

## At Grass by Philip Larkin



Larkin 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**'.

## Explanation of Content

### Structure

The poem is a lyric written in **five** stanzas of six lines each. While it captures a moment, at dusk, in true lyrical fashion, it reflects as well as narrates by means of flashback.

## Stanzas



- 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. Larkin 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. 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.



- 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 criticise 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.

# Themes

- **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.

- **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. Larkin 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 Larkin 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.

- **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 Larkin 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 Larkin 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 organised 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**' Larkin personifies the meadows as good influences on the horses in contrast to the racetrack.



- **Symbol** The groomsmen symbolise the coming of death
- **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 molestation.
- **Tone** The tone of the first stanza is neutral, detached and un-dramatic: '**pick them the eye can hardly 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 Larkin 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.

## Sound Effects

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**'.
- **Alliteration** [repetition of consonant sounds at the start of nearby words] '**dozen distances**',
- **Sibilance** [repetition of 's' sound] Note how the '**sh**' sounds in the second line captures the quietness of the horses environment. In '**summer by summer all stole away**' the repeating '**s**' reinforces the passing of time, which is shown negatively in the word '**stole**'. Line twenty-five is a good example of sibilance, all built around the word '**ease**'. Likewise lines thirteen and fourteen contain ten '**s**' sounds, all of which add to the music of the poem.