

The Whitsun Weddings

First published in *Collected Poems* in 1964, "The Whitsun Weddings" is an account of a train journey the speaker makes from Hull to London. Whitsun, or Whit Sunday, is traditionally a British and Irish tradition, particularly celebrated by Anglicans and Methodists. It is marked for the Christian festival of the Pentecost and Whitsuntide, the weekend for the seventh Sunday after Easter, is widely accepted as a time of holiday for the workers. Given the extended nature of the holiday, Whitsuntide is a popular time for marriages when couples can marry in their villages and return to the city in time for the working week.

Rhyme Scheme and Structure

Larkin creates an unusual stanza form for this poem. The rhyme scheme is consistent throughout the eight stanzas: ABABCDECDE. It begins with the alternating quatrain ABAB which gives a sense of clear form, and then moves into the sestet CDECDE where rhymes become less noticeable because they get more distant from each other. The alternating lines of the quatrain are partly hidden, however, because the shortness of the four-syllable second line cuts against the poem's iambic beat so strongly: when reading, we do not accept it as a full line, but take a breath before returning to iambic pentameter for the third and remaining lines of the stanza. We "hear" a natural conversational voice through most of the poem: believable and unforced like the voice in "Poetry of Departures".

Metrically, the stanzas are regular, but the second line of each stanza cuts against the five-foot length of all other lines: either we wait before restarting pentameter rhythm in the third line, and a lengthy pause is generated; or, we read on, and become disoriented because our internal sense of rhythm finishes at the sixth syllable of line 3. A large proportion of enjambments (44 out of 80 lines) acts further to obscure the regularity of rhyme and metre. Several of these run-on line endings begin a phrase with only one word at the end of the line, as in "and/ Canals" (ll. 14-15), and "girls/ In parodies of fashion" (ll. 28-29), and five of the stanza breaks are run over. In short, Larkin has created a form which has tension. On the one hand, we have stanzaic and rhyming regularity. On the other hand, the second short line of each stanza, and syntax and sense that cut across the pattern, break up the poem's form. The may be one of the reasons why "The Whitsun Weddings" is a heightened, dramatic experience to read, despite its discursive, anecdotal voice and subject matter.

Analysis of the Poem

The story is straightforward. Interviewed for *The South Bank Show* in 1981, Larkin explained the poem arose from a railway journey between Hull and London on Whit Saturday, 1955:

... train that stopped at every station and I hadn't realized that, of course, this was the train that all the wedding couple would get on and go to London for their honeymoon; it was an eye-opener to me. Every part was different but the same somehow. They all looked different but they were all doing the same things and sort of feeling the same things. I suppose the train stopped about four, five, six stations between Hull and London and there was a sense of gathering emotional momentum. Every time you stopped fresh emotion climbed aboard. And finally between Petersborough and London when hurtle on, you felt the whole thing was being aimed like a bullet at the heart of things, you know. All this fresh, open life. Incredible experience. I've never forgotten it. (Quoted in *A Writer's Life*, pp. 287-8)

This is precisely the story told in the poem. As we can expect from Larkin, it is the multitonned, shifting voice of the speaker that provides richness of implication and finds complexity in the subject.

The speaker begins casually with "That Whitsun" and the inconsequential details of "One-twenty" and "three-quarters-empty" train. He is telling the story of the journey, so he does not bother to tell us what caused him to catch a later than usual train. This conversational voice is presented all through the poem from time to time. The same speaker remarks that "At first, I didn't notice what a noise..." (l. 21), or "for/ Some fifty minutes" (ll. 59-60), or that marriages "got under way" (l. 63). Along the way, however, the voice modulates into a number of other tones. These follow the speaker's changes of attitude and mood as he comes out of his isolation to observe other people, then meditates on the significance of what he sees. The process is one of slow recognition, a gradual absorption of signals from outside followed by increasingly intense speculation.

First, he comes out of his life and settles into the train. He is evidently a creature of long-established habits. Not only may he way at the same time every *day*: this character catches the same train out of Hull, every *year*. This year, however, he is late. Furthermore, the phrase "getting away" and the detail "One twenty" indicate his eagerness to leave, and a mild irritation at whatever forced him to change his usual habits. Once in the train, though, his mood changes: "all sense/ Of being in a hurry gone", he can finally relax. The passive ease sets up the mood of the first stage of the journey, and during this stage he becomes guardedly lyrical. He allows himself some powerful metaphoric combinations, such as "tall heat that slept"; an effective, rhythmic rhetorical triad with symbolic overtones ("Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet"); and sudden touches of intensity related to the sun, such as "blinding" windscreens, the hothouse that "flashed uniquely", and "short-shadowed" cattle. We

are carried into his viewpoint and the train's movement as "hedges dipped/ And rose". All of these elements might create a rhapsodic response to the landscape, but they are intermixed with prosaic observations of uglier things, set in plain language□ they "smelt the fish-dock", passed canals with "floating of industrial froth". There was a "reek of buttoned carriage-cloth" and towns are "nondescript", surrounded by "acres of dismantled cars". It is as if the speaker responds to natural, rural beauty with a powerful upsurge of vague emotion, but holds himself in check with prosaic reminders. Each time he descends to the less beautiful, his tone changes back to the merely literal, the matter-of-fact.

From the third stanza he begins to notice the weddings and we see a second transition of mood. There has been vivid reference to the sunlight, and now he comments that its brightness prevents him from seeing what is in the shade. For a moment, he thinks the merry sounds he hears are coming from "porters larking with the mails" and he goes on reading. The phrase "porters larking with the mails" comes from a gentleman's description of ordinary chaps having fun: it belongs to a film comedy of the period, an Ealing comedy. The sense of a gentleman passenger's detachment and superiority is consolidated as he "went on reading". When his compartment passes the actual wedding-party on the platform, the speaker begins in the same mood: girls are "grinning and pomaded" in "parodies of fashion, heels and veils" and we can catch the contemptuous tone: they are provincial, stupid, and their obvious lack of current fashion knowledge makes them look ridiculous. There is a change at "irresolutely", which suddenly carries us from objective scorn (how ridiculous they are!) to the subjective (what are they feeling?). It is a sudden swing into the girls' perspective, from the speaker's, and it takes us by surprise. The simile that follows brings a sudden identification of time and space (the end of an "event" as the end of the platform) combined with vagueness. The conflation of time and space suggest the speaker being, as he says, "struck", while a vague "something" conveys his wish to better understand what he witnessed.

The first wedding he notices, then, is both absurd and vaguely challenging. What is the challenge? The simile of lines 31-3 tells us: something "survived" an "event". The speaker has sensed that something more significant may be occurring, and there is a hint it may constitute a victory over time. "Something" may last even after its time□ its "event"□ has gone. The speaker is left in an ambivalent mood: amusedly scornful and deeply interested.

Intrigued, he leans out to watch at the next station, and sees a second wedding in progress. This section builds on the first, scornful side of the speaker's mood. Fathers, mothers, uncles and girls' coiffures, clothes and colour sense are all observed for ridicule. There is no empathy in "loud and fat" or "shouting smut". The speaker goes out of his way to paint the vulgarity of the scene, and seems to get carried away in defining the social milieu of these wedding-parties. Not only does he see them on the platform, he also imagines the receptions they have just come from and where these have taken place: in "cafes", "banquet-halls up yards" or "coach-party annexes". The speaker's satiric tone comes clear from the oxymoronic effect of "banquet-halls" (associated with palaces and high society) "up yards" (conjuring up a community hall, or an outbuilding of a small country-town hotel); and "bunting-dressed" (celebration) "coach-party annexes" (seedy commercialism).

However, the speaker's mood swings yet again when a third wedding is described. Now, his second response begins to dominate, and he searches in the guests' faces for an answer to his question: what is the "something" that has survived the event? Again, the poem provides us with a transition as he notices that children find weddings "dull", before juxtaposing his two reactions in balance again: fathers feel success so "huge and wholly farcical". "Huge" suggests the weddings' significance, but they are simultaneously ridiculous. However, it does not make sense that the fathers find their success farcical, at least not consciously: the speaker's perspective is still combined with the party's. Next, he uses a simile ("like a happy funeral") to convey how the women feel; and finally an assertive metaphor that dispenses with any distinction between his view and theirs: "girls... stared/ At a religious wounding". This third attempt to define the weddings is loaded with paradox. "Happy funeral", "religious wounding", "huge... farcical" are all poised on the edge of making fun, but are too paradoxical to provoke an easy laugh. The lines are also full of surprises: instead of something like "wonderful" we read "farcical"; instead of "event" we read "funeral"; and, instead of "ceremony" or "ritual" we read "wounding". Each surprise is heavy with connotations. "Funeral" brings images of death and mourning, coffins and graves, and the colour black to our minds; while "Religious wounding" may make us think of the spear in Christ's side, and holes in his hands and feet; or (in a literary vein) the mysterious wound that can only be healed by achieving the quest of the Holy Grail.

There is a satiric effect on a more prosaic level, as well. It is traditional for women to cry at weddings, and naive girls will imagine the loss of virginity on the wedding-night as both a mystery (religious) and bloody (wounding). Perhaps the tradition of hanging out the bloodied bedsheet the morning after, to show the world the marriage has been consummated, also comes to mind. All of these elements, then, are part of the mystique and superstition surrounding weddings; and the speaker's third attempt to define the experience is exceptionally rich in implication, ambivalent and shifting tones and moods, and burgeoning connotations.

The weddings are not further defined in the final three stanzas. The train continues "loaded with the sum of all they saw"□ in other words, all the perspectives just mentioned, added together; the couples' "lives would all contain this hour". Otherwise, the effect of the weddings remains vaguely "what it held". The speaker, however, returns to the tone of the first part of the journey, which we called "guardedly lyrical".

The lyrical images bring elements of fertility ("squares of wheat", "shower", and "somewhere becoming rain") and of weapons ("we were aimed", loosed", "arrow-shower"). At the same time, the speaker holds his more romantic speculations in check by means of matter-of-fact observations, such as the lengthening shadows, the locomotive's "gouts of steam", the passing of "an Odeon" (cinema hall), and a "cooling tower" (tall, open-topped, cylindrical concrete tower, used to cool water/condense steam from any industrial process). His firm grip on the anti-lyrical reality is supported by parts of his meditation. He sees marriage as narrowing the options in life, because of "the others they would never meet", and as a limiting event because "their lives would all contain this hour".

There are subtle that the event has had some effect on the speaker as well as the newly-weds. Habituated to think about London spread out in "postal districts", he now has the astonishing idea of "squares of wheat"; and, ambiguously, he implicitly includes himself in the power "that being changed can give". The final two lines are a study of ambivalence: "swelled" implies growth, but a "sense of falling" is ominous both for the speaker's mood and for the marriages. This arc-shaped movement is echoed by the "arrow-shower" rising and falling, positive only in the final fertile word, "rain". "Rain" is, however, undercut by uncertainty. It is sent "out of sight" to "somewhere", but not any defined place.

In the end, we can claim to have found sudden swings from cynicism to mysticism; from the matter-of-fact to a vague and metaphorical lyricism with images of fertility, of a potential, or at least partial, victory over time and death. The finale is, to coin a paradox, absolutely irresolute. At this stage, it would be useful for us to consider a broader overview of the poem's structure. First, that the journey described in the first two stanzas can be taken as an analogy for the weddings themselves. The sun-flashes on the windscreens and hothouse prefigure the speaker's sudden reaction to a "something" that "survived" when he is "struck", and begins to notice the weddings. Perhaps "acres of dismantled cars" and "floatings of industrial froth" correspond to the vulgar farce of these social rituals. Secondly, the speaker's mood is symmetrically structured. He begins the journey in a state of tension between the lyrical and the prosaic responses to the landscape. In the middle of the poem, he first combines then swings between two opposed responses to the weddings: on the one hand detached, sneering, superior, and on the other, earnest, sensitive and imaginative. For most of the final three stanzas, the speaker returns to the tension between guarded objectivity, and flights of metaphor, that characterised the start of his journey. These two forces are left in exact and unresolved tension at the end. It is as if the poem is a circle, ending where it began. An inversion of dictions illustrates this structural point very well. In the first section, the speaker describes "acres" (a rural word) of "dismantled cars" (industrial and urban objects); at the end of the poem this antithesis of diction occurs inverted: London's postal districts are compared to "squares" (an urban word) of "wheat" (from rural agriculture).