

Analyses of the Poems of Philip Larkin

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. This 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).

An Arundel Tomb

This poem takes on the form of situational poem, or an anecdote, and sparks off a wider meditation. The speaker sees the tomb, which is the medieval (“pre-baroque”) effigy of a noble couple, and notices that they are holding hands. This couple was Richard Fitzalan, the tenth Earl of Arundel, and his second wife, Eleanor of Lancaster. The event that inspired “An Arundel Tomb” was a visit Larkin and Monica Jones paid to Chichester Cathedral in the winter of 1955-6. The poem acknowledges that the couple’s handholding pose is probably “A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace” and a “stone fidelity/ They hardly meant”. After the poem’s publication Larkin discovered that the linked hands were added when the monument was restored in Victorian times. He, however, did not feel that this new knowledge invalidated his poem in any way.

Rhyme Scheme and Structure

The technique is masterly and the poem is beautiful. The integrated ABBCAC rhyme scheme with its understated use of minor rhyme words (“until”, “and”, “in”, “they”), and the natural linking of the last three stanzas are typical features. See also how the gentle “tender” is framed within the alliterative “sharp... shock”; how “Persisted” is withheld to the start of the next stanza, somehow increasing its obstinate, enduring sense; how breaking the line between “light” and “Each summer” seems to imitate the repetitive renewal of the years, and breaking the line between “bright” and “Litter of birdcalls” has an almost onomatopoeic effect; how the alliterated phrase “smoke in slow suspended skeins” lingers like the smoke itself.

Analysis

Beautiful and often lyrical, with resonant, affirmative final line, “An Arundel Tomb” has given rise to widely varied critical interpretations. Many of these focus on arguments about Larkin’s pessimism or optimism: how much weight can we attach to that final line, in

light of the constant interplay between the stone love-story that has “Persisted” linked through “altered people” to an “unarmorial age” when time has changed the air to “soundless damage”, on the one hand; and, on the other, the suggestions that lasting love is a delusion, an “Untruth” they “hardly meant” and no more than “a sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace? Thrown off”? If we consider the character of the speaker, it is clear that “An Arundel Tomb” is a typically Larkinesque complex: a structure in which different and contradictory impulses make a tense and dynamic whole, never likely to be resolved. The speaker is sensitive to the “sharp tender shock”, and his desire to believe in the ideal of enduring love can be heard in the effort he puts into “almost-instinct almost true”. However, he is also cynical enough to place the defining word “Untruth” at the start of a line and the ironic use of the heraldic “blazon” in the same stanza. There is no resolution of the dilemma here, only tension till the very end.

There is another aspect of the poem we must also consider— its concern with the ways which people, their lives and their stories are made. Lacanian theory, echoed in many of Larkin’s poems, for example, “Dombey and Son”, proposes that our birth, and subsequently our childhood, bring with them “innate assumptions”. These assumptions determine our HABIT and eventually harden into all we have got, in other words, CHARACTER. Suggestions that life deprives us of freedom and steadily hardens us can be found in many of Larkin’s other poems. These images of life undergoing a metamorphosis into something lifeless and fixed, are determinist. Larkin’s frequent return to these ideas is a testament to his concern with existential questions about what, if anything at all, constitutes freedom; and where, if anywhere at all, lies an individual’s human essence.

With “An Arundel Tomb” we can attempt to follow the metamorphosis of the stone couple through time, remembering that the undercutting irony of this essay in enduring love is the fact that the entire story takes place after death. At the start of the poem, death has already deprived the Earl and Countess of individuality. Their faces are “blurred” clothing “vaguely shown”. So far, change is simple hardening: his “jointed armour” and the cloth she wears “stiffened”. Memorial convention has provided them with little dogs under their feet, which render them “absurd”. As far as the speaker is concerned, this transformation into effigy is unremarkable. The reason for the poem is that “sharp tender shock” of their joined hands, the three words hard-soft-hard in their sound and meaning.

In the third stanza the speaker introduces the question of mind in a negative: "They would not think...." The Earl's and Countess's minds are local in both space and time: the joined hands are for "friends" and not for "long". Instead, their thoughts are continued by the sculptor they commissioned, and focus on prolonging their names rather than their relationship. The couple's expectations are utterly wrong. Very early in their "stationary voyage" through time, their dependent community ("the tenantry") disappears and people can no longer read Latin. So, the "names around the base" they thought to preserve are quickly rendered meaningless, and attention focuses on the accident (hands held) they "hardly meant" instead.

Because of this context the phrase "Rigidly they/ Persisted" becomes ambiguous. On the surface it would seem to present the couple as determined, their effigy surviving the centuries. In the context of their short-sighted hopes, however, it comes to have a different implication. The ambiguity of this phrase suggests that the couple are now prisoners of their stone existence. Nothing they intended has come to pass, and something they did not intend is happening. Trapped in their hardened stone casing, they are impotent to protest, and must endure and suffer this "Untruth". The speaker contrasts their helpless rigidity with the fluid continuity of nature, its seasonal round, and time which brings "endless altered people".

The metaphor "washing at their identity" makes this point clear. Their rigidity in stone is likened to a rock in the fluid sea of nature and change. Their "identity" has changed from what they had intended, and the "endless people" have, like water eroding over centuries, washed them into a new shape. In other words, time has projected a new identity and meaning unto them, gradually, inevitably. In the final four stanzas, then, a conflict between the couple's intention, and the inevitable and contrary action of time and nature upon them, is described. They have no chance of victory. The power of "time" (including its snows. Sunlight and birdsong) to "transfigure" them is unchallenged.

"An Arundel Tomb" explores the existential question, but with a wry and humorous obliqueness. In the early part of the twentieth century, existentialism examined the new post-religion consciousness. Put simply, the modern individual does not believe in an eternal "soul" or essence that comes from God. When we are born, we exist, but our SELF or individual essence is a blank. Starting from this premise, philosophers proceeded towards two insights. First, the self-consciousness in a being subject to death is inherently absurd because death and consciousness are contradictions. To say "I AM NOT" is a contradiction, an

absurdity, because the pronoun “I” asserts consciousness and therefore existence. The absurdity of life is also apparent in the mismatch between a tiny consciousness and a vast universe. Secondly, that we can pursue and achieve true freedom through our actions: the way we live, if we live free from constraints, will create our individual self, our essence. This is essentially a very broad summary; but it clearly shows how Larkin has comically moved the goalposts in the version he provides.

“An Arundel Tomb” asks: how do we attempt to make meaningful lives for ourselves? Can we do so? In answer, the poem shows that the Earl and Countess attempted to do this and failed. They now suggest a meaning that conflicts with their intentions. Their attempt to make a meaningful monument lost its intended meaning quickly after their death; and worse, it grew another quite different meaning over succeeding centuries. These individuals had no choice or freedom. Their helpless efforts had no chance against the power of nature and time. The metaphor of water “washing at” stone, and contrast shown between their rigidity and the fluid continuity of nature, adds a further comment on metamorphoses. It seems that human efforts are artificial, and tend to harden, to petrify; whereas a long, patient, and completely unpredictable process of time and nature renders those hardened human memorials impotent, or distorts them into falsehood.

The comic element in “An Arundel Tomb” comes from its original perspective on the problem. Far from considering life from its starting-point of birth, this poem uses the starting-point of death. Larkin always insisted that much of his verse was intended to be amusing, and we can imagine him laughing as he wrote about a couple struggling, posthumously, with existential doubt!

Aubade

“Aubade” was composed in 1977 and published in Larkin’s *Collected Poems*. There is a speaker who introduces himself in the first line: “I work all day, and get half-drunk at night”. The poem is set in the small hours waiting for dawn. The title is ironic since an “aubade” is traditionally a poem in praise of dawn, generally involving two lovers who must part, or urging a lover to wake. Larkin’s “Aubade” provides a bitter slant on the tradition,

focusing on the bleak thoughts of death as dawn approaches. If daylight brings relief to this pessimistic speaker, it is only because “Work has to be done.”

The rest of the poem, however, is in Larkin's late manner: there is none of the amused self-mockery and self-doubt of the earlier speakers, none of their ambivalence. Such character ironies are absent, giving us no reason to suppose that there is a distinction between the speaker and Larkin himself. Also typical of the later manner is the tendency to definitive or aphoristic lines. So, in a line that has become famous, religion is “That vast moth-eaten musical brocade” and death “The anaesthetic from which none come round” or “no different whined at than withstood”. The twentieth century began in the shadow of hugely influential determinist thought from the second half of the nineteenth: Marx, Darwin and Freud were perhaps the giants of this intellectual change. Larkin's relation to determinism was uneasy. For most of his life, Larkin expressed no interest in politics or social theory, and when he did his views were erratic but predominantly right-winged. On the other hand, his poems often leave an uncompromisingly determinist effect behind them. Lacking irony and seeking definition, the poet has no need to create tension between shifting conversational dictions, and a complex form, as he did in poems like “the Whitsun Weddings”. Instead, the rhyme-scheme (ABABCCDEED) is regular and firmly used, there are fewer enjambments, and each stanza terminates in a full-stop.

The subject of “Aubade” is declared in the first stanza: “Unresting death”. The poem is one of the few major works to appear after *High Windows*, Larkin's final collection, and makes one of a group of sombre orations which cemented Larkin's reputation for pessimism and morbid subject matter. “Aubade” certainly is about continual thoughts of death; but there is a danger in stereotyping Larkin as this gloomy middle-aged speaker, even if this character is not satirically undercut. If we approach “Aubade” with the same care as we approach other poems, we will realise more exactly what it is about death that occupies the poet.

The opening stanza tells us more than that the theme is “Unresting death”. The speaker is conventionally frightened: death is “a whole day nearer now”, and he has a “dread/Of dying”. Two other characteristics of thinking about death also appear. First, it makes “all thought impossible; and secondly, he not only fears “dying”, he also fears “being dead”. The conventional fears are of something that is active, something that moves or is an event; “nearer now”, “Unresting”, and “dying”. These suggest that death is an action, something death does, or you do when you die. The other two elements, “Making all though impossible”

and “being dead”, introduce the effort to express absence and emptiness, death as a blank negative, which gains dominance and urgency as the poem continues. “Impossible” is given prominence by the changes in pace between the inverted first foot and the spondee that lead up to it: “**Making all thought**”. In the context of death as an impossible concept, the two words “being dead” virtually make an oxymoron. Death is impossible to experience because it is the absence of sensation and thought; and this is the problem to which the poem returns again and again.

“Flashes” gains power from its position at the start of line 10, and conveys both the suddenness and the blinding and therefore unthinkable concept of death, and this effect of paralysing the brain is underscored in “The mind blanks at the glare.” The poem then attempts to express this “impossible” or inexpressible realisation of death. First, the poet dismisses “remorse” and the lack of achievement in life.

The second half of stanza two struggles to express what the recognition of death is. The poet attempts this four times: “total emptiness for ever”, “sure extinction”, “Not to be here”, and “Not to be anywhere”. These are two positive descriptions and two negatives. Such repeated attempts to convey death actually convey the speaker’s desperation, and his inability to put the realisation into words. The problem with which this poem struggles is, in fact, linguistic and logical. As we commented on “being dead”, death is not “being” but its opposite. This stanza, by stripping away other ideas, and repeatedly attempting to describe a vacuum, shows the speaker’s intellectual and verbal helplessness.

In a further negative, “No trick dispels” the speaker’s fear. Two “tricks” are then mentioned and dismissed, just as two causes of misery were dismissed in stanza 2: religion and “specious stuff” or philosophers’ syllogisms. The proposition about “*No rational being*” is, of course, irrelevant. Larkin is unable to overcome the contradiction between consciousness and death. All thought assumes the pronoun “I”: *I* think, therefore *I* am. Logic and language are incapable of framing the absence of “I”. The speaker’s horror is precisely because “all thought” on death is “impossible” and because language is not capable: death goes beyond the power of words. His dread “Flashes” and his “mind blanks at the glare”. Yet again he enters into a desperate struggle to find words. He makes another four attempts to explain to us what he means:

...no sight, sound,

No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

These are further descriptions of the indescribable in the first two stanzas, but there is also a gradual return to more familiar, living activity. Fear of death is now placed in context “just on the edge of vision”; and the terrible time before dawn is also placed “when we are caught without/ People or drink.” Attempts to convey the speaker’s horror continue as well. He describes how “it rages out/ In furnace-fear” in a violent, painful image of “dread... /Flashes afresh”; and death as a non-human absolute is present again in its indifference: “no different whined at than withstood”.

In the final stanza the long-awaited dawn arrives. The poem’s ending is a counterpoint: death occupies three lines and the awakening world another six. This time death is said to be “plain as a wardrobe”, and it seems that this is because the speaker’s dilemma is crystal clear. He knows that he can’t “escape death”, but he can’t “accept” this. His final comment on this dilemma is even amusing: “One side will have to go”. It is possible to hear this as a flippant irony, since the speaker knows perfectly well that he can lose neither his knowledge nor his refusal to accept it.

The final six lines, devoted to a world waking up to its daytime activities, simply reinforce a point that has already been made: that our fears are rampant once we are “caught without” other things on which to focus. The final stanza appears stoic while the other three have seemed terrified. We may, however, see something other than stoicism, and feel that the terror of the previous stanzas hovers over this one as well. The speaker is grateful to everyday things (telephone calls, letters) *because* thinking of death is impossible. Meanwhile, everyday things are not presented in positive terms: telephones “crouch” like animals about to pounce; the world is “uncaring/ intricate rented”, a reminder of the vulgar dominions of money and work; and postmen are “like doctors”, bringing letters that will occupy our minds and therefore act as painkillers to dull the thought of death.

We have mentioned “gaps” or “silences” in the structure of Larkin’s poems before, and identified several examples in our previous readings. “Aubade” creates an enormous silence, by struggling so desperately and repeatedly to express death. It is a silence beyond the reach of language and beyond the ability of thought, as the poem makes plain. There is

another silence when the poem ends: terror will return before dawn on the next morning, and the one after that; and it will stay “just on the edge of vision, / A small unfocused blur” throughout the day, as well. Furthermore, terror will push the speaker to drink, in his desperation to numb things. All of these facts are clear from the poem, but not put into words at the end. They echo like an insoluble future after the poem has finished.

In this analysis of “Aubade”, we have focused our attention on the poem’s demonstrative failure to express death, and the philosophic and linguistic limits that are revealed by the speaker’s struggle. One further point also arises. We are conscious individuals born to death, and there is an inevitable mismatch between our consciousness, our individual sense of existence, and the entire universe that ignores us. This mismatch, or lack of proportion, was one of the characteristics of human life described as “absurd” by philosophers in the early part of the twentieth century. In its struggles with the contradiction between personal consciousness and death, “Aubade” is a poem that confronts the absurd: that which does not make sense about being born.

Larkin wrote the first three stanzas of “Aubade” during the time of his move from the University flat in Pearson Park, to his own house in Newlands Park in Hull. This was not a voluntary move: it was forced because the University had sold the Pearson Park house, and Larkin felt resentful, ill at ease in his new surroundings, and depressed. He finished the poem, adding the final stanza, three years later and eight days after his mother’s death. It is noticeable that the occasion of “Aubade” makes no appearance, however. Larkin’s treatment of the theme is even more negative because he omits any connection with personal desires and passions. In “Aubade” death is the “impossible” or absurd fact that is neither escapable nor acceptable. “Aubade” is, perhaps, even more bleak because he has removed personal grief from the landscape.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. Which of the following poems by Philip Larkin is best described as a self-elegy, anticipating the poet's death?

a. An Arundel Tomb

b. Aubade

c. Sad Steps

d. Explosion

2. "Our almost-instinct almost true:/ What will survive of us is love"— Identify the poem by Larkin that ends with these lines:

a. An Arundel Tomb

b. The Whitsun Weddings

c. Aubade

d. Poetry of Departures

3. Which of the following poems records Larkin's impressions while travelling to London by train?

a. Poetry of Departures

b. Church-Going

c. Sad Steps

d. The Whitsun Weddings

4. How many lines does each stanza have?

a. 9

b. 10

c. 6

d. 8

5. How many stanzas does the poem have?

a. 8

b. 7

c. 10

d. 9

6. What is Whitsun also known as?

a. Pentecost

- b. Easter
 - c. Christmas
 - d. Advent
7. What is the speaker's connection to the weddings?
- a. He is a groom
 - b. None**
 - c. He is the father of the bride
 - d. He is the grandfather of the groom
8. What is the poem's rhyme scheme?
- a. AABBCCDDEE
 - b. ABCABCABCD
 - c. ABABCDCDEE
 - d. ABABCDECDE**
9. How many lines does each stanza of the poem "Aubade" have?
- a. 6
 - b. 3
 - c. 10**
 - d. 7
10. In what year was "Aubade" published?
- a. 1985
 - b. 1989
 - c. 1977**
 - d. 1972
11. What does the speaker of the poem "Aubade" do in the first line?
- a. Work and get drunk**
 - b. Play chess with his friends
 - c. Go to church
 - d. Complete a crossword puzzle

12. What worries the speaker of “Aubade” the most about death?

- a. Making his loved ones sad
- b. The eternity of it
- c. It coming suddenly

d. Feeling nothing

13. What is an aubade?

- a. A poem set at night
- b. A poem about death
- c. A poem about religion

d. A poem set in dawn or early morning

14. What does Larkin compare postmen to in the last line of “Aubade”?

a. Doctors

- b. Death
- c. Writers
- d. Poets

15. How many lines does each stanza have?

- a. 9
- b. 6**
- c. 12
- d. 3

16. In what year was “An Arundel Tomb” published?

- a. 1964
- b. 1960
- c. 1956**
- d. 1978

17. What animals are at the feet of the earl and countess in “An Arundel Tomb”?

- a. Lions
- b. Foxes

c. Dogs

d. Squirrels

18. What does the speaker of "An Arundel Tomb" notice about the effigy?

a. It was made of gold

b. The couple are singing

c. The couple are holding hands

d. It was green in colour

19. What is the poem's rhyme scheme?

a. ABBCAC

b. ABBCCA

c. ABABAB

d. ABCABC

20. What was the name of the chapel where Larkin saw the effigy of the earl and the countess?

a. Sainte-Chapelle

b. Chichester Chapel

c. Sistine Chapel

d. St. Paul's Chapel