Mr Bleaney

SUMMARY

A landlady tells the speaker that the room he's considering renting was formerly occupied by a man named Mr. Bleaney. Bleaney lived there the whole time he worked at a car manufacturing plant known as "the Bodies," until he died or was transferred. The room's thin, shabby, floral-patterned curtains hang five inches short of the windowsill.

The window shows a small yard full of grass clumps and litter. The landlady mentions her "garden" and claims that Bleaney improved it. The room contains a bed, a straight-backed chair, a weak lightbulb, no hook attached to the door, and no space for personal items such as books and luggage.

The speaker tells the landlady he'll rent it. The speaker now lies in the same bed Bleaney once lay in, crushes his cigarette butts in the same tacky saucer Bleaney once used, and plugs his ears with cotton to muffle the radio Bleaney once urged the landlady to buy.

He's learned all of Bleaney's old habits, such as what time he came downstairs each day, how he liked sauce better than gravy, and why he kept betting on soccer.

He's also learned about the yearly schedule that shaped those habits, such as the summer vacations Bleaney spent with acquaintances in Frinton-on-Sea and the Christmases he spent at his sister's house in Stoke-on-Trent.

The speaker wonders whether Bleaney stood looking out at cold, cloudy weather; lay on the musty bed, pretending this room was an acceptable home; and smiled while shivering.

At the same time, the speaker wonders if Bleaney felt a persistent fear that our living conditions reflect who we truly are, and that for someone as old as he was, having nothing more than a tiny rented room meant that was all he'd earned in life. The speaker says that these are things he *doesn't* know for sure about Bleaney.

THEMES

THE DANGERS OF MEDIOCRITY

"Mr Bleaney" sketches a sad portrait of the tenant who formerly occupied the speaker's rented room. The tenant, Mr. Bleaney, led a dull, solitary life, lacking in spontaneity, intimacy, and ambition. The drab, confined room where he lived and died seems to reflect his personal qualities, as if his ghost still lingers. Seeing these qualities as a judgment on Bleaney's character, the speaker also judges himself: he has literally taken Bleaney's place, and fears that he, too, will live an empty life in this coffin-like room. The poem warns that it's all too easy for a dreary, mediocre existence to develop its own momentum, trapping people in gloomy circumstances forever.

The speaker's portrait of Bleaney suggests that he feels both distaste and a queasy pity for his small, sad life. Bleaney's drab bedroom, without so much as a "hook" on the door for clothes, speaks of a life empty of vitality and meaning. The landlady's stories about him suggest much the same: he appears to have been a creature of habit, committed to a dull routine. He seems to have had no curiosity beyond listening to the "jabbering set" (a radio or TV), no aspirations beyond gambling, and no intimate contacts besides a sister he saw once a year. And his efforts to leave a mark on the world didn't come to much: the "bit of garden" he once tended, for instance, is a mess now.

But what really makes the speaker uncomfortable is the fact that he himself seems to be following in Bleaney's footsteps. While the speaker can clearly see how empty and constrained Bleaney's life was, he also finds himself accepting exactly those same circumstances. After assessing Bleaney's grim little room, the speaker says, "I'll take it," as if resigning himself to "taking on" Bleaney's reality.

Worse still, he seems almost to be living Bleaney's life! He "lie[s] / Where Mr Bleaney lay"—literally and figuratively occupying Bleaney's position—and idly smokes as if burning away his time and health. His claim that he "know[s Bleaney's] habits" suggests that he has learned all about Bleaney's routine from the landlady; he's gained an uncomfortably detailed understanding of the man whose place he's taken. And all of this is deeply unsettling to the speaker: his remark that, "at his age," Bleaney had "no more to show" than this sad, cramped room suggests an awareness that Bleaney's circumstances would be a terrible thing to accept in the long term.

Knowing what a life like Bleaney's comes to, the speaker feels deeply afraid that he'll never make anything more of himself than Bleaney did—a fear that might become its own kind of trap. Lying in the bed where Bleaney once lay, the speaker wonders whether Bleaney felt the same "dread" that he does about the prospect of spending life alone in this room—an ominous thought! If Bleaney shared some of that dread, these reflections imply, then even understanding that one is living a mediocre life can't save one from such a life.

The speaker seems to feel Bleaney's fate as a judgement, too. Worrying that "how we live measures our own nature," the speaker fears that an empty life suggests an empty character—and that he might easily discover that he's as hollow a person as Bleaney seems to have been. Perhaps, the poem implies, that sense of hollow worthlessness is part of what traps people in empty lives. If you believe that your circumstances

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are a reflection of your character, gloomy circumstances can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, discouraging you from trying to escape.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

'This was Mr ...
... They moved him.'

The poem's opening lines are literally *dramatic*: quoting the speaker's landlady, they plunge the reader straight into a miniature drama, complete with characters, dialogue, setting, and exposition. There's something ironic about this theatrical beginning. As the poem goes on, it will focus on how *un*dramatic the setting here is—how *little* happens.

The person quoted is a landlady, who's showing the speaker a room that she's renting out and telling him about the previous tenant. Evidently, she got to know that tenant fairly well over the years—but the two probably weren't *that* close, as she still refers to him by the formal "Mr Bleaney."

There's something faintly comic about this name. It echoes homely words like "beans" and "bleary"; shares its initial /bl/ sound with words that connote banality, like "bland" and "blah"; and rhymes with colloquial words for smallness, such as "teeny." Bleaney already sounds like an average, forgettable old chap.

Bleaney rented this room (likely part of a *bedsit* or cheap boarding house) "the whole time he was at the Bodies"—a term that the poem doesn't explain, but that clearly refers to his workplace. (Larkin once suggested that "the Bodies" was an auto works; there was also a taxi manufacturer called Carbodies in his hometown of Coventry.) But the nickname "Bodies" inescapably calls to mind *human* bodies, like the depersonalized bodies of workers at a grueling job. It also calls to mind *dead* bodies, especially in the context of the rest of the landlady's sentence:

> [...] He stayed
> The whole time he was at the Bodies, till
> They moved him.' [...]

"They moved him" could mean that his employer transferred him elsewhere, but it could also be a euphemism implying that Bleaney died and was carried out of the room. (Remember that the landlady is trying to rent the room; she might not want to drive the speaker away by mentioning death outright.) Either way, her remark invites *thoughts* of death and makes the room seem a little haunted.

Both of the first two lines are enjambed. The enjambment after line 1 emphasizes the word "stayed" and makes it linger—stay—in the reader's mind for a moment. Until the sentence continues, it reads simply "He stayed." In a way, that simple phrase seems true of Bleaney: his ghostly presence seems to linger in the room.

The enjambment after line 2 creates a pause after "till." If the landlady is hinting that Bleaney died here, the pause might reflect her awkwardness as she decides how to share this fact.

LINES 3-8

Flowered curtains, thin ...
... bulb, no hook

In lines 3-7, the speaker takes stock of the room as the landlady keeps talking. The details he notices convey how drab and unimpressive the room is. The floral-patterned curtains are "thin," "frayed," and inadequate to cover the window: they "Fall [only] to within five inches of the sill." (Notice how *the sill*, singular, suggests that there's only one window.) The window itself "shows a strip of building land, / Tussocky, littered"; in other words, the room has a view of a small yard or lot full of grass clumps and debris. Not very inviting!

The landlady claims—likely as the speaker's looking out the window—that "Mr Bleaney took / My bit of garden properly in hand." In other words, Mr. Bleaney supposedly improved her small garden. But nothing about the view the speaker describes suggests a garden, so there are a few interpretive possibilities here:

- The garden is too small to be visible to the speaker, and therefore too small to have improved the ugly view.
- The "[t]ussocky, littered" yard is supposed to *be* the garden, or what's left of it.
- The landlady is describing a garden that no longer exists.

Regardless, it's clear that Bleaney's efforts to beautify the property didn't come to much! At the same time, the landlady's tone suggests that she had some fondness and appreciation for Bleaney. It seems she was willing, like Bleaney, to settle for modest comforts—or for what the speaker might view as mediocrity.

In lines 3-4, the /f/ alliteration ("Flowered," "frayed," "Fall," "five") and /v/ consonance ("five," "of") creates a slightly unpleasant sound similar to muttering or cursing. The hard, plosive consonants in the phrase "a strip of building land, / Tussocky, littered" (lines 5-6) are downright ugly; they sound as tough as the clumps of grass in the yard. These sounds subtly reinforce the ugliness of the poem's setting.

LINES 8-10

Bed, upright chair, ...
... 'I'll take it.'

These lines mark a turning point in the poem. The speaker continues listing the unattractive qualities of the room; then, suddenly, he decides to rent it anyway.

The speaker lists the room's few features in the space of eight syllables: a "Bed" (no adjectives, no frills); an uncomfortable-sounding "upright chair"; and a weak "sixty-watt bulb," the room's only lighting. Then he notes what's *not* there: a "hook / Behind the door"; "room for books or bags." These details illustrate how cramped and unwelcoming the space is. Clearly, it's meant to be temporary lodging, not a long-term home—a fact that makes Bleaney's long tenancy even more poignant, and the thought of imitating him even more disturbing to the speaker.

The /b/ alliteration in lines 8-9 sounds almost like a sputter of disgust or indignation: "Bed," "bulb," "Behind," "books," "bags." The speaker's evident disdain for the room makes it all the more surprising that he then agrees to "take it." In fact, "I'll take it" is the one sentence he speaks aloud in the poem, almost as if this decision defines him.

The speaker clearly isn't thrilled about the room. (On a recording of the poem, Larkin reads "I'll take it" with a sigh of resignation.) Why he chooses to rent it anyway is not explained. The simplest explanation is that he can't afford a better place. But as the poem goes on, the speaker toys with the more uncomfortable idea that he doesn't *deserve* a better place. He worries that, like Mr. Bleaney, he's settled for this cramped little "box" due to some flaw in his own "nature": some inherent mediocrity or lack of ambition.

LINES 10-14

So it happens ...
... on to buy.

There's an implied time jump in the middle of line 10, right after "I'll take it"; suddenly, the speaker has been occupying the room for a while. It's possible that everything up to this point has been the speaker's *memory* of renting the room. Or maybe the jump from an earlier to a later "present tense" says something about the *experience* of living there. Perhaps, in this boring room, time seems to stand still.

The phrase "So it happens that..." has a double connotation. On one level, the speaker, having recounted his talk with the landlady, is simply saying, "That's how I've come to live here." On another level, "So it happens" sounds almost like his tenancy is the product of chance—something that happened *to* him rather than something he chose. It's an oddly passive phrasing, perhaps comparable to Bleaney's passive acceptance of his humdrum life.

Having taken Mr. Bleaney's old room, the speaker finds himself taking Bleaney's place in other ways. He literally "lie[s] / Where Mr Bleaney lay," physically occupying Bleaney's former position, stubbing his cigarettes in the kitschy "saucer-souvenir" Bleaney used as an ashtray.

This image also echoes a well-known saying about accepting the consequences of your choices: "You've made your bed; now lie in it." Of course, this kind of acceptance—for better or worse—is what the poem is all about.

Although smoking was more common in the 1950s than today, this habit, too, seems ominous. It's as if the speaker is burning away his time, or even slowly killing himself—and not accomplishing much else in the process. All in all, there's the disturbing suggestion that the speaker has accepted Mr. Bleaney's fate, and is now living out his life of lonely mediocrity.

The next detail *might* suggest that there's some fight left in this speaker after all. By "Stuffing [his] ears" to muffle the radio "set" Bleaney liked (and convinced the landlady to buy), the speaker puts some distance between himself and Bleaney. Maybe he'd rather listen to his own thoughts; maybe he just hates the radio's mindless "jabbering." (Arguably, there's a whiff of snobbery here: the speaker seems proud that, unlike his predecessor, *he* doesn't care for trashy mass media.) But even this detail is ambiguous. The speaker only "tr[ies]" to shut out the radio; he doesn't necessarily succeed. And in a way, by shutting out the world, he's isolating himself even further—thereby making himself even *more* Bleaney-like!

LINES 15-17

I know his ...
... four aways —

Having lived in Bleaney's old lodgings for a while, the speaker has gotten to "know his habits." Most likely, this is because the landlady has continued to tell stories about Bleaney. In lines 15-17, the speaker shares some of what he's learned: what time of day Bleaney typically came downstairs, the fact that he liked sauce better than gravy, and why he gambled on sports. ("Kept on plugging at the four aways" means that Bleaney regularly participated in a betting pool involving "away games" in soccer.)

The words "I know his habits" could also suggest the speaker has gained firsthand knowledge of Bleaney's environment. The speaker may not be literally mimicking Bleaney's habits, but he now understands their context. For example, he probably doesn't gamble on sports himself, but having lived in this dingy room for a while, he may well understand "why" Bleaney gambled. Bleaney seems to have hoped for a lucky ticket out of his dreary life, even if he'd given up on other aspirations.

The details in these lines also emphasize that Bleaney was a creature of habit. He lived his life according to a very predictable routine—perhaps one that trapped him, as gamblers can become trapped in a cycle of gambling. Implicitly,

the speaker fears that he's about to fall into a similar trap—or that he already has.

Lines 15-17 are part of a long, complex sentence, which stretches through line 20 and sets up the even longer sentence spanning lines 21-28. These twisty, sprawling sentences seem to fight against the formal regularity of the poem, with its boxlike quatrains and steady pentameter. Perhaps, in this way, they mirror the speaker's restlessness within his rented "box."

LINES 18-20

Likewise their yearly ...
... house in Stoke.

Lines 18-20 finish the long sentence that began in line 15. Here, the speaker notes that he's learned all about Mr. Bleaney's *yearly* routine as well as his daily habits—suggesting that Bleaney lived in this sad little room for long enough that the landlady got familiar with his annual schedule.

What did his yearly routine look like? Apparently, when on vacation from his job at "the Bodies," Bleaney stayed with "Frinton folk" in the summer and with his sister "in Stoke" at Christmas. "Frinton" refers to the small English beach town of Frinton-on-Sea, while "Stoke" refers to the small English city of Stoke-on-Trent. Neither is an especially glamorous location, though Frinton would have been a nice enough place to visit in the summer.

Significantly, Bleaney doesn't seem to have been *close* with anyone in Frinton; he lodged there with unnamed "folk" who "put him up" (or put up with him?) for a spell. His sister seems to have been his closest relation—and he saw her only once a year.

In other words, these details fit the overall portrait of Bleaney's life as lonely, humdrum, and predictable. His years were bound by a routine "frame," much as his daily life was bound by the four walls of his tiny room.

Alliterative repetition underscores the repetitiveness of Bleaney's life, linking "frame," "Frinton," and "folk" in line 18 and "sister's" and "Stoke" in line 20.

LINES 21-24

But if he ...
... off the dread

Lines 21-24 comprise the first half of a long, complex sentence that stretches across two stanzas, all the way through the end of the poem.

In making sense of this sentence, it helps to read the word "if" in line 21 as synonymous with "whether." The basic meaning of lines 21-28 boils down to: *But whether Bleaney did [X], without losing the fear that [Y], I don't know.*

What the speaker imagines Bleaney doing (without knowing if he actually did it) is pitiful, yet poignant. Specifically, the speaker suggests that Bleaney may have "stood and watched the frigid wind" blowing through clouds outside, lain on "the fusty bed / Telling himself that this was home," and "grinned" to himself (delusionally? self-mockingly? with a grimace of pain?) while "shiver[ing]" from the cold.

Overall, this is a portrait of a lonely man trying to cheer himself up while living in a chilly, musty-smelling bachelor pad. But here's the crucial thing: the speaker can imagine Bleaney's reality in such detail because he's now *living a version of it himself*. As a result, he knows that even an optimistic, "grinn[ing]" Bleaney might have felt some "dread" in these circumstances. The nature of that dread will be revealed in the next stanza; this one leaves the word "dread" hanging in ominous suspense.

Again, this elaborate sentence seems to push against the constraints of the poem's form. It sprawls over two stanzas—one isn't enough to hold it—and relies on twisty, awkward syntax to fit the meter and rhyme scheme. Perhaps these formal qualities reflect the speaker's restless discomfort within the confines of his tiny room.

LINES 25-28

That how we ...
... I don't know.

Lines 25-28 conclude the long sentence that began in lines 21-24 and conclude the poem as well. The "dread" that Bleaney may have felt is the fear "That how we live measures our own nature." In other words, Bleaney may have feared that the home/life people end up with mirrors their true inner selves, for better or for worse. ("Measures," in this context, means something like "mirrors" or "takes the measure of.")

Listen to the way the poem's meter seems to stumble here:

That **how** | we **live** | **mea**sures | **our own** | **na**ture,

This awkward, lumbering line evokes the speaker's own "dread." Based on the poem's tone and details, the speaker obviously feels that Bleaney's old room is sad and inadequate. But if "how we live measures our own nature," then this living space reflects something sad and inadequate in Bleaney—and in the speaker, who's taken Bleaney's place!

One important difference between the speaker and Bleaney is age. Since the speaker appears to be younger that Bleaney, he wonders if Bleaney particularly dreaded the thought that, "at his age," he had nothing but this "hired box" to call his own. ("Hired box" refers to the rented room, which might have been a "box room"—a British term for a small storage room in a house. But this description also sounds uncomfortably like a coffin.) Growing old in such a dump, according to the speaker, might make someone "pretty sure / He warranted no better." Of course, this is really a projection of the speaker's own self-doubt. The speaker fears that *he's* settled for a mediocre

life—and that he might even deserve it.

The final "I don't know" calls back to "I know his habits" in line 15. When reading this phrase aloud for a recording of the poem, Larkin stressed the word "don't." The idea is that the speaker *does* know about Bleaney's daily and yearly routine, but *doesn't* know whether Bleaney escaped a feeling of dread about it all. At the same time, it's strongly implied that the speaker—Bleaney's successor—feels that dread himself.

SYMBOLS

GARDEN

Gardens are symbolically associated with cultivation, growth, vitality, and life itself. Idioms such as "tend one's own garden," "cultivate oneself," and "reap what you sow" link gardening and planting with the life or fate one shapes for oneself. Gardens can also be associated with paradise, as in the biblical Garden of Eden.

In this poem, the landlady claims that "Mr Bleaney took / My bit of garden properly in hand"—that is, helped her improve her garden. But there's no indication of anything beautiful growing outside her house. The window shows only a pitiful "strip of building land," both "Tussocky" (full of grass clumps) and "littered" (strewn with trash or debris). Either the garden consists of an ugly lot outside an ugly room (ironically, pretty much the opposite of a paradise), or it's just a small corner of that ugly lot.

Thus, Mr. Bleaney's garden comes to symbolize mediocrity, failure, and wasted potential—a life that never really amounts to much.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "Whose window shows a strip of building land, / Tussocky, littered. 'Mr Bleaney took / My bit of garden properly in hand.'"

BED

Much like "You reap what you sow," the idiom "You've made your bed; now lie in it" refers to living with the consequences of your choices. The poem plays on this symbolic link between one's bed and one's fate.

The speaker's lying down in Mr. Bleaney's "fusty" old bed, after deciding to rent Bleaney's old room, unsettlingly suggests that he's chosen a fate similar to Bleaney's—in fact, practically taken over Bleaney's mediocre life. The idea that Bleaney might have lain there "Telling himself that this was home" makes it seem that he outwardly reconciled himself to his sad fate—and that he was, on some level, fooling himself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "So it happens that I lie / Where Mr Bleaney lay"
- **Lines 22-23:** "lay on the fusty bed / Telling himself that this was home"

POETIC DEVICES

IRONY

Larkin's poems are often laced with irony, and "Mr Bleaney" is no exception: a series of ironic moments give the poem its dark humor.

For example, in lines 5-7, this juxtaposition of image and dialogue is jarringly ironic:

> [...] Whose window shows a strip of building land,
> Tussocky, littered. 'Mr Bleaney took
> My bit of garden properly in hand.'

Maybe the landlady is kidding herself; maybe her garden is dead now that Mr. Bleaney isn't there to take care of it; maybe her garden is dwarfed by the rest of the ugly view. Regardless, as the speaker looks out at grass clumps and litter, the landlady's *praise* of the view contradicts the reader's expectations. (If anything, you'd expect her to make an excuse for it, or not mention it at all.)

Lines 7-9 contain a bit of situational irony:

> Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook
> Behind the door, no room for books or bags —
> 'I'll take it.'

After the speaker has listed all the unattractive features of the room, he does what you'd least expect: rents the place anyway.

There's also a touch of dramatic irony in the detail about Bleaney's gambling habit ("He kept on plugging at the four aways"). Bleaney's bets couldn't have paid off much: he clearly never won enough to escape this awful housing! Along with the speaker, the reader knows that Bleaney's hopes for a lucky break were in vain.

Finally, the idea of Bleaney "Telling himself that this was home" carries an ironic charge. The reader understands that, if Bleaney really did tell himself this, he was sadly mistaken (at least from the speaker's perspective)—and in the speaker's imagination, he felt "dread" even as he told himself this. This lonely, bare space isn't a "home" in any true sense of the word.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "Whose window shows a strip of building land, / Tussocky, littered. 'Mr Bleaney took / My bit of garden properly in hand.'"
- **Lines 8-10:** "Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook / Behind the door, no room for books or bags — / 'I'll take it.'"
- **Line 23:** "Telling himself that this was home"

REPETITION

"Mr Bleaney" uses repetition, and especially parallel structure, to convey the numbing repetitiveness of Bleaney's routine.

In lines 15-17, for example, the speaker ticks off a list of Bleaney's habits in a string of parallel clauses:

> [...] what time he came down,
> His preference for sauce to gravy, why
> He kept on plugging at the four aways —

The weary tone of this parallelism suggests that the speaker is more than a little tired of hearing about all Mr. Bleaney's habits—and that those habits were in themselves pretty deadening.

Meanwhile, in the next-to-last stanza, the speaker speculates on things Bleaney *might* have done, using a series of parallel verbs: "stood," "watched," "lay," "grinned," "shivered." Most of these verbs are joined with polysyndeton, a long list of "and"s that seem to pile one weary action on top of another: "stood and watched [...] and grinned, / And shivered." These lists provide a kind of inventory of Bleaney's (and the speaker's) life, in all its sparseness and deadening routine.

Another important repetition in the poem is the frequent use of the homophones "no" and "know." Along with two appearances in lines 8-9 ("no hook / Behind the door, no room for books or bags"), they crop up in lines 15 ("I know his habits"), line 26 ("having no more to show"), and together in the final line ("He warranted no better, I don't know"). These words crystallize several of the poem's themes: knowledge (the speaker begins to understand Bleaney's life), deprivation ("no" is applied to things Bleaney lacked), and the knowledge *of* deprivation.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "no"
- **Line 9:** "no"
- **Line 15:** "know," "what time he came down,"
- **Lines 16-17:** "why / He kept on plugging at the four aways —"
- **Lines 21-24:** "stood and watched the frigid wind / Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed / Telling himself that this was home, and grinned, / And shivered,"
- **Line 26:** "no"
- **Line 28:** "no," "know"

ALLITERATION

"Mr Bleaney" uses frequent alliteration to link words and ideas together, and sometimes to create unpleasant sounds that match the poem's unpleasant setting.

For example, the four /f/ words in lines 3-4 ("Flowered curtains, thin and frayed, / Fall to within five inches of the sill") give the verse a muttering or cursing sound; you can almost hear the speaker grumbling under his breath as he surveys the grim decor.

Likewise, listen to the many /b/ words in lines 8-9 :

> Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook
> Behind the door, no room for books or bags

All those /b/ sounds are like a vehement sputter of indignation at the terrible room.

Meanwhile, the simple "lie"/"lay" alliteration in lines 10-11 ("I lie / Where Mr Bleaney lay") strengthens the link between the two men and their actions.

And the hissing, onomatopoeic sibilance of lines 11-12 ("and stub my fags / On the same saucer-souvenir") has an unpleasant hiss that evokes exactly what the speaker's describing: a cigarette getting stubbed out.

Alliterative /f/ and /s/ sounds link "Frinton folk" and "sister's"/"Stoke" in lines 18 and 20, tightening the connection between these people and their places of residence. (Remember, this poem plays with the idea that where you live reflects your identity!) "Frinton folk" also alliterates with "frame" (line 18), and "sister's"/"Stoke" adds to a larger pattern of sibilance in lines 19-20. The consistency of the sounds in this stanza helps evoke Bleaney's consistent routine.

In line 24, alliteration marks an intuitive connection between "shiver[ing]" and "shaking," but also marks a distinction: Bleaney may have *shivered* in his room, but that doesn't mean he *shook off* his underlying fear.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Flowered," "frayed"
- **Line 4:** "Fall," "five"
- **Line 8:** "Bed," "bulb"
- **Line 9:** "Behind," "books," "bags"
- **Line 10:** "lie"
- **Line 11:** "lay," "stub"
- **Line 12:** "same saucer-souvenir"
- **Line 18:** "frame," "Frinton folk"
- **Line 20:** "sister's," "Stoke"
- **Line 21:** "watched," "wind"

- **Line 24:** "shivered," "shaking"

ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance (and some internal rhyme) for a variety of subtle effects. In lines 3-6, for example, heavy assonance on the short /i/ vowel ties together the description of the room's window and view:

> [...] Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,
> Fall to within five inches of the sill,
> Whose window shows a strip of building land,
> Tussocky, littered.

In English, the short /i/ vowel is associated with many words describing smallness or meagerness—like "thin," "inches," and "strip" here, but also "little," "stingy," "wispy," "itty-bitty," etc. As it repeats, it seems to extend the sense of thinness, meagerness, and inadequacy over the whole description.

Later, short /i/ sounds also strengthen the link between adjective and noun in "frigid wind" (line 21) and suggest a close connection between "grinned" and "shivered" in lines 23-24. (The idea of Bleaney *grinning* in this awful room is as eerie as the idea of him *shivering*. Both actions might be prompted by fear.) In the same stanza, assonance bridges the verb "Tousling" and its object, "clouds" (line 22), adding extra emphasis to already stressed syllables and evoking the disruptive force of the wind.

Long /o/ sounds link "no" and "show" in line 26, as well as "no," "don't," and "know" in line 28. Here, assonance and internal rhyme draw out the sound of "no" over multiple syllables (the last word of the poem, "know," is even a homophone of "no"). They contribute to the final stanza's emphasis on negation and deprivation.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "curtains," "thin"
- **Line 4:** "within," "inches," "sill"
- **Line 5:** "window," "strip," "building"
- **Line 6:** "littered"
- **Line 21:** "frigid wind"
- **Line 22:** "Tousling," "clouds"
- **Line 23:** "grinned"
- **Line 24:** "shivered"
- **Line 26:** "no," "show"
- **Line 28:** "no," "don't know"

CAESURA

The many caesuras in "Mr Bleaney" help to evoke the characters' emotions. giving the poem some of its drama.

For instance, take a look at the caesuras in lines 2-3, in which the landlady shows the speaker Mr. Bleaney's old room:

> [...] He stayed
> The whole time he was at the Bodies, || till
> They moved him.' || Flowered curtains, thin and
> frayed,

The hesitant pause in line 2 leads into an abrupt mid-line period in line 3. This heavy break might suggest that the landlady is delicately sharing heavy news: Bleaney died here.

Another caesura in line 10 has a similar dramatic effect:

> 'I'll take it.' || So it happens that I lie

The mid-line period here makes the speaker's words feel jarring, heightening the reader's surprise over the speaker's decision to rent the room. Perhaps the speaker himself is a little surprised that he's chosen to take this dreary, mediocre path.

And consider the caesura in the very last lines:

> Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
> He warranted no better, || I don't know.

This caesura marks a dramatic pause after the very long clause in lines 26-28. It comes just before the poem's last three words, "I don't know," making them sound all the more crisp and emphatic.

Caesurae thus give the poem some of its emotional punch.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "room. He"
- **Line 2:** "Bodies, till"
- **Line 3:** "him.' Flowered," "curtains, thin"
- **Line 6:** "Tussocky, littered. 'Mr"
- **Line 8:** "Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no"
- **Line 9:** "door, no"
- **Line 10:** "it.' So"
- **Line 11:** "lay, and"
- **Line 12:** "souvenir, and"
- **Line 13:** "wool, to"
- **Line 15:** "habits — what"
- **Line 16:** "gravy, why"
- **Line 18:** "frame: the"
- **Line 22:** "clouds, lay"
- **Line 23:** " home, and"
- **Line 24:** "shivered, without"
- **Line 28:** "better, I"

ENJAMBMENT

"Mr Bleaney" makes extensive use of enjambment. Fully half of its lines (14 out of 28) are enjambed. In general, this effect

creates a restless tension within the verse, as if its sentences are fighting against the meter and rhyme scheme. The speaker's thoughts keep sprawling over the line and stanza breaks; they seem to need more room, to want to escape their box-like stanzas (and the word "stanza" derives from the Italian for "room"). These formal elements reflect the speaker's apparent desire to escape his dull routine and tiny room.

Some of the poem's enjambments also have more specific effects, creating special emphasis or suggesting a certain tone. For instance, take a look at the way the enjambments work in the first few lines of the poem:

> 'This was Mr Bleaney's room. He **stayed**
> **The** whole time he was at the Bodies, **till**
> **They** moved him.'

In line 1 here, "He stayed" seems to hang in the air for a moment. On closer inspection, this simple statement seems true of Mr. Bleaney: his haunting presence seems to have lingered here. Then, in line 2, the pause after "till" may reflect the landlady's hesitation as she decides how to mention Bleaney's death, as if she's trying to find the right euphemistic words.

And take a look at the enjambment in lines 10-11:

> [...] So it happens that I **lie**
> **Where** Mr Bleaney lay, [...]

The attention the enjambment here draws to the word "lie" hints at a double meaning. The speaker's lying *down*, but maybe, in some sense, he's also lying *to himself*. (He's just said "I'll take it," meaning that he's accepted the room: but maybe, in a deeper sense, he *doesn't* accept this fate for himself.)

And the strong enjambment that leaves the word "dread" dangling alone at the end of the sixth stanza creates a bit of unnerving suspense—dread of *what*?—while conveying the heaviness of the dread itself.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "stayed / The"
- **Lines 2-3:** "till / They"
- **Lines 6-7:** "took / My"
- **Lines 8-9:** "hook / Behind"
- **Lines 10-11:** "lie / Where"
- **Lines 12-13:** "try / Stuffing"
- **Lines 13-14:** "drown / The"
- **Lines 16-17:** "why / He"
- **Lines 18-19:** "folk / Who"
- **Lines 21-22:** "wind / Tousling"
- **Lines 22-23:** "bed / Telling"
- **Lines 24-25:** "dread / That"
- **Lines 26-27:** "show / Than"
- **Lines 27-28:** "sure / He"

APORIA

Aporia is the expression of doubt or uncertainty for rhetorical effect. Often the uncertainty is feigned (as when someone begins a sentence, "I'm not sure how to say this, but"—and then says something perfectly clear and articulate). The ending of "Mr Bleaney" expresses just this kind of feigned uncertainty.

In the poem's final line, the speaker claims that "I don't know" whether Bleaney had the experiences and feelings described in lines 21-28—specifically, whether he experienced this sad room and lifestyle "without shaking off the dread" that he somehow deserved it. But the speaker's portrayal of this dread is so vivid that it's fairly clear he *does* know—or at least believe—that Bleaney experienced it. And since he's taken Bleaney's place, there's the strong implication that he now knows that dread *firsthand*.

It's still possible to read some ambiguity into that closing "I don't know." The speaker never actually met Bleaney, so it's possible that Bleaney really was happy with his life, however pitiable it may seem from the outside. But to the extent that the speaker fears becoming *like* Bleaney, "I don't know" is a kind of emotional dodge. Whatever Bleaney felt about his room and his life, it's clear by now that the speaker considers them dreadful.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-28:** "But if he stood and watched the frigid wind / Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed / Telling himself that this was home, and grinned, / And shivered, without shaking off the dread / That how we live measures our own nature, / And at his age having no more to show / Than one hired box should make him pretty sure / He warranted no better, I don't know."

VOCABULARY

The Bodies (Line 2) - "The Bodies" appears to be a nickname for Mr. Bleaney's workplace. It may relate to auto bodies, as in the Carbodies manufacturing plant in Larkin's hometown of Coventry, England. (Mentioned just before a reference to Bleaney's death, the name also evokes *dead* bodies.)

Tussocky (Line 6) - Filled with *tussocks*, or clumps of grass.

Fags (Line 11) - British slang for cigarettes.

Saucer-souvenir (Line 12) - A saucer bought as a souvenir from somewhere. In other words, it's probably tacky and fairly cheap, not fine china. (After all, both Bleaney and the speaker use it as an ashtray.)

Set (Line 14) - A radio. "Mr Bleaney" was written in the mid-1950s, when radios remained very popular as home entertainment and were sometimes called "sets," similar to the term "TV sets."(TVs were also starting to become household items in the 1950s, at least in wealthier homes, so "set" could refer to a TV. However, the landlady of this cheap boarding house seems unlikely to have sprung for a television. Also, the actual house that seems to have inspired Larkin's poem contained a radio, not a TV, that annoyed him!)

Four aways (Line 17) - "The four aways" refers to a gambling pool in which bettors wagered on "away games" in soccer. That Mr. Bleaney "kept on plugging at" them indicates that he habitually gambled on sports.

Frinton/Stoke (Line 18, Line 20) - "Frinton" and "Stoke" are UK place names. Frinton-on-Sea is a small beach town in southeast England; Stoke-on-Trent is a city in the West Midlands of England.

Tousling (Line 22) - Messing up or disheveling (often used to describe mussing up someone's hair).

Fusty (Line 22) - Musty or stale.

Hired (Line 27) - Here, a synonym for "rented," as in the speaker's rented, box-like room.

Warranted (Line 28) - Deserved or merited.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mr Bleaney" consists of seven quatrains, or four-line stanzas, laid out with a kind of measured regularity that mirrors the regularity of Bleaney's—and the speaker's—routine. Its four-line stanzas impose tight formal constraints, like the four walls of a confining room. (In fact, the word "stanza" derives from the Italian for "room," so Larkin may be playing on this connection.) The poem unfolds within strict limits, much like Bleaney's and the speaker's lives.

At the same time, the poem's occasional metrical variations, along with its frequent enjambments and caesuras, add elements of surprise that keep the verse from becoming unbearably monotonous. In this way, they reflect the speaker's resistance to the monotonous routines that trapped Bleaney. Similarly, the syntax of the final sentence (lines 21-28) is contorted, as if straining against the poem's formal limits—much as the speaker strains against the limits of his room.

METER

"Mr Bleaney" is built on a foundation of iambic pentameter. That is, each line generally uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this:

> Behind | the door, | no room | for books | or bags —

The poem's passages of perfect iambic pentameter—all of stanza 3, for instance, in which the speaker lies smoking in Mr. Bleaney's old bed—help to evoke the strictures of the speaker's little room and Mr. Bleaney's little life. The meter in those passages feels as monotonously predictable as Mr. Bleaney's day-to-day existence.

But the poem often plays with this meter, varying stresses and rhythms. This variation gives readers the sense that the speaker is internally rebelling, kicking out against Mr. Bleaney's fate—a fate he feels he might be trapped in, too.

For instance, take a look at the way the rhythm changes in line 25:

> That how | we live | measures | our own | nature,

This odd, awkward rhythm has two effects. First, it seems to reflect the "dread" the speaker mentions in the previous line, as if the meter itself is rattled. Second, it calls special attention to this line, which encapsulates the speaker's anxiety about whether he deserves his mediocre fate—one of the poem's major themes.

RHYME SCHEME

"Mr Bleaney" is written in quatrains that follow an ABAB rhyme scheme. This simple, foursquare scheme suits the poem's setting: a sparse little "box" of a room.

Nearly all the poem's rhymes are both exact and *masculine*: that is, they rhyme on a stressed final syllable (e.g., "stayed"/"frayed," as opposed to a *feminine rhyme* like "calling"/"falling," whose rhyme words end on an unstressed syllable). These "masculine" endings, too, give the verse a rigid, foursquare quality, with no softening extra syllables. They may even tie in thematically with the stereotypical maleness of the speaker's bachelor pad.

The lone exception comes with the imperfect rhyme in lines 25 and 27, which rhymes an unstressed with a stressed syllable:

> That how we live measures our own nature [...]
> Than one hired box should make him pretty sure

The slight break from the rhyme pattern (and the variation in the meter in line 25) draws extra attention to this line, which sums up the poem's central question.

SPEAKER

Biographical evidence, like letters to friends, makes it clear that Philip Larkin based "Mr Bleaney" on an actual room he rented in Hull, England, during the 1950s. At the time, Larkin was in his early 30s, unmarried (as he would remain), working as a

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librarian, and still establishing his literary career. During this period, he lived in *bedsits*: single-occupant rooms rented within a larger house. Like the setting of the poem, the house where he wrote "Mr Bleaney" was suburban, run by a landlady—and contained a radio that annoyed him!

It's reasonable to imagine, then, that the speaker is based partly on Larkin himself, even if some of the poem's details are imagined or exaggerated.

From the poem alone, it's clear that the speaker is unattached (he's living alone in a tiny, single-occupant room), that he smokes (he uses Bleaney's old saucer-ashtray), and that he lives a rather austere life (he's able to take a room with no space for "books or bags," even if he might prefer otherwise). Unlike Bleaney, he doesn't enjoy the radio, apparently preferring to listen to his own thoughts. In general, it's clear from the speaker's judgmental language that he *dislikes* this room—or "hired box"—even though he decides to rent it. He feels ill at ease, and perhaps adrift in life.

Though the poem doesn't give specifics about the speaker's profession or personal situation, it expresses his fear of ending up a lonely mediocrity like Bleaney. In acknowledging "the dread / That how we live measures our own nature," he hints at a desire to live better, aim higher, and escape Bleaney's fate.

SETTING

The poem's setting is a rented room in a bedsit or boarding house, which seems to be located on an unimpressive plot of "building land" in a suburban neighborhood. The room was previously occupied by an old bachelor named "Mr Bleaney," who died there. The property is run by a landlady (the speaker of lines 1-3 and 6-7, as well as the "her" in line 14), who got to know Bleaney over the years and recounts his habits to the speaker.

The room—apparently based on the real one Larkin was renting at the time he wrote the poem—is bare, cramped, and drab. It has a single window with a shabby curtain and a view of ugly, "littered" turf. It contains sparse furnishings and dim lighting ("Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb") and has little or no space for personal items ("no hook / Behind the door, no room for books or bags").

Both the room and the house still bear traces of Mr. Bleaney's presence: the "saucer-souvenir" he used as an ashtray, the "fusty bed" that may still carry a whiff of its former occupant, and the "jabbering" of the radio he convinced the landlady to buy. Of course, the landlady's stories about Bleaney are a reminder of his tenancy, too.

Though the speaker decides to "take" the room, he clearly doesn't feel at home there. In fact, he mockingly imagines Bleaney "Telling himself that this was home." The room's oppressive dinginess makes the speaker feel as if he's living in a "hired box"—language that uncomfortably evokes a coffin.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

From the publication of his second collection, *The Less Deceived*, in 1955 until his death in 1985, Philip Larkin was one of the UK's most popular poets. The editor-critic J. D. Scott grouped him, along with a number of other post-World War II English writers like Larkin's close friend Kingsley Amis, into a school he called "The Movement." The Movement poets, including Larkin, rejected many of the formal and stylistic experiments of the previous, Modernist generation. They adopted a plainer style along with characteristically English themes—as evidenced by a poem like "Mr Bleaney," a frank portrait of lonely bachelorhood in suburban England.

Larkin wrote "Mr Bleaney" in spring 1955 and published it in the journal *The Listener* that fall. It was first collected in Larkin's 1964 book *The Whitsun Weddings*. Along with several other well-known poems from that collection—including "Dockery and Son," "Sunny Prestatyn," and the title poem—it captures a slice of post-WWII English life, finding ominous or unsettling overtones in ordinary situations.

These poems' general attitude is one of blunt realism bordering on bleak cynicism (though some, including "An Arundel Tomb" and "The Whitsun Weddings" itself, contain redemptive notes as well). This attitude became strongly associated with Larkin, who gained a reputation as both a brilliant stylist and a literary curmudgeon. He once famously claimed that "Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for [William] Wordsworth." In other words, the kind of loneliness and lack explored in "Mr Bleaney" were his signature poetic subject.

From biographical evidence, including letters to friends, it's clear that "Mr Bleaney" was based on—and written in—an actual room Larkin rented in Hull, England, in 1955. The room was part of a bedsit, a type of cheap boarding house. Larkin spoke well of the house's landlady, really did complain about its "blasted RADIO," and moved to other lodging after a few months. Whether or not he felt exactly as the speaker of "Mr Bleaney" feels, he got out of there as soon as he could.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Following the hardships of World War II, along with the first phase of the decolonization movement that dissolved the British Empire, the UK found itself in reduced circumstances. Britain narrowly avoided bankruptcy after the war, was slow to recover economically and entered an "age of austerity" that included rationing of food and raw materials. Prosperity returned to the country during the 1950s, when Larkin wrote "Mr Bleaney," but the memory of wartime belt-tightening remained, along with the sense that Britain's days as a global

superpower were over.

Larkin was an Oxford University graduate from an affluent middle-class family, so he didn't share the apparent working-class background of his "Mr Bleaney" character. (Arguably, there's a touch of class snobbery in Larkin's portrait of both Bleaney and his living space.) But his generation witnessed both the austerity years and the subsequent boom years—which brought, for example, a nationwide increase in home ownership, buoyed by government investment in construction of new homes—and his poetry reflects its time and place in many subtle ways.

Like the speaker of "Mr Bleaney," Larkin lived for a while in bedsits (a.k.a. bed-sitting rooms), a form of cheap lodging whose popularity in Britain increased after the war. Bedsits also featured in other British literature and media of the period: for example, the plays *The Room* (Harold Pinter, 1957) and *The Bed-Sitting Room* (1963, Spike Milligan and John Antrobus). However, Larkin—like many Britons during the postwar decades of renewed prosperity—evidently aspired to better circumstances. He soon moved into a more spacious flat in Hull, where he remained for nearly two decades, and eventually bought his own house in 1974. Still, for most of his career, he lived modestly (despite his growing literary fame), and he remained a bachelor until he died.

In some ways, then, Larkin's upward-striving impulses mirrored those of his generation—and of the "Mr Bleaney" speaker, to the extent that he feels dissatisfied. But perhaps Larkin's more modest, hermit-like impulses mirrored another side of the "Bleaney" speaker—the side that chooses to live alone in a small room.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Larkin Documentary — Watch the 2003 documentary "Philip Larkin: Love and Death in Hull." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqa6L22m0rY)
- The Poet Reads the Poem — Listen to Larkin reading "Mr Bleaney" with a short introduction. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-AbE0ZqFFA)
- A Biography of the Poet — Learn more about Larkin's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)
- Larkin at the British Library — Browse the resources of the Philip Larkin Collection at the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/philip-larkin#)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- An Arundel Tomb
- Coming
- The Trees
- The Whitsun Weddings
- This Be The Verse

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