in appearance. However, their very ordinariness reminds us how ordinary death is. The last two lines of the poem emphasise the fact that death is a part of life and can come to anyone. Nobody is safe from death, it can stop at 'any kerb'. Death is random and there is no avoiding it. We are reminded that it will come for us, in time.

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Summary

People who are going about their daily business stop to watch as someone is carried into an ambulance and taken away. The patient looks terrified, but they are quickly put into the back of the ambulance and driven away.

Note

The children are 'strewn' about the place and the women are 'coming from the shops'. It is almost as if this moment freezes time and shows us the people as they would be if captured in a photograph. They are not prepared for the arrival of the ambulance, just as we are rarely prepared for the arrival of death. Again, we are reminded that it can come to anyone at any time, even in the middle of an ordinary day.

The ordinariness of the scene contrasts with the patient's terror. He or she is 'a wild white face' as they are lifted into the ambulance. That person is now facing their mortality and the fact that this incredibly difficult and frightening ordeal takes place amidst the normal hustle and bustle of a world filled with the smell of dinners cooking and children playing shows us how life goes on for everyone else, even if it stops or changes unutterably for someone else. We feel that the freeze-frame moment will end when the ambulance pulls away, and that the people who watched will continue with their normal daily routine. There is something impersonal in the way the patient is described as 'it' and reduced only to a face seen briefly over stretcher blankets. Also, the patient is 'stowed' – put away neatly in the back of the ambulance the way you might put a piece of luggage in a locker or under a seat. There is no real drama in this situation for anyone but the patient.

Notice the description of the patient. We never discover if the person is a man or a woman, and it does not matter. The poet James Shirley described death as a 'leveller': all are equal in the face of death. In this poem, Larkin goes beyond that idea to take an even more bleak view of illness and death. The patient is dehumanised – reduced to 'a wild white face'.

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Summary

The people watching have a moment of realisation that death is close to them and they are moved. The pity they feel, though, is more for themselves than it is for the patient. For a second, they see death and they see what lies ahead for all of us. Everything that seems important now will dissolve and there will be nothing of us left. The door of the ambulance is shut and the person inside is no longer part of this world. They are removed from the sensual aspects of the world and their life is beginning to unravel. Everything that held them to this world is coming loose as they near death. The traffic parts to let the ambulance pass and the person inside moves further away from the rest of the world. At the end, all life is reduced to this and everyone goes to their final destination in the same way.

Note

The people watching are forced, even if it is only for a moment, to face the terrible truth about death. No matter who we are or how important we think our lives are, we will all dissolve into nothingness in the same way. This is a very bleak view of life and death and offers no comfort in the form of heaven or any sort of afterlife. All that waits for us is emptiness. Those watching are moved to pity and distress, but it is not really pity for the patient; rather it is the horror they feel on thinking of their own mortality and the

inevitability of death. There is a contrast between the word 'soul' and Larkin's view that there is no life beyond this one.

The person in the ambulance is either dead or dying. The air inside the ambulance is 'deadened air', emphasising the fact that the patient is no longer a part of a world filled with the smell of 'different dinners', for example. There is a sense of loss as the doors are shut and the person taken away. They are shut off from the world. We are reminded again of the opening lines in which the separateness of the ambulance was highlighted. It does not give away its secrets but just as those outside cannot see into it, so those inside cannot see out. They are now in a different world and there is no connection between it and our world.

Everything that defined the person begins to slip away. Everything that made them 'unique' is vanishing and has no significance. In death, we are all alike. 'Families and fashion' mean nothing now. Not even love can touch us at the end. Death is a solitary experience in which, like the patient in the ambulance, we draw further and further away from the world and from everything that once mattered.

Theme

Sickness and/or death: This poem tells us that death is inevitable. It will come for all of us in time. Who we are now, our loves and our likes, mean nothing when death comes. Our very being will dissolve away as we leave this world. All that awaits us is 'emptiness'. This is a very bleak view of death and of the transience of life.

Tone

The tone of this poem is bleak and rather depressing. There is no note of hope, nothing for us to look forward to after death but 'emptiness'.

Features of style

- The language is straightforward and simple, which adds a certain force to the message. We cannot avoid what the poem is saying.
- The ambulance is a symbol of death.
- The person in the poem is dehumanised by illness and death. For all the detailed descriptions in the poem, we learn nothing of this person. The person – 'it' – is losing their personality, all that made them unique or special to others.

- The verb 'stow' adds to the idea that the person in the ambulance no longer has an identity. They are packed away like luggage.
- The sounds in the poem add to the bleak tone. There is a half-rhyme between 'noons' and 'None' which brings to mind the sound of the siren of an ambulance.
- The alliteration in the last line 'dulls to distance' adds to the idea of the depressing finality of death. The 'd' sounds are rather abrupt and quite harsh, emphasising the unavoidable, harsh nature of death.



Note: This poem is not on your course. I merely include it in the vain hope that you will read it and see what I mean when I mentioned it in my notes on 'Ambulances'. You are under no pressure to read it, of course, and it does bring with it the risk of extra education and a broader mind. You have been warned. Aoife

Death the Leveller

The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against Fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Sceptre and Crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crookèd scythe and spade.

Some men with swords may reap the field,
And plant fresh laurels where they kill:
But their strong nerves at last must yield;
They tame but one another still:
Early or late
They stoop to fate,
And must give up their murmuring breath
When they, pale captives, creep to death.

The garlands wither on your brow,
Then boast no more your mighty deeds!
Upon Death's purple altar now
See where the victor-victim bleeds.
Your heads must come
To the cold tomb:
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in their dust.

James Shirley 1596-1666

