

**Philip Larkin [1922-1985] “At Grass”**

The eye can hardly pick them out  
From the cold shade they shelter in,  
Till wind distresses tail and main;  
Then one crops grass, and moves about  
- The other seeming to look on -  
And stands anonymous again

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps  
Two dozen distances surficed  
To fable them: faint afternoons  
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,  
Whereby their names were artificed  
To inlay faded, classic Junes -

Silks at the start: against the sky  
Numbers and parasols: outside,  
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,  
And littered grass : then the long cry  
Hanging unhushed till it subside  
To stop-press columns on the street.

Do memories plague their ears like flies?  
They shake their heads. Dusk brims the shadows.  
Summer by summer all stole away,  
The starting-gates, the crowd and cries -  
All but the unmolested meadows.  
Almanacked, their names live; they

Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,  
Or gallop for what must be joy,  
And not a fieldglass sees them home,  
Or curious stop-watch prophecies:  
Only the grooms, and the grooms boy,  
With bridles in the evening come.

- **Philip Larkin : Relevant Background**

Philip Larkin was born in 1922 in Coventry, England, where his father was an important city official. Larkin's father was very bossy to him while he was growing up. His father was an admirer of Hitler. Larkin's father was hostile to women. Despite the fact the Philip Larkin rejected what his father stood for, his father's attitudes passed on to him, to some extent. For example, Larkin was criticized for being racist in his adult life. His mother was too weak to defend him against his father. Larkin bitterly described his childhood as 'dull, pot-bound and slightly mad...'

Yet under his father's influence, Larkin developed an interest in Jazz. Larkin grew up self-conscious and shy and developed a stammer. Perhaps his confidence was affected by being tall and short-sighted as well as by his strict father. As an adult Larkin had a strong dislike of children.

However Larkin was very good at his studies. He was educated in Coventry and at Oxford University. While there studying English, he developed as a writer and became a fan of the jazz music of the 1930's. Later in life he became a reviewer of jazz music and a sharp critic of experimental jazz.

He wrote two novels but then decided to concentrate on poetry. After gaining a good degree he accepted a post as librarian in a small village. This gave him the time and opportunity to develop as a writer. Later, he worked as a librarian in various colleges and universities, including Belfast and Hull.

Larkin always wanted to be loved by women but he lacked the confidence to develop a relationship and marry. Although he had a number of affairs, Larkin feared marriage and family, and never married. 'Two can live as stupidly as one,' he said. Despite his various affairs he basically became a loner. He developed a morose [gloomy] attitude to life.

The reference to 'stop-press columns' on the street in this poem is to evening newspapers. They had columns on the front and back pages in which sports results and breaking news were

printed at the last minute before the various editions of the papers were issued. This is unnecessary in the current age of mass broadcasting, internet and mobile phones.

The poem is a lyric written in five stanzas of six lines each.

The poet is observing two racehorses in retirement and imagining their racing careers. It is interesting that Larkin doesn't mention the word 'horse', though he mentions so many aspects of horses that he doesn't need to use the term 'horse'.

**In the first stanza**, he gazes at two horses at dusk. His eye finds it hard pick out the outline of the horses in the dusk. It is when the wind blows at the tail and mane of each horse that he sees their outline. One of the horses is grazing and moving while the second horse stands there motionless, as if watching the grazing horse. Then the grazing horse stands still like the other and there is no way of distinguishing them in the twilight. The words 'cold shade' and 'distressed' create a disturbing atmosphere. These words may imply the death that soon awaits the old, retired horses.

**In the second stanza** Larkin introduces a flashback. The poet guesses that these old looking horses were famous fifteen years ago as racehorses. He imagines that they won various Cups, Stakes and Handicap races between them. Memories of these afternoons are 'faint' or faded now. He guesses that whatever races they won, the total winning distances achieved by the two racehorses in various races was less than twenty-four horse-lengths. These winning distances turned the horses into celebrities of the racetrack, 'fabled them'. Their racing names were inscribed on Derby Days on various cups and pennants, now faded.

**In the third stanza** the flashback continues. Larkin's imagination pictures the colourful silk costumes of the jockeys, the number boards and the bookies parasols: all making up the enchanting scene inside the racetrack. The scene outside the track, especially on a hot day is a bit disturbing. He imagines the car parks full of cars arranged in military order on littered grass on hot days. It is an unpleasant picture. His mind jumps inside to the climax of races as those with winning bets cry-out in excitement. Larkin imagines this cry being carried from the

racetrack to city streets where evening newspaper sellers would cry out an exciting win by one of the horses in order to sell copies to the paper.

**In the fourth stanza** Larkin wonders if the horses find memories of these events as disturbing as flies around their heads? The horses shake their heads, either to answer him that they don't have bad memories or to shake off these kinds of memories. The reader has to decide which. Evening deepens and fills the shadows, making it even harder to see the horses. The scenes of their racing triumphs, starting gates and race-goers shouting them on, have vanished from the lives of the horses. Each part of their lives has vanished in time, apart from these meadows where they now graze and reflect in the grass. It is interesting that Larkin refers to the meadows as 'unmolesting'. This word suggests that to Larkin's mind the horses' glory days while winning races was a form of abuse. He seems to criticize the use of horses in this way. The horses are now private, even though their racing names still remain in the mind of the public due to racing records and perhaps due to races named in their honour.

**In the fifth stanza** Larkin proclaims that the horses are comfortable with their anonymity, their privacy. He imagines they are happy to have left their days as trained horses behind them. Now, he presumes, they gallop spontaneously as an expression of joy at their freedom. There are no binoculars watching them, demanding that they win. There are no bets being placed on them, based on predictions from their previous form and track times. Larkin likes the fact that the horses are stress-free. The only humans they have to relate to are their carers, the groom and apprentice. The horses are at ease on the grass. The earlier reference to 'cold shade' is a classical image of coming death. Therefore the final image of the caring grooming team may be a kindly sign of the death that awaits the horses.

### **Analysis:**

"At grass" by Philip Larkin is about his encounter with two retired horses. A passage of time is significant in this poem as it is only after the poet thinks back to what the horse's life was like before it they retired that he has a change of mind and realizes that they are probably better off now than they were in the past. The first hint that the poet gives us, is in his title of

the poem "At Grass" as this gives the impression that the horses are at rest and away from all the races and secondly lets the reader know that the horses are retired.

The structure of the poem is very important as it is broken down into three main parts which are the poet's observation, his reflection and finally his conclusion. Each of these parts of the poem is set in a different tense. The first section of the poem is the first stanza which is set in the present tense and is the poet's observation of these two horses. The poet shows what tense this section is set in by his word choice of words like "distresses" and "stands". In this section the poet is observing the horses and thinking through the situation they find themselves in and wondering how they came to be like this. Larkin's use of word choice is very important when creating this passage of time in the first stanza:

"...the cold shade they shelter in,  
Till wind distresses tail and mane..."

-These two lines make the mood of the first section sad; making the horses seem miserable this also makes you think about the horses possibly not being looked after properly and just living a horrible existence. The word choice of "cold shade" again adds to this feeling of being miserable and also the horses being neglected by humans. The alliteration "shade they shelter..." makes an "s" sound, which suggests the word shivering. The word choice of "moves about" suggests the horses aren't doing very much and they are just moping about and are just really unhappy with the way they live. Finally the poet again emphasizes his feeling of these horses not really being happy and having a pointless existence by using the word "anonymous" which suggests that the horses have been forgotten and have no human to care for them anymore.

The second section of the poem in which Larkin begins his reflection of the horse's life is made up of stanzas two and three. Stanza two starts with the line "yet fifteen years ago", the word "yet" is used by Larkin here to let the reader know there has been a change in the passage of time and he is known in the past tense. The word "Perhaps" suggests that the poet is having a change of mind. The poet uses the words "faint afternoons" to emphasize that it was a long

time ago that they were famous and the word “faint” again also suggests that the horses might have trouble remembering these glory days. Then in stanza two, the poet contrasts with stanza one.

“Whereby their names were artficed”

This line is used by the author to show what he had thought about the horses being described as “anonymous” in stanza one is wrong and that their names were quite famous and actually well known. Then in stanza three stanzas however the poet, through deeper thinking of this passage of time begins to come to the conclusion that maybe the horse’s life weren’t as good as he once had thought. The structure of stanzas two and three being one large sentence first of all suggest there racing life was like one long continuous job for the horses. It also could suggest that they could not differentiate between these races as they were pretty much the same. Larkin then goes on again to contrasts with the first stanza:

“Numbers and parasols: outside,  
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat”

As these lines suggest to us it is warm and possibly also summer so it was quite a happy time, which contrasts to the coldness and sadness which appears in stanza one. Although this setting may sound better, it would be more appealing to humans as the horses would probably not like to run in the heat of the sun. Larkin then goes on to describe things the horses will have also not has been happy about like the “littered grass” and the “long cry”. By suggesting this poet begins to make us think that the horses are perhaps happier now than when they were famous.

The third section of the poem, the poet conclusion starts with a question:

“Do memories plague their ears like flies?”

Here Larkin seems to be asking himself if their memories of these that plague there thoughts. The horses “shake their heads” as if they are answering no to the question and suggesting that he is wrong but it is really to get rid off the flies. The word choice of “dusk brims the shadows” lets us know that it is coming to the end of the day, and to the end of the horses’ lives. Also

“summer by summer” shows that time is passing and the word choice of “summer” makes us think of happiness. The poet again contrasts, this time between section three and two:

“...unmolested meadows.

Almanacked, their names live...”

His word choice of the line “unmolested meadows” are to show that here no one is taking advantage of them as the humans at the race’s did. In stanza five, the poet’s word choice is used to show his feelings about the horses being happy are true as they “stand at ease” and “gallop for what must be joy”. This shows that the horses are a lot happier now than before and they are running around now for the joy of being free, not because they have to.

In conclusion “At Grass” Larkin use a passage of time to clearly show how he arrives at one train of thought and by reflecting back in time changes this feeling, so this passage of time is clearly is very important part of the poem as it help to you greater understanding of the poem as a whole . Larkin does this successfully by the structure of the poem, the tenses he uses and the contrasts he makes between each section all to show you how this passage of time help him change his mind.

## **\* Themes**

### **1. Death/The March of Time**

Larkin views horses as they stand or graze in a cold shade, long into their retirement. He imagines the horses at the end of their days. When he says that ‘dusk brims the shadows’, Larkin is hinting at the closeness of death. The fact the horses are fading from his vision suggests to him the gradual passing of time. It is a long time since they were in their hey-day as winners. The afternoons of their fame are now ‘faint’. Their racing days ‘stole away’ over time; that is time moved on gradually. The word ‘stole’ suggests that time is a cheat as it sneakily removes the glory and grandeur of life after giving it.

## **2. Nature/Identity/Abuse of animals for human pleasure**

Larkin questions the identity of two animals in a field. Now at ease on grass at dusk, they were once legendary racers. The poet suggests that the use of racehorses for pleasure is against nature, that it molests them. He contrasts the grassy meadow to the racetrack. The racetrack is a place where the horses' names were 'artificed'. The reference to 'litter' and 'squadrons' of cars suggests a negative view of the spectators and punters who attend race meetings. The poem gives the feeling that horseracing is an abuse of animals for human entertainment. Instead the poet celebrates the freedom of the horses in retirement as they gallop of their own accord, 'for what must be joy'. Fieldglasses, stopwatches, classics, and long cries of the public are unnatural to horses. The horses are happier as anonymous grazers in a field than as legendary racers. Their true identity is 'At Grass' rather than at the racetrack.

## **3. Memory**

Larkin is bothered by memories of horses used for human enjoyment. By contrast the horses do not have to live with memories of their abused past. Seemingly they are not 'distressed' by memories as they have long forgotten what the poet alone remembers. The horses' body language is not affected by memories, just by the wind and flies. Though the horses' names are famous and recorded, 'almanacked', the horses have 'slipped' their names. Their identity as competing racehorses has vanished from their memory. Memory is a human problem only.

**Style :**Form The poem is a lyric. It resembles an elegy as it celebrates the lives of the two horses in a sad way.

**Structure:** It is written in five stanzas of six lines each. Stanzas one and five deal with the present, stanzas two, three and four with the past.

**Language:** The words are mainly in plain sentences, though Larkin poses one important question in the fourth stanza and allows the horses to answer it through a gesture. Some sentences contain lists of descriptions, as in the first stanza. At times Larkin uses a brisk



statement to make a point precisely. Larkin sometimes leaves out a word like 'the' in the third line before 'wind'. This slightly challenges the reader, but it is for the sake of achieving a rhythm. The listing in the third stanza is an effective method of conveying a lot of information while building up the excitement.

**Diction:** Some of the words require a familiarity with horse racing: silks [the horse-owners' colours as worn by jockeys], Stakes, classic, starting gates, fieldglass, stopwatch, etc. Words like 'distressing' and 'shade' suggest a negative force in the present environment of the horses. Larkin's wit is evidenced by his unusual way of referring to bets as 'curious stop-watch prophecies'. Larkin creates a new word, 'unmolesting', to imply [suggest] a criticism of horseracing. Larkin uses the noun 'fable' as a verb to mean 'make famous'. So he is original with language.

**Full Stops and Commas:** Larkin uses punctuation to suit the build up of his descriptions. The first stanza, which describes the scene that meets Larkin's eye, with only one full stop, is a good example. This allows the energy of the poem to build up. Larkin similarly uses only one full stop for stanzas two and three where he reflects back on their racing careers and all elements of racing. The run on nature of these lines help maintain the energy. The isolation of 'they' at the end of the fourth stanza shows the welcome anonymity that the horses have achieved after their racing days. The punctuation of the fourth stanza slows the pace down, as the poet reflects on the horses. The energy of the poem decreases, with a question mark and two full stops in two lines.

**Comparison** Larkin compares the activities of both horses in the field at the start of the poem. One grazes while the other stands.

**Imagery:** The imagery focuses on two horses in a meadow at dusk and the typical scene of their racing careers. The images appeal to a number of our senses.

**Metaphor:** Larkin compares the organized layout of cars in a car park to squadrons, as if the horses were controlled in a military situation.

**Simile:** Larkin wonders if memories of their racing days bother the horses like the way flies torment their ears.

**Personification:** In referring to the meadows as 'unmolesting' the poet personifies the meadows as good influences on the horses in contrast to the racetrack.

**Contrast [difference]:** The poem is based on a contrast between the racing phase and the retired phase of racehorses' lives. He contrasts the present, at dusk, with 'fifteen years ago'.

**Mood/Atmosphere:** The words 'cold shade' and 'distressed' create a disturbing atmosphere in the first stanza. The various descriptions of the racetrack activities create an exciting and dramatic atmosphere in the second and third stanzas. The final stanza, second line, creates a mood of joyous freedom.

**Paradox [apparent contradiction]:** The successful days which 'sufficed to fable the horses' were a type of molesting.

**Tone:** The tone of the first stanza is neutral, detached and un-dramatic: 'the eye can hardly pick them out'. The point of view is factual, as the last two lines of the first stanza show. The tone remains matter of fact in the second stanza but becomes excited from the start of the third stanza: 'the long cry hanging unhushed'. In the final stanza the tone is happy as the poet delights in the 'joy' of the horses, freed from the curiosity of the betting public. Overall the tone is sad as it's like a memorial to these horses.

**Repetition:** Words like 'summer' and 'groom' add to the poem's music. The following sound effects show a large amount of repetition.

**Rhyme:** Each stanza contains a rhyme scheme, where lines four to six echo the endings of lines one to three: abc,abc, def,def etc. The repeated 'oom' and 'ome' sounds in the final two lines create a satisfactory closing music to the poem.

**Assonance:** [similar vowel sound repetition] Notice the long 'a'/'ey' sound of the second and third line of the poem. This creates a sad music that provides a gloomy atmosphere to accompany the dusk. The same effect is created in line nineteen and twenty with 'plague their...they shake their heads'.