The Whitsun Weddings

SUMMARY

It was Whitsun Saturday and I left late. It was a sunny day and my train departed around 1:20, almost completely empty. The windows were open due to the stifling heat, even the seat cushions were hot, and everything felt very slow. Out of the window I saw the backs of houses, the glare of windshields, and I could smell the fish-dock. We rode beside the wide, flat, slow river, zooming through the Lincolnshire countryside.

The train kept its steady course all through the hot afternoon, as we traveled south and inland. We passed big farms with cows whose shadows were small under the high sun, and canals full of industrial waste. I saw a greenhouse, and hedges rising and falling. The carriage had a pretty bad smell from the cloth, but sometimes the smell of grass overpowered it. Towns seemed to repeat themselves as we went past, each one signaled by a scrapyard.

At the beginning of the journey, I didn't notice the weddings whose noise could be heard from each station. The sun was too bright for me to see what was happening in the shade of the platform, and though I could hear a commotion I thought it was porters mucking around with the mail. I kept reading, but as the train pulled away I noticed a large group of young female wedding guests. They were smiling, had elaborate hair, and were dressed as if in a caricature of contemporary styles, with heels and veils. They were poised uncertainly on the platform watching us leave.

It was as though they were witnessing the end of something that we on the train had survived. Now I was intrigued, so I took greater notice at the next station and comprehended the scene more clearly. I saw fat fathers with sweaty heads, loud overweight mothers, and uncles being rude. Then I noticed the girls again, with their perms, nylon gloves, and fake jewelry, and the yellows, pinks, and brown-greens.

These fashion elements separated the girls visually from the other guests, almost as if they were an illusion. These numerous weddings—which took place in small halls and cafes near the train yards, with rooms covered in streamers and full of coach-loads of guests—were nearly over. At every station, newly-weds boarded the train while the guests gave last bits of advice and threw confetti. When we left each station, I read the faces of those still on the platform, each of which seem to say something about the wedding. The children seemed bored.

For the fathers, this was the biggest success of their lives, though something about it felt like a joke. The older women looked like they knew a terrible secret, while the girls seemed perplexed, holding their purses tighter—perhaps even intimated by what they saw, as though they'd witnessed something of fearful religious importance. Pretty soon we left the guests behind—though we had internalized all their perspectives—and raced towards London, the train blowing fits of steam. The environment grew more urbanized, fields giving way to plots of land being developed, and I noticed poplar trees casting shadows over the roads.

In that fifty minutes or so, which was just long enough to get comfortable and reflect on the wedding, all of these new marriages got started. The newly-weds gazed out of the window, crammed into the carriage. A cinema, a cooling tower, and a cricket game were all visible from the window. I don't think any of the different couples thought about the people they would never meet now that they were married, or how they all were sharing this first hour of their respective marriages together. As we approached sunny London, our final destination, I thought of the different areas packed together like squares of wheat.

We were headed straight for the capital, racing past glinting rail and stationary train carriages. The sooty, mossy walls of the city started to surround us and the shared experience was nearly over. The collective power of these newly-weds was ready to be unleashed. We slowed and braked, feeling the gravity as though we were falling like a shower of arrows sent beyond view, raining down somewhere else.

THEMES

TIME, DEATH, AND IMPERMANENCE

"The Whitsun Weddings" describes the speaker's train journey into London on Whitsun Saturday (a date in summer that was once a popular choice for weddings due to certain tax breaks). As it does so, the poem takes an unsentimental look at what it means to be human in light of the unstoppable forward march of time. Even though weddings might be thought of as new beginnings, the speaker draws out the way that all this celebration is ultimately cast in the light (or shadow) of its impermanence—that is, in the face of inevitable death.

Before the wedding parties even show up in the poem, the speaker builds an atmosphere of decay. Looking out upon the shifting English landscape that passes by the train's windows, the speaker sees "industrial froth" on the canals. This evokes the vast shifts in the fabric of society due to modern industrialization, which was happening at the time of Larkin's writing. It also suggests the way that human activity wears down and muddies the world around it. Likewise, the carriage-cloth of the train, which was ostensibly once pristine and new,

now "reeks" with a bad odor, subtly suggesting rot and overuse. Later, the speaker sees "acres of dismantled cars"—objects made defunct by time. All of these images suggest that the human world cannot stay fresh for long—an idea that, in turn, comes to affect the later description of the newlyweds themselves as "Fresh." That is, in creating this atmosphere of decay, the poem implies that even these bright young faces will eventually become worn out and stale.

At first, however, the wedding parties are vibrant. Marriage is traditionally one of life's major events, and the newlyweds and their guests behave with all the pomp and ceremony of a momentous occasion. Their enthusiasm reflects the idea of marriage as a stamp of permanence—of pledging to be together forever and so on. At the same time, however, the way the train passes by the wedding parties seems to highlight that this permanence is just a kind of trick played by the magnitude of the occasion. That is, however momentous these events may *feel* to the participants, they are little more than fleeting visions that pass by almost as soon as they appear.

This idea is supported by the description of the wedding parties initially posed on the platforms "as if out on the end of an event / Waving goodbye / To something that survived it." The young couples' new beginnings, in their way, signify their *endings*—another step away from their youth and freedom. The poem sums this up in the phrase "happy funeral"—this is a happy day for many, but this happiness all too brief.

The speaker then focuses on the balding fathers, the "mothers loud and fat," and the "smut[ty]" uncles of the newly-weds—hinting at the way that the "Fresh" young couples will age and turn into similar figures. Likewise, the focus on the gaudiness of the girls' appearances (their "jewellery-substitutes" and so on) shows that the pomp of the big day is a kind of temporary illusion. Indeed, the supposed importance of the wedding day is undermined by the way that this importance can never last. That's why the "success" of these wedding days is, though "huge," also "wholly farcical." Time will continue to move forward, and, the poem suggests, this happy moment will soon end; death lurks behind every smile and under every wedding hat.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 6-8
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-20
- Lines 27-33
- Lines 33-45
- Lines 45-80

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Larkin's poetry often takes an unsentimental look at love, frequently presenting it as little more than an biological mechanism to ensure the human race's reproduction. "The Whitsun Weddings" takes slightly satirical aim at the artificiality, conformity, and farcical nature of weddings to undermine the notion of love as some sort of grand, magical, and everlasting endeavor. In reality, the poem implies, marriage and love are kind of commonplace and mundane. The poem thus contrasts the supposed meaningfulness of getting married—e.g. *the big day*—with a kind of hollowness at its core.

The wedding parties don't appear until the poem's third stanza. At first the speaker doesn't even realize that all the commotion he can hear is caused by wedding guests, thinking it to be something else entirely (showing that, to him at least, these weddings are not especially important). When he *does* take notice, he is taken aback by the sheer number weddings that seem to be taking place. This makes them feel less special and unique, best summed up by the speaker's approximate counting of the weddings as adding up to a "dozen" (a word usually associated, at least in England at the time, with eggs—something decidedly less than romantic).

It's also worth considering *why* the speaker encounters so many wedding parties on his train journey to London. The U.K. government used to offer a tax break to those married by a certain deadline—which coincided with the long Whitsun weekend (long because it included a bank holiday, a.k.a. an extra day off). It was thus a popular time to get married for economic and practical reasons—but not really for romantic ones. This gently undermines the romanticized clichés about love as something special, magic, and eternal.

The speaker then observes the wedding parties more intently, critiquing the guests' appearances as gaudy and fake. The girls are dressed not fashionably, but in "parodies of fashion" adorned with "jewellery-substitutes"; the fathers have "seamy" foreheads; the mothers are "loud and fat." Perhaps this is what leads the speaker to describe the "success" of the weddings as both "huge" and "wholly farcical"—these *are* momentous occasions, but they also seem vacuous and pretentious.

It's worth noting that critics are particularly divided about this section of the poem. Some see it as an unfair and snobbish take down of the working classes, and others view it as a set of honest observations that reflect the reality that, given this particularly wedding date was popular for primarily *financial* reasons, it did tend to be the poorer in society getting wed. "[J]ewellery-substitutes," then, need not necessarily carry negative connotations. It's possible to read the poem as primarily concerned with making fine-tuned observations about the rituals and social practices of marriage—and how those relate to the idealism that is usually associated with love.

Indeed, this ambiguity about the speaker's position towards the

weddings is important. On the one hand, the speaker's observations certainly do highlight something fake and throwaway. But the ending of the poem seems to take a view that incorporates these weddings as both meaningful *and* meaningless. When the train comes to its stop at the end and the speaker remarks on "this frail / traveling coincidence," it at once seems both significant and kind of hollow. The train is about to unleash a kind of "power" by emptying out its newly-weds—who will in turn reproduce and create the next generation of couples—but it's not necessarily a power with any real sense of wonder or magic.

Instead, it's as common as rain in England—which is how the poem ends, by subverting the mythology of Cupid's arrows (which usually make their targets fall in love) and imagining them somewhere "out of sight" becoming rain. These arrows, then, don't follow through with their special purpose (thus undermining the idea of love as a kind of destiny).

That said, rain *is* also associated with fertility, and the fact that all the couples are married also means that, in their way, they are a community with a shared experience that they will always have in common whether they know it or not—a community that will in turn impact the world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 21-80

ALIENATION AND COMMUNITY

The speaker is clearly alienated from the wedding parties he encounters on the train, but there is also a sense running throughout "The Whitsun Weddings" that, ultimately, everyone else is alone too. The wedding parties create a sense of community from which the speaker is excluded, yet even this feeling of togetherness may only be temporary. In the end, the guests and newlyweds all go their separate ways, the "frail ... coincidence" of this shared train ride over as quickly as it began.

A sense of isolation is present from the start of the poem. For one thing, the speaker's train is initially empty as it heads back to London. And though the countryside seen through the train window *is* full of a certain kind of life, or at least the *evidence* of life (through buildings and so on), there aren't any other people in the first two stanzas of the poem. This marks the speaker out as a somewhat lonely figure.

Indeed, when the speaker encounters the bustle and commotion of the wedding parties, he feels very much like a detached observer. At first, he doesn't even *notice* that these weddings are the source of the "whoops and skirls" he can hear from the platform. There is a total disconnect between the speaker and the crowds—and between the importance that the crowds place on the wedding day and the speaker's indifference.

Each of the guests, in turn, seem to have their own private thoughts about the wedding, which the speaker, as a kind of spy in their midst, can interpret: the children are bored; the fathers are overwhelmed; the women are sharing "the secret like a happy funeral" (that marriage can be a disappointment, perhaps); the girls are "gripping their handbags tighter" out of some kind of instinctive fear. All of these different figures are sectioned off from each other, held together only loosely and precariously by the weddings themselves (which, of course, are pretty much over at this point in the day).

And though these *individual* wedding parties are brought together by a sense of celebration and occasion, the parties, too, are isolated from one another. That is, each wedding is its own distinct group, failing (or choosing not) to recognize that there are numerous other parties doing exactly the same thing. Their *own* sense of community somewhat ironically cuts them off from *other* communities. The newlyweds never think, for instance, "of the others they would never meet," nor about the fact that "their lives would all contain this hour"—that is, how all these newlyweds will have forever shared this train ride.

That's why the speaker views this shared experience as a kind of "coincidence," one which *seems* significant but perhaps in reality actually isn't. That said, he can't really relate to the newlyweds because he isn't one of them; he might simply be projecting all this, in turn misreading the situation and contributing to his own and social separation. Overall, though, it's not as if the newlyweds even seem that happy. There is a kind of disquiet in the carriages, allow the reader to wonder whether the ultimate act of communion—marriage—really does bring people closer together, or just cuts two people off from the rest of the world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27
- Lines 36-45
- Lines 48-55
- Lines 58-63
- Lines 64-68
- Lines 74-77

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

That Whitsun, I ...
... a hurry gone.

The poem opens by establishing its disarmingly casual tone, pitching somewhere between a narrative and dramatic monologue. Though the whole poem is tightly—and virtuosically—controlled in terms of its form, the language is

intentionally down-to-earth and even prosaic (as is Larkin's work more generally).

Like a story or diary entry, the poem starts by setting the scene. The poem is set on Whitsun Saturday in mid-1950s United Kingdom. This isn't an arbitrary detail, but a key part of the poem's setup. Because of tax and marriage laws in the U.K. at the time, the Whitsun weekend in May was an advantageous time to get married. It afforded certain tax breaks, and also coincided with a long weekend due the Whitsun bank holiday (Monday). That's why the speaker encounters so many wedding parties on his train journey from the East of England to London. Of course, the wedding parties themselves aren't introduced until the third stanza, making them a kind of chance encounter (and subtly undermining the idea of the wedding day as something special and unique).

The stanza form used throughout is Larkin's own, but is loosely based on the odes of John Keats. This aspect of the poem is analyzed in more detail in the form section of this guide, but here it's worth acknowledging the way that the second line in each stanza is considerably shorter than the rest (two metrical feet as opposed to five), which helps evoke the push-pull rhythm of a train alternating between acceleration and coming to a stop.

Initially, the train carriage is mostly empty. This helps the poem set up a contrast between the quiet isolation of the speaker and the boisterousness of the wedding—and this contrast provides the poem's vantage point, with the speaker able to comment on the weddings in a detached and observant way. And though there is no "sense / Of being in a hurry," the mention of the date and hour does foreshadow one of the poem's main themes—the relentless passing of time. The diacope (close repetition) in line 5—"all windows down, all cushions hot, all sense"—gives the reader a sense of the uniformity of the train carriages, which again anticipates something the poem develops later: the uniformity of the wedding parties.

LINES 6-10

We ran ...
... and water meet.

After the caesura in line 6, the speaker makes his first observations of the view through the train window. Here, as in much of the poem, caesura and enjambment are used skillfully to suggest the forward motion of the journey. The poem is constantly stopping and starting, and these moments don't necessarily conform to the ends of each line.

The train exits its first station—quite probably Larkin's adopted hometown, Hull—and begins its journey to London. Lines 7-10 paint a vivid picture of 1950s England, though there is little sign of life at the moment. The poem builds a sense of quiet reflection, which allows for the abrupt interruption and noisiness of the wedding parties from the third stanza onwards.

The mention of the smell from the "fish-dock" plays into the poem's overall discussion of time, anticipating the mention of the newlyweds as "Fresh" couples and hinting at the way all things—including people—grow old and decay, like the stinking fish. The asyndeton of these lines (the lack of the conjunction word "and") links the different observations together, conveying the way that these are perceptions made in a continuous chain as the train makes its way.

It's also worth noting the beautiful metrical effect of the last two lines. As the train leaves the more built-up urban environment, the speaker's view becomes more regular and repetitive. Accordingly, the poem employs two lines of pure, clean iambic pentameter (lines of five da-DUM metrical feet):

> The riv- | er's lev- | el drift- | ing breadth | began,
> Where sky | and Lin- | colnshire | and wat- | er meet.

These lines have a hypnotic effect that suggests a deepening of thought, as though the rhythm of the train facilitates a kind of meditative state. The train passes through Lincolnshire, which is an area to the northeast of London.

LINES 11-16

All afternoon, through ...
... hothouse flashed uniquely:

The second stanza moves the poem on a few hours as the train travels through the "tall heat" of May. The assonance and gentle consonance help create a sense of time passing by slowly:

> All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept
> For miles inland,

The long /oo/ and /aw/ vowels give make the lines feel stretched in time, while the delicate /t/ sounds have a quiet regularity like the rhythms of a lullaby.

Line 13 evokes something similar:

> A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.

The alliteration of /s/ sounds (also called sibilance) works similarly to the /t/ above, but it's also worth noting the placement of the verb in this line ("kept"). Indeed, this is the first main verb in the stanza, and the way it is delayed until the end of the stanza's third line means that the grammatical sense of the sentence itself goes on a kind of journey.

Lines 14 to 16 evoke the English landscape. Much of this is agricultural land full of "short-shadowed cattle." This marvelous alliterative phrase cleverly reminds the reader that the sun is still pretty high in the sky (if it was low the shadows would be long) *and* perhaps subtly hints at the briefness of life (as though humans themselves cast their shadow on the earth for a short

time only).

The "industrial froth" floating on the canals speaks to the specters of industrialization and mass production lurking in what has so far been an almost pastoral scene. The froth is both a symbol of a society undergoing fundamental change *and* of a kind of waste product. Waste is an important idea in the poem, as it contrasts with "Fresh[ness]" which forms part of the speaker's observations about the newlyweds. The implication, of course, is that before too long time will turn anything fresh into waste—including the promises of young love.

LINES 16-20

hedges dipped ...
... of dismantled cars.

After line 16's caesura, the speaker continues to make observations about what he sees as the train makes its journey. The enjambment between lines 16 and 17 creates a neat visual effect of hedges "dipp[ing] and [rising]," the phrase itself lifting and falling over two lines.

But the speaker isn't just focused on what he can see, but also on what he can smell (and later hear). The sense of smell was also mentioned in line 8, in reference to "the fish-dock." For most of the journey the speaker can smell "the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth," as he describes it in line 18, but occasionally this is "Displaced" by the "smell of grass." Again, the poem divides its observations along the lines of freshness and a kind of staleness—supporting the poem's overall discussion of the passing of time.

The "smell of grass" also hints at a kind of fertility, which the rain at the end of the poem perhaps gestures towards as well. In much of Larkin's poetry, there is a kind of deconstruction of love which shows it to be as much about mere reproduction and biological dominance as it is about more lofty ideals such as fate, togetherness, and emotional warmth.

The enjambment between lines 16-19 pushes the poem forward, mirroring the train's ongoing journey. Soon enough, another image of waste appears, which isn't even tied to a specific town (suggesting it is an image that appears multiple times throughout the journey):

> Until the next town, new and nondescript,
> Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

The alliteration of "**n**ew and **n**ondescript" conveys the uniformity of these towns, and the "acres of dismantled cars" again play into the way that time works as a kind of quiet destroyer.

LINES 21-27

At first, I ...
... went on reading.

The third stanza represents a key moment in the poem's development. So far, the speaker has been the only person in the poem. But it's here that the journey's growing sense of quiet is loudly interrupted by the presence of the numerous wedding parties that the poem's title references.

But the speaker doesn't even "**n**otice" the "**n**oise" (this is ironically loud alliteration) of the weddings at "each station"—he's been lulled, like the reader, into a kind of observant stupor. His excuse is that the brightness of the "sun" makes it difficult to focus on "what's happening in the shade." This minor detail—the fact the speaker initially failed to notice the weddings—subtly undermines the sense of momentous occasion that surrounds each of these weddings. This is supposed to people's "big day"—but for the speaker today is really just another day. The fact that the sun "destroys" the speaker's interest additionally links with the poem's interest in impermanence and decay.

Line 25 is an intentionally noisy line:

> And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls

The prominent assonance (/oo/) and consonance (/n/, /d/, /l/, /p/, /s/) highlighted above helps build a sense of the boisterous atmosphere on the station platforms, which are full of wedding parties. "Larking" (which means playing about) in line 26 is a possibly a pun on the poet's name, reinforcing the idea that at first the speaker was too absorbed in his own thinking to notice what was happening in the stations.

LINES 27-33

Once we started, ...
... that survived it.

After the caesura of line 27, the speaker focuses more intently on the wedding parties. This is probably the most critically contested part of the poem, with some people feeling that it represents Larkin unfairly taking aim at the working class; others view as an astute and non-sentimental set of observations.

The first thing to notice about lines 27-30 is the sheer amount of caesurae. This contributes to a much more energetic, even frenetic, sound. That frenetic sound fits with the way that the platform itself is busy with the movement and noise of the young wedding guests. These girls are "grinning and pomaded"—they are dressed for the happy occasion. The balancing of the various clauses also hints at the way that the women and girls have to balance on their high heels.

The main point of contention in these lines is the phrase "parodies of fashion." In other words, the speaker thinks the woman are dressed in an almost grotesque imitation of contemporary styles. It certainly sounds like a statement with negative connotations, but it can also be read as a finely-tuned perception. Remember, the popularity of the Whitsun weekend

for weddings was primarily for financial reasons—and therefore as a date it *did* tend to make more of a difference for those less well off in society. So, though the girls are dressed not fashionably but in "parodies of fashion," perhaps this just reflects economic reality. In other words, all they can afford are knock-offs and cheaper clothes. In this reading of Larkin's poem, the speaker might even sympathize with the reality of not being able to afford the kinds of clothes one wants.

Also notice the subtle ambiguity in pronouns here. In contrast to the noisy women on the platform, the speaker and his fellow passengers form their own kind of accidental community. Accordingly, the speaker sometimes slips into "we" rather than "I," which creates a kind of us vs. them dynamic. Indeed, the people on the train are watching the wedding party, who in turn are watching the people on the train, and so on—creating an anxious feedback loop of observation.

Enjambing across stanzas, the poem introduces a simile in lines 31 to 33. The girls look

> As if out on the end of an event
> Waving goodbye
> To something that survived it.

This simile foregrounds the poem's focus on time and impermanence. These weddings are supposed to be new beginnings, and ceremonial markers of a kind of eternal love. But the girls already look like they are at "the end of an event" and "waving goodbye." In other words, time, and the way it marches people relentlessly towards their non-existence, seems to lurk in the poem's atmosphere.

LINES 33-38

Struck, I leant ...
... uncle shouting smut;

The caesura in line 33 is one of many that supports the poem's conversational, prosaic tone. The adjective that follows—"Struck"—carries with it connotations of being under a kind of spell, which is a reasonable way of interpreting the poem as a whole. The sight of the wedding parties does cast a kind of magic over the speaker and, in turn, the reader—though it's not the same kind of magic that people associate with ideas of eternal love. It's more like a spell of curiosity. The diacope of "more" in line 34 shows this deepening sense of curiosity as the speaker's attention fixes on the different wedding guests. Now taking a closer look, he can see it "all again in different terms."

The descriptions here are less than flattering. The brides' fathers are big-bellied and sweaty—which is suggested by the alliteration of "suits" and "seamy"—while the mothers are "loud and fat." The adjective "seamy" perhaps hints at the related word "seam," suggesting that the big occasion is in its way hastily stitched together or inauthentic. The uncles are also noisy, shouting "smut" (dirty words). Between these three sets of descriptions there is a common link of lewdness and un-refinement. This hints at the speaker's feeling that weddings are less like marvelous romantic occasions and more like ways for the human race to go about its sordid business of reproduction.

LINES 38-41

and then the ...
... from the rest.

In this section the speaker returns his gaze to the "girls" first mentioned in line 28. Perhaps they are worthy of special attention because they represent the current crop of potential brides, still "fresh" enough to be pairing off and getting married. Through its detailed description, this section itself "Mark[s] off the girls unreally from the rest"—that is, it gives them an air of surreality and perhaps superficiality too. The subtle assonance and alliteration in "then the perms" suggests the girls' constant attention to their hair, and the mention of "jewellery-substitutes" suggests there is something fake about their appearance.

It's up to the reader to decide if these observations are made with disdain or not—perhaps they just reflect the speaker's inability to relate to these young women. Indeed, the color of their clothes seems to separate them almost as some kind of alien species:

> lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres

The /l/, /m/, /v/, and /s/ consonance here sounds almost indulgent, conveying the girls' decadence and flamboyant appearance. Even the observation that their gloves are "nylon," rather than leather, draws the readers attention to the fact what they are wearing is somewhat synthetic. Also notice the way that the poem again enjambs between two stanzas, the sentences refusing to conform neatly to the stanza shape.

LINES 42-46

Yes, from ...
... rest stood round;

In this section, the speaker daydreams about the weddings themselves. He imagines the locations of the weddings and the reception parties, all of which most likely have taken place in fairly humble surroundings, such as "cafés". This section has no less than four instances of hyphenated word combinations, which could be interpreted as a subtle textual representation of marriage (two words being joined together) or even the "bunting" mentioned in line 43 (long strings of decorative flags).

The speaker imagines several different parties that are all pretty much the same, with guests arriving and departing by the coach-load. The alliteration of "banquet" and "bunting, and then "wedding" with "were," is intentionally obvious, evoking the garishness of the wedding celebrations. The fact that the

"wedding-days" themselves are coming to an end hints at the poem's theme of impermanence, undermining what is of course supposed to be a special day. The descriptions in this section also aim to get across the sheer numbers involved in these weddings—a bounty of newly-weds and an even greater number of guests. This, too, subtly questions whether these marriages really are all that special.

The caesura after "end" in line 45 gives the word special emphasis, halting the poem in its tracks. After this caesura, the speaker observes the "fresh couples" climbing onto his train (setting off for their brief honeymoons; the bank holiday afforded them an extra day away form work). This moment also signifies that the newlyweds are now literally *and* figuratively setting off on a new journey. The description of the onlooking weddings guests—"the rest stood round"—is monosyllabic, suggesting the way that their attention is fixed squarely on the departing couples.

"Fresh" is a key word in the poem. It carries with it connotations of the excitement of the newlyweds, but also hints at the way time will undo this freshness before too long. Indeed, this juxtaposition between freshness and oldness/staleness weaves its way throughout the poem as part of its subtle discussion of time and impermanence.

LINES 47-51

The last confetti ...
... and wholly farcical;

With the train now departing its station, the wedding guests say their goodbyes to the "Fresh couples" heading off on their honeymoons. Here the poem deploys a brilliant example of zeugma:

> The last confetti and advice were thrown,

Here, both confetti and advice are governed by the same verb (which is written in the passive voice to emphasize how it's hard to tell who is doing the throwing). Confetti is a standard part of the U.K. wedding ritual, and so, too, is advice (asked for or not). But placing the two together like this means that the two words inform one another, even though one is something physical and the other is more abstract.

Confetti is a whole load of small bits of paper thrown over the newly weds after they get married. It's literally *throwaway*. That's where the zeugma comes in—linking the throwaway confetti with the supposedly serious "advice" undermines that advice, suggesting that people's words of wisdom about love and marriage don't really count for much. Again, there is a conflict between the way that people think they are unique (in this case, able to convey a special understanding of marriage), and the mundane reality that they are just like everyone else.

The poem then shifts into its second simile, describing the faces of those still on the platform as "defin[ing]" what they can see "departing." In other words, each person's facial expression casts the wedding in a different light. Indeed, perhaps their wide-brimming smiles change slightly to allow a little more of their real emotion to show through. For the children, the weddings—and the concept of coupling off—are alien and boring. The fathers, for their part, "had never known / Success so huge and wholly farcical."

These lines, 50 and 51, are key. The weddings are cast as both "Success so huge" and "wholly farcical"—on the surface, these have been momentous occasions, but in reality they don't mean anywhere near as much as people pretend. Even though the two words are separated by a stanza break and enjambment, "fathers" and "farcical" alliterate to link these two words together. The proud fathers, in other words, typify the somewhat absurd pretentiousness of the weddings themselves.

LINES 52-57

The women ...
... gouts of steam.

In lines 52 to 57, the speaker focuses on the female reactions to the departing wedding guests. The older women share a "secret like a happy funeral." This is a somewhat puzzling moment in the poem because the speaker doesn't expand on what this "secret" actually is, treating that question with an appropriate air of secrecy. Perhaps this secret has something to do with the *reality* of marriage, as opposed to the pomp, circumstance—and falsehoods—of the wedding day.

It's here, too, that the poem makes its most overt reference to the theme of time, death, and impermanence. The women appear to look upon the departing newlyweds as though they were viewing something that is not *merely* happy, but is "like a happy funeral" (the poem's third simile). In other words, the joyous and boisterous occasion somehow manages to contain a suggestion of death as well—as though this is not just a new beginning, but the recurrence of a familiar ending too.

The following observation about the "girls" seems to support the above analysis. Tense, nervous, and excited, these younger female guests grip their handbags "tighter" as they stare at the newlyweds pulling away into the distance. The mention of "gripping" and "tighter" gently hints at sexual intercourse, which is reinforced by the mention of a "religious wounding" (tying in with the once-common practice of remaining a virgin until getting married). The word "wounding" also suggests some kind of injury, again building a less than idealistic view of marriage.

After the caesura that follows "wounding" in line 55, the train picks up momentum as it heads towards London. The speaker uses the prosaic phrase "free at last" to describe the way that the pomp and ceremony have been left behind—but it also plays somewhat ironically with the notion of freedom in relation to marriage as an eternal bond.

It's worth noting as an aside that the phrase "shuffling gouts of steam" indicates that this particular train is steam-powered. Steam trains were phased out of use on the main British train lines soon after the poem was published, meaning that this description dates the poem, unintentionally becoming an indicator of the poem's fixation with time and impermanence. In other words, the steam train soon became part of society's discarded waste, like the "acres of dismantled cars" described earlier in the poem.

LINES 58-63

Now fields were ...
... got under way.

From line 58 onwards, the surrounding environment changes as the train nears London. London, of course, is a huge city, and the speaker's view reflects this. Instead of fields, the speaker sees "building-plots." He notices poplar trees, which are common in the capital city—and they cast shadows not on muddy ground but "over major roads," planted there as part of the city's urban planning. The assonance in "long shadows over major roads" captures a sense of the length of these shadows by slowing down the line's pace.

The speaker accidentally shares a kind of intimacy with the newly-weds: he is an awkward presence in the first hour of multiple couples. This section of the journey takes around "fifty minutes," which the speaker describes as just enough time for the newcomers "to settle hats and say / *I nearly died*." Or, more accurately, when the journey is done this section of it will *feel* like it was just enough time for the above. This phrase—"*I nearly died*"—is a euphemistic way of saying something like "I was so embarrassed/shocked." This, then, speaks to the sense of grandeur felt by the newly weds on their "big day," which is a kind of tension that can be released now that they're not under the staring eyes of the wedding guests.

Larkin often uses words that mean more than might first appear, and his use of "dozen" might be one of those. Ask an English person what they associate with the word and it will probably be eggs. Eggs are, of course, not only commonplace and fragile—like these fledgling couples—but they're also part of the reproductive process and suggestive of fertility. Elsewhere in Larkin's poems, he reframes love as a kind of dumb biological force that works as a tool to aid human reproduction.

LINES 64-68

They watched the ...
... contain this hour.

In this section, the watched become the watchers. That is, the newly-weds are no longer on the other side of the train window, but on the inside looking out. The speaker, of course, is still watching them, cutting a kind of detached, isolated figure. These "fresh couples" are "sitting side by side," the crowded alliteration (also sibilance) mirroring the way that the newly-weds are crammed into the carriage. Of course, this image—the sheer numerousness of the newlyweds—subtly undermines the notion of the wedding day as something special, and of the love between the bride and groom as unique and once-in-a-lifetime.

Between the em-dash at the start of line 65 and the em-dash in line 66 (where it functions as a caesura), the poem lists some of the things that the couples (and the speaker) can see out of the window. As with earlier in the poem, the asyndeton (the lack of "and") makes these observations feel connected and continuous. The cinema perhaps represents some of the idealized Hollywood notions of love, while the cooling tower could be interpreted as a phallic symbol. "Someone running up to bowl" is a reference to cricket, and is a distinctly transitory observation. That is, it describes a very particular moment in time, and thus intensifies the poem's attention to the passing of time.

Indeed, the speaker's next observation is transitory as well. The speaker thinks there's something profound (or nearly profound) about the way that all of these newlyweds share this first hour of their new lives together—but they don't seem to realize it, perhaps because they're too caught up in their own conversations. The speaker's isolation from the frenetic celebrations of the weddings allows him to make these insights into what he later calls "this frail / Travelling coincidence."

LINES 69-75

I thought of ...
... Travelling coincidence;

In lines 69 and 70, the speaker imagines London from a bird's-eye view. London is divided into different "postal districts," each with its own postcode (see the Resources section for a visual representation). The speaker thinks of these districts as being "packed like squares of wheat," a simile which has a couple of interesting implications.

Firstly, the word "packed" ties in with the way that the couples themselves are not unique—there are loads of them squashed into the train carriages. The specific comparison to "squares of wheat" is an agricultural image that relates to fertility and the basic sustenance of life (food as a kind of survival). Wheat is one humanity's oldest crops, so this simile also subtly reflects on the way that these love stories might not be as special as they think; they do, however, have a collective power in that the newlyweds will procreate and raise the *next* generation of newlyweds, and so on.

As is typical of Larkin, profundity sits side-by-side with a lack of meaning. As though destined by fate, the speaker and the newlyweds are "aimed" (a word which anticipates the ending's arrow image) at London. But that's also just where the train is going. At this point, the passengers have ceded all control of their destination. The caesura after "aimed" allows for this moment to sink in—for the reader to consider whether there

really is anything significant about what is happening.

Lines 71 to 75 use enjambment to represent a quickening of pace as the train comes close to London. The "bright knots of rail" is not just an effective way of describing the complicated train tracks and switches, but also hints at future complications in the lives of the newlyweds (and, of course, the fact that they have just "tied the knot").

The "walls of blackened moss" that signal the train's arrival in the metropolis also tie in with the poem's general discussion of freshness and waste. Indeed, moss is often seen as a representation of decay or neglect (not to mention that here it's "blackened" from the trains' soot)—but it's also an example of the persistence of life and the ability of organisms to survive in all kinds of conditions. This plays into a more cynical reading of the poem, one that associates marriage with humanity's relentless reproductive forces rather than the supposed magic of being in love.

Here, the speaker neatly sums up his train experience in the phrase "frail / Travelling coincidence." Referring to coincidence is a clever touch, because it leaves the question of significance open-ended. That is, some people view coincidences as remarkable events (and sometimes as proof of some grand life narrative), while others see them as just that—coincidences born of meaningless chance. The phrase "it was nearly done" subtly plays into the way that death and impermanence seem to lurk in the poem's atmosphere, offering a kind of alternative to the promise and happiness represented by the marriages themselves.

LINES 75-80

and what it ...
... somewhere becoming rain.

After the caesura in line 75, the poem draws to a close (while the train itself comes to its final stop, London). In characteristically ambiguous terms, Larkin talks about how the train carriages have "held" some kind of "power"—the "power" that comes with "being changed." This, essentially, is the mass power signified by the numerous newlyweds. Each couple on their own are fairly insignificant, but looked at en masse they seem to represent something with greater impact on the world—or potential impact, at least. But Larkin doesn't ask the reader to marvel at this power—merely to notice it. The poem carefully weighs the apparent importance of this moment, all those new marriages just getting started, with its possible insignificance too.

The last three and a half lines make effective use of sound patterning:

> [...] We slowed again,
> And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
> A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
> Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Notice how the consonant /d/ sounds convey the braking action of the train. Just like brake pads being applied to the wheels, the reader's tongue has to come into contact with the roof of the mouth in what is called a voiced alveolar stop. In other words, the reader has to stop the airflow on these sounds, subtly mimicking the train's arrival at its final stop. The alliterating and sibilant /s/ consonants gently evoke the sound of rain.

This is another ambiguous section of the poem. The speaker notices a "sense of falling" as the brakes bring the train to a stop, perhaps suggesting some kind of impending disaster (marital problems later down the line, for example). This is then developed through a simile which is also an allusion. The "arrow-shower / Sent out of sight" is a reference to the myth of Cupid, a God from classical mythology whose arrows would make the targets fall in love. The myth ties in with common ideas of fate and romance—the idea that "the one" is out there waiting for everyone.

But, of course, Larkin makes the allusion deeply ambiguous. This is not a pair of arrows, but an "arrow-shower"—numerous arrows making the act of firing less of a special event. In other words, this speaks to the way that these different pairs of newlyweds are all part of the same mass of new couples. Looked at most cynically, this undoes any sense of these weddings being special, using the language/mythology of love to deconstruct any illusions about love being profound, meaningful, or rare.

Within the simile, these arrows fall somewhere "out of sight" and "becom[e] rain." This, too, is ambiguous. The transformation into rain—which crops need in order to grow—could be a reference to fertility and reproductive power. Indeed, perhaps this is the "power" that the speaker perceives in the newlyweds in line 76. On the other hand, the comparison to rain could just be another way to say that these marriages are commonplace and unremarkable, nowhere near as important as the pomp and ceremony would suggest. Rain in England is, of course, nothing unusual!

The poem ends on this ambiguous note, the caesurae in the last two lines creating the "sense of falling" described by the speaker and leaving the reader on uncertain footing. Perhaps the reader has just witnessed something deeply profound that speaks to the nature of human life—or maybe it was just a train journey.

SYMBOLS

THE COUNTRYSIDE

The train journey undertaken in this poem is a long one, stretching from the east of England to London. As part of this, the speaker sees a fair share of countryside out

of his window. This countryside symbolizes the ways in which nature affects human society and behavior—even the institution of marriage.

On a basic level, of course, the countryside simply signifies the natural world itself. This isn't a heavily romanticized depiction of nature, but more a series of relatively detached observations. Subtly, though, the presence of the river, farmland, cattle, etc. helps build a detailed picture of the natural world *and* the way that the natural world is *used* by human society. This a countryside modified by human activities like farming and industry, as exhibited by the "Canals with floatings of industrial froth." The references to the countryside in the poem underscore the fact that humans both *shape* the natural world and *depend* on it.

This also ties in with the poem's implication that humans' ideas of love and marriage are ultimately based on the biological (and, thus, natural) need for reproduction—something Larkin often suggests. Just as the English countryside shaped agriculture and industry, so too does the natural need for procreation shape English attitudes towards marriage. That is, love isn't necessarily a fairy tale—maybe it's just the most efficient way for the human race to propagate and spread.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "The river's level drifting breadth began, / Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet."
- **Lines 14-15:** "Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and / Canals with floatings of industrial froth"
- **Lines 16-17:** "hedges dipped / And rose: and now and then a smell of grass"

THE URBAN AND INDUSTRIAL ENVIRONMENT

"The Whitsun Weddings" makes frequent reference to what the speaker can see out of his train window as he heads to London. The speaker's glimpses of urban and industrial life symbolize both waste and the human potential for renewal.

Of course, this changes depending on which part of the country the train is in at any given point. The speaker's observations are finely-tuned, and at first he sees evidence of people without actually spotting any people themselves. This builds a sense of disquiet in the poem that feeds into the way it casts doubt on the meaning of love and marriage. The built environment seems to suggest the emptiness of contemporary life.

The urban environment also helps develop the poem's historical and social context. The "new and nondescript" towns, for example, reference the extensive rebuilding of the post-war years in England. The "acres of dismantled cars" (scrapyards) speak to both waste *and* the human talent for regeneration, feeding into the poem's subtle discussion of fertility and reproduction.

When the train nears London, this urban environment intensifies. The speaker notices a cinema and a cricket game—both of which seem like surreal details that flash by before they can be fully comprehended. This surreal quality again suggests a kind of emptiness. To the speaker, these images suggest diversion and entertainment, but not necessarily real meaning.

When the train gets close to its destination, the speaker notices "walls of blackened moss." This image speaks in part to the dirtiness of the urban environment, but also to the resourcefulness of life itself (moss, of course, is a living thing). Perhaps this resourcefulness is the power that the speaker refers to in lines 76-77: "all the power / That being changed can give."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "the backs of houses, crossed a street / Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock;"
- **Line 15:** "Canals with floatings of industrial froth;"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Until the next town, new and nondescript, / Approached with acres of dismantled cars."
- **Lines 58-59:** "Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast / Long shadows over major roads,"
- **Lines 65-66:** "—An Odeon went past, a cooling tower, / And someone running up to bowl—"
- **Lines 69-70:** "I thought of London spread out in the sun, / Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:"
- **Line 73:** "walls of blackened moss"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used throughout "The Whitsun Weddings." An early example is in line 13:

> A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.

The /s/ sounds here are distributed with an even regularity throughout the line, giving it a sense of momentum (in fact, alliteration in this poem often creates forward motion). This subtly mirrors the train's ongoing path from the east of England to the south.

In the same stanza, line 19 also uses alliteration effectively:

> Until the next town, new and nondescript,

The repetition of the identical /n/ sounds evokes the way that, at that speed, each town that goes by lacks definition. That is, the speaker's eyes can hardly settle on what's there before the

train is going past the *next* town. This also builds a sense of the cultural and historical atmosphere, referencing the numerous new towns that were built in England during the postwar years (the years after World War II).

The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth stanzas all use alliteration as way of creating a noisy, almost boisterous reading experience. This, of course, is no coincidence—it reflects the commotion caused by the wedding parties on the station platforms. The alliteration of "notice" and "noise" in line 21 shows the way that the speaker hears the guests before he consciously comprehends what's happening.

Lines 28-30 are full of /p/ sounds that, through being so obviously placed, evoke the garish and loud outfits of the girls in "parodies of fashion." The fathers wear "broad belts" (line 36) and "suits" (which alliterates with "seamy foreheads"). "Then the" in line 38 has a delicate sound that evokes the meticulous attention the girls have paid to their hairdos. "Fathers" in line 50 chimes with "farcical" in line 51 to question whether the apparent importance of the wedding days is really grounded in reality.

Once the train, now full of newlyweds, has left the guests behind, the alliteration starts to represent other elements of the poem. The /s/ sound, which was associated with the regular motion of the train in line 13, returns: "sitting side by side" (line 64); "spread out in the sun" (line 69). The two plosive /p/ sounds in line 70—"[London's] postal districts packed like squares of wheat"—are themselves packed into the line (echoed by "Past standing Pullmans" in line 73).

Finally, the poem's closing four lines intensify the alliteration to what is probably its peak. /S/ alliteration takes grip of the poem, mimicking the way the brakes are reducing the train's speed. "Slowed," "swelled," "sense," "sent," "sight," and "somewhere" brilliantly manage to evoke the sound of rain *and*, through their sheer repetitiveness, a kind of magic spell. This alliteration, then, neatly sums up the poem's ambiguous ending, which asks whether love is truly something magical and mythical (e.g. Cupid's arrow, discussed in the allusion section) or is as common and unremarkable as bad weather in England.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Whitsun," "was"
- **Line 3:** "sunlit Saturday"
- **Line 7:** "Behind," "backs"
- **Line 9:** "breadth," "began"
- **Line 10:** "Where," "water"
- **Line 13:** "slow," "stopping," "southwards"
- **Line 14:** "short-shadowed cattle"
- **Line 15:** "Canals," "floatings," "froth"
- **Line 16:** "hothouse," "flashed," "hedges"
- **Line 18:** "carriage-cloth"
- **Line 19:** "next," "new," "nondescript"
- **Line 21:** "notice," "noise"
- **Line 23:** "station," "stopped," "sun"
- **Line 24:** "interest," "in"
- **Line 26:** "with"
- **Line 27:** "went," "Once," "we"
- **Line 28:** "passed," "grinning," "pomaded," "girls"
- **Line 29:** "parodies"
- **Line 30:** "posed"
- **Line 33:** "something," "survived," "Struck"
- **Line 36:** "broad belts," "suits"
- **Line 37:** "seamy foreheads," "fat"
- **Line 38:** "then the"
- **Line 40:** "mauves"
- **Line 41:** "Marked"
- **Line 43:** "banquet-halls," "bunting-dressed"
- **Line 44:** "wedding-days"
- **Line 45:** "Were"
- **Line 46:** "couples climbed," "rest," "round"
- **Line 48:** "And, as," "define"
- **Line 49:** "departing"
- **Line 50:** "dull," "fathers"
- **Line 51:** "Success so," "farcical"
- **Line 53:** "funeral"
- **Line 54:** "girls, gripping"
- **Line 55:** "last"
- **Line 56:** "loaded," "sum," "saw"
- **Line 58:** "plots," "poplars"
- **Line 60:** "Some," "seem"
- **Line 61:** "settle," "say"
- **Line 62:** "died"
- **Line 63:** "dozen"
- **Line 64:** "sitting side," "side"
- **Line 66:** "none"
- **Line 67:** "Thought," "the," "they," "never"
- **Line 68:** "their"
- **Line 69:** "spread," "sun"
- **Line 70:** "postal," "packed"
- **Line 71:** "we were," "we"
- **Line 73:** "Past," "Pullmans"
- **Line 74:** "Came close"
- **Line 77:** "slowed"
- **Line 78:** "swelled"
- **Line 79:** "sense"
- **Line 80:** "Sent," "sight," "somewhere"

ALLUSION

There is one allusion in "The Whitsun Weddings." This takes place in the poem's final sentence, which runs from line 77 (after the caesura) to the end. The simile here compares the "sense of falling" brought on by the deceleration of the train to "an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain." This isn't an explicit reference, but given that the poem is

focused on weddings and love, it's reasonable to interpret this moment as a nod towards the classical myth of Cupid.

The story of Cupid, who is affiliated with Eros in Greek mythology, is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He is a god of love who famously carries a bow and arrow. As the Sam Cooke song, "Cupid," spells out, when the god draws back his bow and fires an arrow, it makes the target fall in love (though he also carries arrows that achieve the opposite effect).

The key difference between Larkin's poem and the myth of Cupid is that Cupid usually only fires one arrow at a time, selecting his targets methodically and deliberately. The suggestion of an "arrow-shower," as well as likening these arrows of love to a kind of rain, makes them numerous and thereby less unique or special. This plays into the way the poem undermines the idea that love itself depends on magic and fate, suggesting it is less special than most people think.

But this allusion could also be read in a more positive light, as the numerous arrows also speak to a kind of collective power held by the newlyweds (which is perhaps the ability to reproduce and create the next generation of young people).

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 77-80:** "We slowed again, / And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled / A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain."

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "The Whitsun Weddings." An early example is in line 9:

> The river's level drifting breadth began,

Here the /uh/, /e/, /i/, and /ee/ vowel sounds themselves seem to level out, representing the constant presence of the river outside the train window.

In line 11, vowel sounds evoke a sense of time passing (an important thematic concern throughout the poem):

> All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept

These vowels slow the poem's pace to give the reader a sense of an afternoon going by.

Similarly vowel sounds achieve a different effect in line 25:

> And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls

These /oo/ sounds mimic the whooping, cheering noises of the wedding parties—which the speaker hasn't yet fully noticed, but hears in his periphery.

In line 30, /o/ sounds serve yet another purpose:

> All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

Clustering around the word "posed," these /o/ sounds are aimed at giving the reader a sense of the poise and appearances of the young female wedding guests. The "mauves, and olive-ochres" in line 40 achieves a similar effect, the closeness of the /o/ vowel sounds suggesting the kind of meticulous attention that these girls pay to their clothes.

Even more long and short /o/ assonance appears in lines 58 and 59, once more conjuring a sense of passing time:

> Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
> Long shadows over major roads,

Similarly, the assonance in line 64—"sitting side by side"— crams the line with uniform vowel sounds, subtly representing the way that the newlyweds are squeezed into the train carriage, all looking more or less the same.

Finally, assonance in the last three lines helps the poem feel like it's coming to a rest:

> And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
> A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
> Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

The /e/, /a/, /o/, /ow/, and /uh/ assonance here combines with consonance and alliteration to make it feel as though a spell is being cast (tying in with the reference to Cupid, which is discussed in the allusion section). These vowel sounds also slow the poem down, representing the train coming to a stop at its final destination.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "late," "away"
- **Line 3:** "One-twenty," "sunlit," "Saturday"
- **Line 4:** "three," "empty," "train"
- **Line 5:** "All," "all," "hot," "all"
- **Line 6:** "being," "hurry," "gone," "ran"
- **Line 7:** "backs," "street"
- **Line 8:** "windscreens," "fish-dock"
- **Line 9:** "The river's level drifting breadth began"
- **Line 10:** "sky," "Lincolnshire," "meet"
- **Line 11:** "All afternoon, through," "tall"
- **Line 13:** "kept"
- **Line 14:** "went," "shadowed cattle, and"
- **Line 15:** "Canals," "froth"
- **Line 16:** "hothouse," "hedges"
- **Line 17:** "then," "smell"
- **Line 18:** "of buttoned"

- **Line 23:** “Each,” “we”
- **Line 25:** “cool,” “whoops”
- **Line 27:** “reading,” “we”
- **Line 29:** “parodies,” “heels”
- **Line 30:** “posed irresolutely,” “go”
- **Line 31:** “end,” “event”
- **Line 32:** “goodbye”
- **Line 33:** “survived”
- **Line 35:** “saw,” “all”
- **Line 36:** “fathers,” “broad”
- **Line 37:** “mothers”
- **Line 38:** “uncle,” “smut”
- **Line 40:** “mauves,” “ochres”
- **Line 41:** “Marked off”
- **Line 42:** “cafés”
- **Line 43:** “banquet-halls,” “yards,” “dressed”
- **Line 44:** “annexes,” “wedding”
- **Line 45:** “end,” “line”
- **Line 46:** “Fresh,” “climbed,” “rest”
- **Line 47:** “last,” “and”
- **Line 48:** “And, as we,” “each,” “seemed”
- **Line 49:** “saw departing”
- **Line 50:** “something dull”
- **Line 51:** “so,” “wholly”
- **Line 54:** “While,” “tighter”
- **Line 56:** “sum of all,” “saw”
- **Line 57:** “We hurried,” “ London, shuffling,” “steam”
- **Line 58:** “fields,” “plots,” “poplars”
- **Line 59:** “Long shadows over major roads”
- **Line 60:** “minutes,” “in”
- **Line 61:** “hats and”
- **Line 62:** “I ,” “died”
- **Line 63:** “way”
- **Line 64:** “They,” “landscape,” “side by side”
- **Line 66:** “someone,” “ running up,” “none”
- **Line 67:** “others”
- **Line 69:** “London,” “sun”
- **Line 71:** “aimed. And as,” “raced across”
- **Line 72:** “knots,” “rail”
- **Line 73:** “Past standing,” “walls,” “blackened moss”
- **Line 74:** “Came,” “it was,” “done, this frail”
- **Line 75:** “Travelling,” “and,” “held”
- **Line 76:** “ready to,” “loosed”
- **Line 77:** “That being,” “can,” “We slowed”
- **Line 78:** “hold, there swelled”
- **Line 79:** “sense,” “an arrow-shower”
- **Line 80:** “Sent out,” “somewhere becoming”

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton—the absence of conjoining words like "and"—is used to great effect in "The Whitsun Weddings." It serves one primary purpose, which is to connect clauses and develop a sense of ongoing momentum. This, of course, is meant to evoke the rhythms and propulsion of a train journey.

The first example is in lines 5-8:

> All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense
> Of being in a hurry gone. We ran
> Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street
> Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock;

Notice how the asyndeton makes the diacope (close repetition) of "all" seem more repetitive, evoking the repeating landscape outside the train window. Likewise, the houses, windscreens, and fish dock pass by the reader all-the-more hastily precisely because they don't have the usual connecting word "and"—just like they pass by the speaker's view.

A similar effect occurs in lines 36-38, as the speaker looks at all the weddings guests who have come to send the young couples off. The speaker lists all the types of people he has seen, separated by semi-colons rather than "and." It's as if he's seen so many people that the images of them are packed tightly in his memory. This occurs again in lines 46-47 and lines 49-53. All in all, the speaker's use of asyndeton captures the piling-on of wedding imagery that he experiences during his journey.

Later on in the poem, the speaker's thoughts seem to deepen and become more meditative. The poem then seems to shift into more conventional grammar (including the "ands"), showing this intensification of thought, as opposed to the previous quick-fire observations that used asyndeton.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** “All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense / Of being in a hurry gone. We ran / Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street / Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock;”
- **Lines 36-38:** “The fathers with broad belts under their suits / And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat; / An uncle shouting smut;”
- **Lines 46-47:** “Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round; / The last confetti and advice were thrown,”
- **Lines 49-53:** “children frowned / At something dull; fathers had never known / Success so huge and wholly farcical; / The women shared / The secret like a happy funeral;”

CAESURA

Caesurae appear frequently throughout "The Whitsun Weddings." They are an important part of the poem's tone, which is distinctly conversational and down-to-earth (while also being hypnotic and beautifully controlled). The poem has a tight ten-line stanza form, but the syntax and grammar of these stanzas is deliberately prose-like, often running over line breaks and stopping mid-line. Accordingly, then, every stanza is

full of caesurae—in fact there are more lines that have one than don't!

Notice how the first line starts like the first sentence in a story or a campfire anecdote:

> That Whitsun, I was late getting away:

The caesura definitely helps achieve that prosaic effect. The following two stanzas begin in exactly the same way.

The caesurae also help give the reader a sense of the speaker's connected series of observations, which are made possible simply by what he is seeing (and smelling) out of the window. In lines 14-17, for example, each caesura introduces the next sight or smell:

> Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and
> Canals with floatings of industrial froth;
> A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped
> And rose: and now and then a smell of grass

Farms, cattle, canals, hothouses, hedges, the smell of grass—each of these appears suddenly after a caesura. This gives the impression of sights passing by the speaker's window.

This kind of list-making appears elsewhere in the poem too. The section from lines 37-45 uses multiple caesurae to get across the busyness of both the platforms and the weddings themselves (as the speaker imagines them).

Line 45 uses a strong full-stop caesura after "end" to mark the separation of the newlyweds (who get on board the train) from the guests on the platform, with a similar effect being achieved after "wounding" in line 55 (which makes the phrase "religious wounding" more dramatic).

In the poem's ending, caesurae break the last two lines into fairly equal parts:

> A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
> Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Notice how this gives the ending a kind of rising and falling motion, creating a kind of rhythmic arc that matches with the image of arrows firing into the air and landing quietly somewhere else.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Whitsun, I"
- **Line 5:** "down, all," "hot, all"
- **Line 6:** "gone. We"
- **Line 7:** "houses, crossed"
- **Line 8:** "windscreens, smelt"
- **Line 11:** "afternoon, through"
- **Line 14:** "by, short-shadowed," "cattle, and"
- **Line 16:** "uniquely: hedges"
- **Line 17:** "rose: and"
- **Line 19:** "town, new"
- **Line 21:** "first, I"
- **Line 23:** "at: sun"
- **Line 27:** "reading. Once," "started, though,"
- **Line 28:** "them, grinning," "pomaded, girls"
- **Line 29:** "fashion, heels"
- **Line 30:** "irresolutely, watching"
- **Line 33:** "it. Struck,"
- **Line 34:** "time, more"
- **Line 37:** "foreheads; mothers"
- **Line 38:** "smut; and"
- **Line 40:** "lemons, mauves, and"
- **Line 42:** "Yes, from"
- **Line 43:** "yards, and"
- **Line 44:** "annexes, the "
- **Line 45:** "end. All"
- **Line 46:** "aboard: the"
- **Line 48:** "moved, each"
- **Line 49:** "departing: children"
- **Line 50:** "dull; fathers"
- **Line 54:** "girls, gripping," "tighter, stared"
- **Line 55:** "wounding. Free"
- **Line 57:** "London, shuffling"
- **Line 58:** "building-plots, and"
- **Line 59:** "roads, and"
- **Line 60:** "minutes, that"
- **Line 64:** "landscape, sitting"
- **Line 65:** "past, a"
- **Line 66:** "bowl—and"
- **Line 71:** "aimed. And"
- **Line 73:** "Pullmans, walls"
- **Line 74:** "close, and," "done, this"
- **Line 75:** "coincidence; and"
- **Line 77:** "give. We"
- **Line 78:** "hold, there"
- **Line 79:** "falling, like"
- **Line 80:** "sight, somewhere"

CONSONANCE

"The Whitsun Weddings" is full of consonance. In, fact hardly a line goes by that doesn't have any consonance! Of course, some of these instances are more meaningful than others. The first three lines, for example, have a lot of /t/ consonance—but that doesn't necessarily convey anything particularly important, beyond providing a sense of musicality and unity to the poem.

Lines 5 and 6 are probably the first key example. Here the lines relies heavily on /n/ sounds:

> All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense

> Of being in a hurry gone. We ran

This /n/ sound exerts a strong presence on this section, conveying a sense of the stuffy heat within the carriage. The uniformity of the sound also evokes the uniformity of the decor inside the train, as well as foreshadowing the repetitiousness of the landscape outside.

Line 15 uses consonance to great effect, describing one of the regular sights out of the train window:

> Canals with floatings of industrial froth;

Say this out loud and notice how it seems full of sounds (/n/, /f/, /l/, /t/, /s/, and /r/) that are almost like a tongue-teaser. This moment conveys the common sight of industrial waste by clogging up the line with consonance.

The poem then uses noisy consonance, some of which is alliteration, to convey the boisterous arrival of the wedding parties into the poem. So the /s/ sounds (otherwise known as sibilance) of "whoops and skirls" (line 25), "porters," and "mails" (line 26), make the poem turn up its own volume to signal the commotion that's taking place on the platform. Then, with the speaker noticing the young female wedding guests, consonance is used to show the sheer effort they've made in terms of their appearance:

> We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
> In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
> All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

Notice how the sounds in this section (/p/, /s/, /m/, /g/, /n/, /d/, /s/, and /l/) are carefully curated, mimicking the meticulous attention that the girls have given to their outfits. Similarly, lines 39 and 40 use consonance to give the reader a sense of the girls' "unreal[]" appearances ("lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres").

Line 57 marks an important transition in the poem, the point at which the newlyweds separate from their wedding guests and head towards London (accompanied, of course, by the speaker):

> We hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of
> steam.

The three consecutive /d/ sounds in the line give the poem a sense of forward momentum (now that the train is moving again), while the /s/ consonance (or sibilance) evokes the sound of the steam engine.

Line 70 is full of consonant sound:

> Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:

The density of sounds here (/s/, /p/, /t/, /l/, /d/, and /c/) mirrors the image of London being like "squares of wheat" all packed-in tight together.

The last few lines are also full of consonance:

> [...] We slowed again,
> And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
> A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
> Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Notice how the line is gripped by tightening /n/ and /d/ sounds, helping the poem itself to feel like it's coming to a stop. This section is also full of /s/ sounds (sibilance), which have both mundane and magical connotations. That is, they could represent the sound of rainfall—or collectively perhaps they mimic the sound of a spell or incantation through their rhythmic repetitiveness.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
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- Line 60
- Line 61
- Line 62
- Line 63
- Line 64
- Line 65
- Line 66
- Line 67
- Line 68
- Line 69
- Line 70
- Line 71
- Line 72
- Line 73
- Line 74
- Line 75
- Line 76
- Line 77
- Line 78
- Lines 78-78
- Line 79
- Line 80

DIACOPE

Diacope is used in three lines of "The Whitsun Weddings." The first instance is in line 5, when the speaker starts describing his experience on the train (quoted with line 6):

> All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense
> Of being in a hurry gone.

The repeated "all" emphasizes the uniform appearance of the train from carriage to carriage. The main thing to notice is the sense of an oppressive heat—though this is the first station on the journey, the windows are all down from the train's previous journey. And the train has been in the sun, heating up its cushions and making them "reek." The "all" also has a propulsive rhythm to it that anticipates the motion of the train itself.

The next example is in line 34 (quoted with 33 and 35):

> [...] Struck, I leant
> More promptly out next time, more curiously,
> And saw it all again in different terms:

Here, the diacope signals a shift in the speaker's state of mind. The wedding parties are no longer a noise happening on the periphery, but his point of focus. His thought process is becoming *more* fixed and meditative, thus opening up the rest of the poem for a closer development of his observations.

The final example of diacope is in line 63 and describes the newlyweds—who have just got on the train—as "sitting side by side." This neat little repetition of "side" shows the proximity of bride to groom, and also the way that multiple couples are crammed into the carriages.

Taken together, these instances of diacope act as rhetorical flourishes that heighten the speaker's observations of his surroundings and the people he encounters.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "All," "all," "all"
- **Line 34:** "More," "more"
- **Line 64:** "side by side"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "The Whitsun Weddings." Indeed, every stanza has at least four enjambed lines. It's best to consider the use of enjambment in relation to the poem's form. The poem uses a tightly controlled ten-line stanza throughout its eighty lines. But eighty lines of poetry would probably sound quite tiresome if the formal control was made too obvious—if, for instance, most of the lines were end-stopped. At least, the poem would probably sound like it was written in the mid-19th rather than mid-20th century.

Accordingly, Larkin controls the lines, grammar, and phrases with a hidden virtuosity, making the poem intentionally down-to-earth and even conversational in its tone. Enjambment is a huge part of this, freeing sentences from having to end where the lines end. Caesura is also key. In part, this adds a sense of velocity to the poem's lines, evoking the onward momentum of the train. Overall, then, enjambment is a vital part of the poem's tone.

With the above in mind, there are examples in which the enjambment carries additional meaning too. Look at the way "sense" in line 5 and "slept" in line 11 are both suspended momentarily by the line-break, both words reflecting the apparent lack of hurry. In line 16, hedges "dipped" and, in the next line, "rose," these two verbs themselves playing out on the vertical space of the page (just as the actual hedges do in the vertical space of the train window).

Line 31's enjambment seems especially important:

> As if out on the end of an **event**
> **Waving** goodbye

The "event" is separated from the act of "waving," playing out in miniature the separation of the people on the platform from those on the train.

At times, the poem even enjambs from the end of one stanza to the start of the next. This happens between stanzas 4-7. It seems particularly important between lines 60 and 61, helping the poem emphasize the sense of separation that now applies to the newlyweds—who are on the train—and the wedding parties they have left behind.

The last stanza is full of enjambment, which helps build the poem towards its conclusion. Enjambment makes the grammatical sense of the last three lines feel tense and suspended, subtly mimicking the inevitable fall of arrows shot into the air.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “about / One”
- **Lines 3-4:** “Saturday / Did”
- **Lines 5-6:** “sense / Of”
- **Lines 6-7:** “ran / Behind”
- **Lines 7-8:** “street / Of”
- **Lines 11-12:** “slept / For”
- **Lines 14-15:** “and / Canals”
- **Lines 16-17:** “dipped / And”
- **Lines 17-18:** “grass / Displaced”
- **Lines 18-19:** “carriage-cloth / Until”
- **Lines 21-22:** “noise / The”
- **Lines 22-23:** “made / Each”
- **Lines 23-24:** “destroys / The”
- **Lines 25-26:** “skirls / I”
- **Lines 28-29:** “girls / In”
- **Lines 31-32:** “event / Waving”
- **Lines 32-33:** “goodbye / To”
- **Lines 33-34:** “leant / More”
- **Lines 36-37:** “suits / And”
- **Lines 40-41:** “that / Marked”
- **Lines 42-43:** “cafés / And”
- **Lines 43-44:** “bunting-dressed / Coach-party”
- **Lines 44-45:** “wedding-days / Were”
- **Lines 45-46:** “line / Fresh”
- **Lines 48-49:** “ define / Just”
- **Lines 49-50:** “frowned / At”
- **Lines 50-51:** “known / Success”
- **Lines 52-53:** “shared / The”
- **Lines 54-55:** “stared / At”
- **Lines 58-59:** “cast / Long”
- **Lines 59-60:** “for / Some”
- **Lines 60-61:** “seem / Just”
- **Lines 61-62:** “say / / I ”
- **Lines 64-65:** “side / —An”
- **Lines 66-67:** “none / Thought”
- **Lines 67-68:** “meet / Or”
- **Lines 71-72:** “across / Bright”
- **Lines 72-73:** “rail / Past”
- **Lines 73-74:** “moss / Came”
- **Lines 74-75:** “frail / Travelling”
- **Lines 75-76:** “held / Stood”
- **Lines 76-77:** “power / That”
- **Lines 78-79:** “swelled / A”
- **Lines 79-80:** “arrow-shower / Sent”

SIMILE

Simile is used in a few key moments of "The Whitsun Weddings." There are four examples, each of them important to the development of the poem.

The first of these is in lines 31-33, in which the young female wedding guests stand on the station platform

> **As if** out on the end of an event
> Waving goodbye
> To something that survived it.

This simile beautifully foregrounds the poem's concern about time and impermanence. For all its apparent importance, not to mention pomp and ceremony, each wedding is coming to an end—subtly hinting at the way *all* things decay over time. The train departing the platform—separating from the girls still standing there—seems to mimic the way a whole life can go by seemingly in the blink of an eye, and it's as if the girls and the speaker subconsciously recognize this.

The next simile is also about female wedding guests and appears in lines 52 and 53:

> The women shared
> The secret **like** a happy funeral;

These women are older than the girls in the last simile. This is a mysterious moment in the poem which asks the reader to consider what this "secret" actually is—and why it is like a

"happy funeral." The simile seems to speak to the same theme as above: time and impermanence. These women know from experience that the promises of young love—and the vows made on wedding days—are often undone in the fullness of time. That's why it's both a happy day, full of life, *and* a kind of funeral—something hard to define has died (youthful naiveté, perhaps).

The next simile is in lines 69 and 70, when the train gets near to London (its final stop):

> I thought of London spread out in the sun,
> Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:

Apart from being a brilliant image, this moment relates to the way that the newlyweds themselves are all "packed" in tight on the train carriage. The reference to wheat speaks to notions of fertility and new growth, perhaps preempting the collective power that the speaker ascribes to the newlyweds in lines 76 and 77.

The poem's final simile is right at the end:

> [...] We slowed again,
> And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
> A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
> Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

This simile is about the feeling of momentum as the train's brakes tighten (a kind of leaning-forward sensation that stops when the train is fully stationary). The simile compares that "swell[ing]" sense of falling to an "arrow-shower" arcing up high into the air and falling back down to earth as rain. This is a complicated idea that alludes to the myth of Cupid (discussed in the allusion section). Essentially, it expresses the poem's ambiguity—maybe there is a genuine magic to love, or maybe love is as common as bad weather in England.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 31-33:** "As if out on the end of an event / Waving goodbye / To something that survived it."
- **Lines 52-53:** " The women shared / The secret like a happy funeral;"
- **Lines 69-70:** "I thought of London spread out in the sun, / Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat"
- **Lines 78-80:** "there swelled / A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain."

ZEUGMA

The poem employs zeugma in line 47:

> The last confetti and advice were thrown

Here, the verb "thrown" applies to both "confetti" and "advice," but in different senses. That is, the onlookers literally throw confetti, and figuratively "throw," or shout out, advice.

By employing zeugma here, the speaker equates advice and confetti. It's easy to imagine each bit of advice almost as a cheap, colorful scrap of paper, just like confetti. And just as confetti is a traditional element of U.K. weddings, the speaker humorously suggests that advice is too. Yet confetti is also literally *thrown away* in celebration. It all looks the same, and is easily disposable. In using zeugma here, the speaker seems to imply that this advice is also *throwaway*, that it's also basically all the same.

This taps into the speaker's feeling that people's lives aren't as unique as they think they are. Everyone gets married, grows old, has the same problems, and then dies—all to keep the human race going. This last celebratory moment neatly sums that up. Abstract human experiences—such as receiving advice from loved ones—are no more unique or important that shreds of paper.

Packing all these sentiments (or lack of sentiment) into a single line is an example of Larkin's signature wit. Of course, it's a very dry and cynical wit. This use of zeugma, then, clearly shows how Larkin was able to use poetry to offer sharp commentary on the state of human affairs in mid-century England.

Where Zeugma appears in the poem:

- **Line 47:** "The last confetti and advice were thrown"

VOCABULARY

Whitsun (Line 1) - Whitsun is the name used in Britain (and elsewhere) for the Pentecost, which is the seventh Sunday after Easter, marking the visitation of the Holy Spirit to Jesus's disciples. In England, it was a popular date for a wedding because it granted certain tax advantages *and* was on a long weekend (the Monday was an extra day off).

Lincolnshire (Line 10) - A county in the east of England.

Hothouse (Line 16) - A heated glass building for growing plants, similar to a greenhouse.

Reek (Line 18) - A strong bad smell.

Carriage-Cloth (Line 18) - The fabric that covers the train's seats.

Nondescript (Line 19) - Bland; similar; lacking defining detail. In other words, all the towns look the same.

Whoops and Skirls (Line 25) - Shouting and cheering.

Porters (Line 26) - People employed at the station for moving things around (including the mail).

Larking (Line 26) - Playing around (with a possible pun on the

poet's name).

Pomaded (Line 28) - Pomade is a waxy hair product (especially popular in mid-20th century Britain). The girls have a lot of this product in their hair.

Seamy (Line 37) - *Seamy* means something like sordid and disreputable, but here probably relates more to the kind of seams found on stitched fabric. In other words, the fathers have lines (wrinkles) on their foreheads.

Smut (Line 38) - Rude, lewd, or dirty words.

Perms (Line 38) - A curly hairstyle created using heat and chemicals.

Bunting-Dressed (Line 43) - Decorated with small coloured flags.

Annexes (Line 44) - An annex is a small constructed space connected to a main building.

Gouts of Steam (Line 57) - *Gouts* are drops or spots, in this case of steam (the train is a steam engine).

Poplars (Line 58) - A common London tree. They are tall and narrow, and often planted in rows.

Odeon (Line 65) - A chain of cinemas in the U.K.

Pullmans (Line 73) - Train carriages manufactured by the Pullman Company.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Whitsun Weddings" is a tightly controlled formal poem. It is composed of eight ten-line stanzas that follow a strict meter and rhyme (further discussed in those sections of the guide).

Put simply, this is a long poem! This is deliberate on Larkin's part, allowing for the slow and steady development of the poem's main themes (love, time, isolation and so on). The poem is in no hurry and develops at a regular pace, mimicking the steady forward momentum of the train. Caesurae often provide stopping points, like stations along the way. Even looking at it on the page, the uniformity of the stanza shape makes the poem visually resemble the equal-length carriages of the train, as though the reader is looking down on the train from above.

There are some key moments to note during the poem's "slow and stopping development." The first two stanzas have no mention of the weddings at all—the weddings arrive in the third. Then, after the caesura in line 55, the newlyweds part ways with their guests, marking the next significant transition in the poem. Finally, the train comes to its destination in the last stanza—which is also the point when the poem is at its most ambiguous and figurative, with the "arrow-shower" simile. The poem, then, comes to a stop at the same time as the train. All in all, the whole poem has followed the speaker's train journey chronologically—in a straightforward, stop-by-stop manner.

It's also worth noting that the ten-line stanzas—and indeed the eight stanza total length— steers close to the ode form developed and employed by John Keats in his own odes (see, for instance, "Ode to a Nightingale"). Like those odes, this poem is an examination of time and beauty (or, perhaps, the lack of it). And like those odes, the poem employs a meditative tone as the speaker makes a series of observations.

METER

"The Whitsun Weddings" is a tightly-organized metrical poem, and is a quintessential example of Larkin's control of rhythm and stress. The poem is definitively iambic (da-DUM), giving it a steadily propulsive sound that evokes the momentum of a train traveling across the country. For the most part, these iambs are in lines of five feet—the classic sound of iambic pentameter.

Line 9 provides a perfect example:

> The ri- | ver's lev- | el drift- | ing breadth |began,

Notice how steady and consistent this sounds. If there's one classic metrical scheme for English poetry, it's probably iambic pentameter—making this the perfect meter for a poem so resolutely based in the English landscape (both rural and urban). The rhythm is also hypnotic, evoking the way that the rhythms of train wheels can lull people into a kind of stupor (or sleep!).

Of course, one look at any of the poem's eight stanzas will demonstrate that not *all* the lines have five metrical feet. The second line in each stanza is only two feet long (iambic dimeter). Apart from being another demonstration of Larkin's control of meter, this seems to mimic the push and pull of a train accelerating and decelerating as it negotiates several stations along its route. "For miles | inland"—which is line 12—is a good example of this variation.

It's worth noting that the poem's general form is very close to the odes of John Keats, a 19th century British Romantic poet (see "Ode to a Nightingale"). Like those odes, this poem has ten-line stanzas, and both poets use the same rhyme scheme. So perhaps the shorter second line in each stanza is Larkin's way of marking this form as his own—paying tribute to Keats but also diverging in his own direction.

There are a few key moments where the poem disrupts its iambic pattern. Line 32, for example, employs a troachic (DUM-da) substitution in its first foot:

> Wav|ing | goodbye

This makes the word "wave" seem more active, while also giving it a falling rhythm that perhaps foreshadows the similar

metrical effects used in the poem's penultimate line.

Before looking at that line, though, here is line 57:

> We hur- | ried towards Lon- | don, shuff- | ling gouts | of steam.

There are a number of ways of scanning the above line, but notice how the unstressed syllables in "hurried towards London" seem to rush out of the mouth, as the reader tries to squeeze the extra syllables into the established iambic sound. This, then, mimics the very image that it describes—a hurried journey.

Now, here's the poem's end (lines 79 and 80):

> A sense | of fall- | ing, like | an arr- | ow shower
> Sent out | of sight, | somewhere | becom- | ing rain.

Notice how the penultimate line (79) builds tension through the sound of falling. Though it can be scanned to pretty much conform to iambic pentameter, the extra syllable at the end of the line creates this falling effect:

> A sense | of fal- | ling, like | an ar- | row shower

Contrast that line, then, with the one that follows immediately after and closes the poem. The last two feet in this line are iambic again ("becom- | ing rain"), which has the effect of bringing the poem's sound back down to earth. So, the penultimate line goes up and the final line goes down, ending on the heavy stress of rain.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "The Whitsun Weddings" is strict and regular throughout the poem. Each ten-line stanza runs:

ABABCDECDE

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the rhyme scheme—apart from the way Larkin sustains it for so many lines without it becoming tiresome—is the way that it is not even that noticeable. Indeed, Larkin opts for a conversational tone without too many obvious poetic elements—and the rhymes are just *there*, without drawing too much attention to themselves. They help push the poem forward, but without becoming a distraction.

Many of the rhymes are also slant rhymes—often so imperceptible that it's only through the rhyme scheme in *other* stanzas that readers can notice them. For instance, "street" and "meet" clearly rhyme in stanza one, whereas the chime between "grass" and "cars" is much more subtle. Similarly, the rhyme between "sense" and "fish-dock," if it exists at all, is practically impossible to perceive (the two share sibilant sounds, and their /e/ and /i/ sounds are somewhat similar), while the rhyme between "froth" and "carriage-cloth" in stanza two is crystal clear.

These moments help steer the poem away from overly poetic language. They also suggest a tension between a prescribed path (rhyme scheme), and the possibility of wandering away from that path—just as young people must weigh the pressure to marry against the option of breaking with that tradition.

As a whole, this rhyme scheme has its roots in the Keatsian ode, which follows the same set of rhymes and was John Keats's development of the classical ode form. It lends itself well to meditative contemplation, which is precisely what is on show in this poem (aided by the meditative rhythms of the train journey itself). Technically speaking, the rhyme scheme divides each stanza into four lines and six lines respectively—a quatrain and a sestet. Larkin intentionally avoids accenting this division, aiming for the disarming casual tone that draws the reader deep into the poem.

SPEAKER

Most people interpret the speaker in this poem as Larkin himself—or a version of Larkin at least! This would have been a familiar train journey for Larkin, who lived and worked in Hull (east England) for most of his life. The poem is written in the first-person singular ("I"), but occasionally it slips into the first-person plural ("we"). This slight confusion is thematically useful for the poem, showing that there is a kind of tension between the speaker's isolation as a detached observer *and* the groups of wedding guests—between individual and community, in other words.

That said, there is no clear indicator in the poem itself as to who the speaker is. However, for the sake of clarity, this guide has also taken the speaker to be Larkin or a version of Larkin. As such, we use the singular "he" to refer the speaker, in contrast to the "they" that refers to the many people that the individual speaker sees on his journey.

For the most part, the speaker is just a typical train-traveler gazing out of the window. At first, he doesn't even notice the boisterous wedding parties, mistaking them for rowdy employees (line 26). He tries to go on reading, but then he takes more notice of the weddings, deciding to concentrate on them more intently. The rest of the poem depicts his innermost thoughts about those weddings, and there is a distinct division between him and them. For the most part, his tone is very down-to-earth—but it takes a leap into something more figurative in the poem's closing image of an "arrow-shower" falling "out of sight."

SETTING

"The Whitsun Weddings" has a very distinctive sense of setting.

First of all, it's set on a specific day—Whitsun Saturday (in May). It takes place in England on a journey between the east (Lincolnshire) and London, the capital. The year isn't specified though there are clues that place it in the 1950s, which was when the Larkin wrote and published the poem. It's a hot day, making the trains "reek" with the stench of "carriage-cloth."

The poem is, of course, set on a train. This is a vital component of how the poem develops—the train journey provides the poem's vantage point (the speaker looking out of the window) and the sense of time passing, as the speaker passes through one station after another. This combination of the speaker's gaze and the hours going by contributes to the poem's meditative and reflective tone.

The poem, then, is full of observations specifically relating to the setting. The speaker observes both rural and urban environments—farms *and* "acres of dismantled cars." This gives the reader a sense of post-war England—the speaker passes towns that are too new to really have their own character, and this contributes to a tension between the natural world and urban growth (playing into the poem's discussion of love as a kind of unstoppable life-force). Cultural references like the Odeon cinema and "someone running up to bowl" (cricket) showcase typical leisure activities of the day.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Whitsun Wedding" is one of Larkin's most enduring poems and showcases many of his poetry's distinctive characteristics. There is a virtuosic control of rhyme and meter coupled with a disarmingly down-to-earth tone. Larkin was grouped with a number of other mid-20th century British poet as The Movement (poets like Thom Gunn, Donald Davie, and Ted Hughes) who defined themselves *against* the Romantic and abstract excesses of earlier poets like Dylan Thomas.

As always, these kinds of groupings are somewhat crude—and, indeed, Larkin's poetry features many elements that are perhaps more in line with the Romantic poets than it first appears. This poem, for example, is heavily indebted to the formal innovations of John Keats, perhaps the quintessential Romantic poet. "The Whitsun Weddings" has the same stanza length, rhyme scheme, and meditative tone as some of Keats's odes (for instance, "Ode to a Nightingale"). That said, this poem is considerably less prone to romantic idealism, and feels very much rooted in its specific historical and cultural context.

Larkin has a reputation for being a somewhat miserable, cynical poet. While there's undoubtedly some truth in this, the poem is undoubtedly beautiful and certainly has an element of nostalgic longing throughout it. For someone so supposedly critical of love, the subject occupies a number of Larkin's most famous poems.

A good comparison poem would be "An Arundel Tomb," which uses a sculpture as a way to reflect on the nature of love. This poem appears in the same collection as "The Whitsun Weddings" (the collection is also called *The Whitsun Weddings*). This poem subtly hints that love might not be quite as magical as it seems. Such a sentiment is probably best expressed in Larkin's "This Be the Verse." That poem presents love as a kind of dumb biological force, helping one generation "hand[] on misery" to the next.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem is set sometime in 1950s England, and the historical context plays an important role throughout. During that era, getting married on the Whitsun weekend afforded the British public two key advantages: a tax break, and a longer weekend (because the Monday was a bank holiday). This made it a very popular weekend for getting married—hence the sheer number of wedding parties encountered on the speaker's train journey from Lincolnshire to London. It's worth noting that this advantage was more meaningful to the lower economic classes, and the poem is sometimes criticized as being a somewhat snobbish takedown from a middle-class poet. In turn, this criticism itself is often debated.

The historical context plays out in the view from the train window. The speaker, usually taken to be Larkin himself, sees a country in transition. England underwent a great deal of rebuilding after the Second World War, and whole new towns were created (the "nondescript" nature of these towns is referenced in line 19). There is a kind of tension between the rural countryside and the built urban environment, subtly playing out beside the train tracks.

The approach to London brings with it a noticeable change too, the speaker seeing signs of popular leisure activities like the cinema and cricket (lines 65 and 66). Larkin was preoccupied with the changing nature of sex and relationships in British society, and though this poem predates the introduction of the contraceptive pill and the liberating attitudes of the 1960s, Larkin's fixation on the meaning—or lack of meaning—of love is in full display. The poem also nods to love as a kind of constant presence in human history with the allusion to Cupid (a god from classical mythology) in the closing lines.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Weddings and Statistics — An interesting analysis of the changing social habits of marriage through the years, from the British Office of National Statistics. (https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/marriages/marriages/index.html)
- BBC Documentary — A film about Larkin that particularly

looks at the importance of place in his poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0E4q55lPSrk)

- More Poems and Larkin's Bio — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)
- A Reading of the Poem — The poem read by the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9eTF6QNsxA)
- An Essay — An interesting piece from the Poetry Foundation about the poem. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68946/philip-larkin-the-whitsun-weddings)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- An Arundel Tomb

HOW TO CITE

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