

Afternoons

- by Philip Larkin -

A YouTube clip of Rita Dove talking about her work is available, called the 'Big Think Interview.' Students may find this helpful to introduce the poet and her ideas.

Activities

A

Students' impressions of 1960s British life may be very different from Larkin's depiction here so it may be helpful to encourage a close reading of some of the details in the poem. Some contextual features which they may be able to identify, with focus on the highlighted details if necessary, include:

- the physical environment – new housing estates and the provision of public spaces for children's play rather than the street hint at an aspiring social class
- the social structures – the expectations for women of marriage, child-rearing and a stay-at-home, domestic lifestyle
- the aspirations of working class men at the time

B

The grammar in the poem suggests that the main focus of the poet's attention is the 'young women' whose lives and relationships are described in some detail. Students may begin to discuss the poet's attitude to these young women: some may find his depiction cruel or mocking while others may suggest there is some sympathy for the banality of their lives.

C

The poem has a strangely static, rather stylised quality which students may notice from the way the characters in it are placed and positioned as if in a photograph. The title suggests that this tableau-like image reflects the monotony of everyday life – it happens in all the 'afternoons' of their lives. Other possible structures could be explored, such as the use of the very specific, physical location described in the first stanza which opens out to include the physical and social backdrop in the second, followed by Larkin's comment on it in the last. Other ways of exploring structure discussed may help to shed light on Larkin's attitude to the people he describes. The poem seems to describe the passage of one afternoon, for example, from the assembling of the mothers to the children being 'taken home' at the end. There may be some suggestion that every day follows the same rhythm, and perhaps the poet mocks this monotony and predictability.

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D

The symbolic use of autumn and the 'fading' of summer may be discussed to highlight Larkin's use of resonant images to set the scene for his depiction of these peoples' lives. Connotations of autumn as past the best days of their lives, despite their comparative youthfulness, may be noted. The depiction of the recreation ground suggests an ordered, man-made environment where the trees are positioned decoratively and yet perhaps the seasons impose their own, less controlled rhythms on people's lives. Other interpretations of Larkin's use of the image should be encouraged.

The time of day is also interestingly described as 'the hollows of afternoons'. Students may discuss productively the use of this striking image as, perhaps, a comment on the 'hollowness' of these people's lives, the banality of the repeated meaningless activities described. Some may find this implication cruel or mocking, an interpretation which could encourage useful discussion of Larkin's attitudes here.

The last line may, for some students, suggest that the outdoors represents some kind of freedom from oppressive domestic life for the children. The opposing image implied here of imprisonment may be explored – is this Larkin's view of the social structures and expectations of the time or perhaps a criticism of the limited aspirations of middle class people?

E

The poet's use of concrete details to signal or represent the kind of life he is depicting here may be considered. Some students may find this device insulting or cynical – the suggestion that people like this would all have the same possessions, for example, and the mindless conformity this suggests. Others may see some poignancy in the simple assumptions about marriage and gender roles which seem to be implied by the description. The odd phrase, 'at intervals' may reflect those gender roles as well as the idea of a monotonous and regimented life. There may also be some implication that the relationships themselves are staid and lacking genuine warmth or spontaneity.

The last two lines may be considered a return of natural imagery, as in the use of autumn in the first stanza. In both instances, perhaps the natural world is seen as a disruptive force on the rather synthetic lives portrayed, a more powerful, less easily controlled influence on their predictability and superficial orderliness. Students may usefully discuss what is being destroyed by the wind here (and perhaps in the use of autumn in the first stanza) – the memory of naïve young love evoked by the slightly archaic 'courting-places' may encourage students to interpret the imagery more imaginatively. Links between images throughout the poem should be encouraged.

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F

Students could be encouraged to arrive at a personal interpretation of the complex tone of the poem overall, and particularly in this stanza. Some may see a misogynist's view in the 'thickened' beauty of the young women although there are some interpretations which suggest a criticism of the banal lifestyle imposed by social constraints on young people, particularly women.

The enjambment used between the stanzas creates a hiatus in the sentence and allows an added layer of meaning to appear in the last stanza. The reader's assumption that the courting places are no longer there, ruined by the wind is qualified in the last stanza with the realisation that it is the couple themselves, not the places, which have been replaced by younger versions of themselves.

The links between images of nature may be pursued in a discussion of 'unripe acorns' and how Larkin hints that even the children, who 'expect to be taken home', have become socialised into a life of routine. The final three lines should offer students a range of interpretations and effects to discuss: the cruelty and/or poignancy of 'their beauty has thickened' is striking, and there may be some productive interpretation of what is meant by the image in the last two lines. The emphasis here should be on personal engagement and interpretation which reflects students' own understanding of the poem as a whole.

How the poet's views are conveyed, once students have discussed their own views and interpretations, could focus on the contrast between concrete and natural imagery, the use of details to represent and stand for a whole way of life, the use of arresting images which encapsulate the poet's view of this kind of life.