

"At Grass" by Philip Larkin

A Thematic analysis

“At Grass”, a lyrical poem by poet Philip Larkin undoubtedly contains old age as one of the central ideas. The poem centres around two old horses in a field and he begins to discuss the lives of the horses. The poem centres around the key themes of life and death, the inevitability of death and the insignificance of life. Larkin achieves these themes through his use of imagery, form and flashbacks.

“At Grass begins with Philip Larkin watching two old horses in a field; “The eye can hardly pick them out” and they are very far away. The insignificance of this snapshot is key as it implies that these horses are unimportant and are generally irrelevant. This, however, turns out not to be the case as it is later discovered that these were once very famous racehorses who very popular. Larkin further adds to the sense of insignificance through his use of words such as “them”, “they” and “anonymous”. These words are very indirect and are very general and at no point does Larkin mention horses. Alternatively he drops subtle hints: “Till wind distresses mane and tail”. The ambiguity that Larkin creates through his word choice supports one of his themes – the insignificance of life – as these horses were once very famous but now are unimportant.

Larkin contrasts the opening stanza by continuing on to describe the post life that was lived by these horses and to discuss the popularity that they once had: “Outside, Squadrons of empty cars”. The image created by Larkin has connotations of planes all lined up in the Royal Air Force. The word “Squadrons” emphasises that it wasn’t a minor gathering that turned up to watch the horses and that instead there was a vast number that would rival the number of aeroplanes in a “Squadron”. This popularity

that Larkin conveys successfully creates the contrast between the horses now and the horses when they were racing. “Squadrons” contrast the unimportance that is evoked in stanza one: “anonymous”. Larkin’s effective use of contrast between the present and the past supports the theme of the insignificance of life as old age will hit everyone, no matter how popular, and may even leave them as being unimportant.

Larkin returns to the present situation of the horses through the use of a rhetorical question: “No memories plaque their ears like flies?” Larkin uses this image to question whether or not the horses think about their past fame and whether or not they actually miss being so popular. The word “plaque” has connections of a widespread illness that is killing many and this leaves the reader questioning whether the horses are ill or not and it implies that these horses are near death. Larkin’s effective use of the rhetorical question poses many further questions regarding the physical well-being of the horses and this supports the theme of the inevitability of death as the once popular horses are potentially ill and dying. Larkin further supports the theme of death and the inevitability of it through his use of imagery: “Only the Groom and Groom’s boy with bridles in the evening come”. This image has connections of the grim reaper coming to take the horses away to their final resting place, and they will be led away wearing the “bridles” that they wore whilst they were still racing.

The form of “At Grass” also supports Larkin’s themes of life and death and the inevitability of it as he uses a regular rhyme scheme – “abcabc” in every one of the five stanzas. This conveys the regularity of life and how it is all the same, even for the most famous and popular of race horses. Each line in the five stanzas of “At Grass” contains eight

beats which further add to the tempo that evokes the regularity of life and death.

Even the title – “At Grass” – supports the theme of old age as it has connotations of leisure time, perhaps retirement. In addition, it also makes reference to horses as old race horses are “put out to grass” once their racing days are over. Larkin, however, never directly mentions horses and instead merely implies that horses are involved. This creates ambiguity and unimportance as the horses are only hinted at and not stated to be horses. The title “At Grass” contains a high level of ambiguity which adds to the understanding of the themes of life and death and the insignificance and unimportance of it.

The poem is about the race horses in their retirement. However, Larkin himself announced that he has never seen any race horse in the field of horse – racing, in which people stock money. Perhaps, he was inspired by a news-reel film on Brown Jack, the race horse in its retirement. The race horses that he describes are no more in their glory; these superannuated horses no longer participated in race. With ease and comfort under the cool shade of trees they are grazing:

“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”

These horses has now lost individual identity but once, fifteen years ago these race horses were famous, own distinction in races and achieved

glamorous fits, a vast crowd of people including the noble ladies used to attain the field of race and stock their money on the horses of their choice. In the month of hot June they used to park their curse outside the arena of the race course and if their favourite horse won the race they felt jubilant:

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 –

The poem belongs to movement poem and underneath its simplicity it identifies the poet's mentality which is stripped of its glamour and the poet becomes an ordinary man speaking in ordinary language which sounds prosaic. What Larkin tries to bring home is that like youth old age is a necessary part of life and we must accept it calmly when it apprehends us. 'At Grass' is a serene picture of old age. The bright days of youth have passed on and the sunset of life is approaching. It is also taken as a political allegory where there is emotionally complex treatment of contemporary English society. The superannuated race horses indicate England's loss of power and glory. It is a post imperial poem and uses "language of imperial achievement and that of imperial loss". The image of 'squadrons' are the long cry of England's imperialism. The race horses, once famous, are English ancestors, famous generals, perhaps who can now 'stand at ease'. The race horses symbolize something about success and failure and neglects to notice the threatening atmosphere of the modern social democracy.