# Collected Poems Study Guide

## Collected Poems by Philip Larkin

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Section 1

## Section 1 Summary

Section 1 is the first of two sections of Larkin's poetry from 1946-83. In the poem "Deep Analysis," Larkin writes as if he were a woman who has been rejected. The woman has offered herself unconditionally, wanting nothing more than to please, server and love the object of her affection. The woman does not understand why the subject will not accept her kindness and affection and instead turns away. The woman states, "I became your grief when you would not listen." Although the door may have closed between the two, as a sort of death, the woman states that her grief will not subside.

The poem titled "The Dedicated" acknowledges the fact that there is one who must keep the path clear for the mourning who enters into a cemetery to pay homage or simply visit the tombstones of the dead. It is almost as if the caretakers work as angels, never seen, but achieving great things for the good of others.

Larkin dedicates a number of columns to various acts in nature such as the spring thaw, waves of the ocean, dawn, the sea, grass, crops, birds, and weather. Each one is met with a sense of newness and wonder.

"To Failure" is a poem in which Larkin refers to the act of failing as being something that is always present, unlike dragons or panicky horses. Although time ventures forward and tends to become stale, failure is always present at Larkin's elbow.

"At Grass" is a poem dedicated to a horse racing event, supposedly a large one such as the Stakes. Larkin describes the state of the horses and wonders what makes them flick their ears, if they have memories of races gone by or of the places and crowds. Although people come from far away to witness the big races in June, at the end of the day the only one who pays attention to the horses are the grooms come to take them home.

There are a series of problems throughout the work of dedicated to death, dying and grief. The emotions that grief brings are at the same time expected and unexpected and are all-consuming to those affected. It is common for one to celebrate the things that God gives, yet one still feels surprised when something or someone is taken away.

There is a humorous poem titled "The Literary World" that addresses two different subjects and people. The first one is addressed to author and philosopher Franz Kafka. Larkin says that once the author has had five years worth of irresistible force bumping up against objects in the belly, he will know and understand depression. The second part of the poem is dedicated to Mrs. Alfred Tennyson, wife of the famous poet. It was up to Mrs. Tennyson to handle all of the letters addressed to her husband, manage the business of a famous literary figure, care for the house and family, entertain visitors,

raise and educate their children. Meanwhile, according to Larkin, Lord Tennyson "sat like a baby doing his poetic business."

"Strangers" addresses the behavior of humankind and how it changes in the face of the unknown. In the presence of strangers, one tends to keep one's eyes downcast and cold. Among strangers, Larkin asserts that one must indulge in what he calls the "teashop behaviors," exhibiting proper manners, and being careful not to upset the balance, while keeping one's own treasure hidden.

"Wants" addresses the busyness of life, and although one may appreciate invitations received, family photographs, appointments, and all things that go hand-in-hand with being a person in a civilized society, underneath all of that there is a desire for oblivion.

The poet is fond of attics in his work. These can be used either literally or metaphorically, particularly when it comes to describing the state of the mind and the contents within.

"On Being Twenty-Six" relates to passing the quarter century mark and how things begin to wane and flag. Although the things that once excited and enticed one are all but gone, the memory of earlier times is always present to remind one whether or not the memories are welcome.

There are a number of poems that address both arrivals and departures including the untitled poem with the first line, "Since the majority of me." In this poem, Larkin writes about a relationship that is no longer fortuitous. Time has come for the debate to end and to define and go separate ways.

Solitude is a favored topic of the poet's and can be seen in "Best Society." Larkin states that in childhood, he did not realize that solitude was something one had to search for, that it was always there. After reaching the age of 20 Larkin realizes that solitude is something that must be sought that there is always too much to do, company to keep and work to be done. However, in getting solitude, one must give up other things and Larkin wonders if it is as good as he once thought it could be.

The poet enjoys addressing the building blocks of one's life. This can be seen in "Maturity" and "To put one brick upon another." In Maturity, Larkin talks about a stillness that comes with maturity and being surprised that things are the way they are and no different. Once one becomes mature, there is the beginning of aches and pain, of old age, of defeat, and wondering if time was well spent. The poem "To put one brick upon another" talks about the act of living, how one simply puts one brick upon another without ever fully realizing if what one is building is solid and worthwhile.

"Arrivals, Departures" is a poem that addresses traveling and emotions involved in coming and leaving the board a ship. One never really knows if the choice is good, if the unknown is to be trusted, or if the trip will bring happiness.

The poet writes about a ride home on a train, sitting amidst "felt-hatted mums" who are laden with packages from a day of household shopping. The locals are rural and not up

to Larkin's standard, rather, they do not do, want or need the same things; nor do they recognize the poet's worth and distinction. However, at the end of it all, when death comes, it will not matter what one has done.

## Section 1 Analysis

Larkin's poetry reveals much of himself, whether or not it is intended. There is a sense of entitlement, of confidence bordering on arrogance that seeps through into the work. It is clear through the descriptions of people, place and elements of nature that the poet has a keen sense of observation and depth of feeling.

Particularly insightful are the poems about inner turmoil and conflicting relationships. "Since the majority of me" obviously addresses Larkin's failed relationship with his wife and how their separation was barely amicable, speaking of resentment and the need to part.

Through these poems, Larkin shows a penchant for over thinking and melancholy. A good example of this can be seen in "On Being Twenty-Six." There is a sense of fatalism and remorse over days past, as if the poet's life is on the downward slide despite the young age. Larkin has settled into his daily life and routine, lamenting days gone by and opportunities that will never again present themselves. The same feeling is gained in "Maturity" when the author discusses how life has turned out, not exactly as one might have planned but regardless, it must be accepted.

Larkin shows his humorous side in "The Literary World." It is obvious that Larkin does not subscribe to Kafka's philosophies and regards him as being out of touch and unexposed to what real depression is like. In the second part of the poem, Larkin pays a tribute to Mrs. Alfred Tennyson. It is fascinating how the woman behind the man gets little if any attention and appreciation. While Tennyson has create for himself a legacy and body of work admired by millions, it is Mrs. Tennyson that makes it all possible through taking care of her husband's needs, from business services to running the house and raising the children, so that he can do nothing but write.

# Section 2

## Section 2 Summary

"He Hears That His Beloved Has Become Engaged" is a poem about a man who has learned of the loss of his lady love. The man gallantly steps aside and when dancing with the beloved chooses to help her shine as opposed to interfering with her happiness. In this way, the man shows true love for he is intent on showing the woman in her best light.

Larkin laments loneliness in "At Thirty-one When Some are Rich." While some have become rich and others have become dead, Larkin has a job instead of divining a plan on how to gain fame and fortune. The poet spends his evenings writing letters. The letters are written to women, but Larkin is quick to point out that they are not the kind that will land him in court. Instead, they contain niceties and kind words, there is nothing astonishing contained inside. Larkin questions himself about writing the letters and wonders why he wastes time issuing endearments and humor.

The poet pays a tribute to photographs in "Lines on the Young Lady's Photograph Album" and "Whatever Happened?" Larkin questions if the photographs are able to capture more than history and simple images. Can they succeed in conveying personality, feelings, and the importance of certain events? The photographs will continue to exist even after memory begins to fade, and things are no longer as clear as they once were, growing smaller and farther away.

There are several tributes to autumn, including reminiscence about the poet's mother and how she was uncomfortable during the summer and could rest easy when autumn appeared. To Larkin, autumn equates rain, as is common in London, along with the fog. As the greenery of summer dies, it may fit amongst photographs, letters and other papers, capturing the summer's memory.

Larkin tries to comfort himself while waiting for an airplane. There has been a delay, and no one is able to say how long it will be before the trip can commence. Passengers keep telling themselves that it can't be long but there are no signs of progress. The poet laments that he could have already been at his destination if he had gone by boat but the time for that has passed. Each of the passengers amuses himself with a cigarette or newspapers or going off to buy tea or sweets. Although there are many people confined to the same space they dare not make friends because when the time comes to board the plane, there will be a race for the seats and one is better off alone.

The author shows his love for jazz in the poem for saxophonist Sidney Bechet. The poet speaks of visiting New Orleans and seeing jazz great Sidney Bechet playing in the French Quarter. All around people are going about their business, standing on balconies, making love, being lost in their own minds, while expensive prostitutes flaunt

their wares. Meanwhile, Larkin is listening intently to every note that comes from Bechet's saxophone, indulging as if the music were love.

If the poet were called upon to develop his own religion he would be sure that there would be a significant place in the doctrine for water. There would be dousing and drenching and holding a glass to the light to wait for the congregation.

The theme of the Church continues in "Church Going." The church is old and quiet and get in contains many elements of churches everywhere, including the musty smell, dead flowers, an organ, and small books. Larkin examines the room and wonders what type of people enter and what their reasons are, whether it's prayer, grief or thanks. Larkin stands at the lectern at the front of the church, gazing out onto the empty pews as if there are ghosts occupying the wooden benches. The poet sees the church is a place of reverence and awe and delights in visiting them wherever he goes.

There are several times when the poet is asked about his home. There does not seem to be one specific place that Larkin calls his own, even the place of his childhood or adulthood. Larkin has also claimed that he has not met a special person to call his own, who can lay instant claim on his possessions, including his name.

The use of the name is also addressed in the poem titled "Maiden Name," where Larkin questions what happens to a woman's maiden name after she marries. The name is no longer used, and its syllables have ceased to mean the essence of the woman. The mention of the words does not bring about images of her face. When the name changed, so did everything that was once relative to the woman from bundles of letters, school memorabilia, and old programs. All of those things are long past and will never be again.

It is strange to possess ignorance about oneself and the way things operate although one may not possess knowledge of a particular topic. As a general rule, people tend to qualify or explain even after professing ignorance. After all, someone must have the answer and then after one gains the knowledge, one begins to die.

Larkin addresses various parts and objects of the UK in several poems including "An Arundel Tomb." In the tomb lay an earl and a countess carved by a sculptor in effigy, holding hands throughout eternity. The poet wonders if they had any idea it would be laying together for so long, complete with the earl's jointed armor and the countess' plain attire of the pre-baroque. Larkin also addresses Ireland in several works, including "Church Going." It surprises Larkin that there are some traditions in Ireland that are strange and uncomfortable, because they are not those of England.

"Self's the Man" is about one of Larkin's friends named Arnold. Arnold has chosen to marry a woman so she would not get away. Now Arnold spends all of this time taking care of the wife and children with no time left for himself. Larkin wonders how Arnold can take it being so selfless, while the poet is exactly the opposite doing as he pleases all the time. Yet Larkin wonders if they really are as different as it would seem on the surface as Arnold has devoted himself to putting the needs of others above his own in

order to meet and fulfill his dreams. Is that really so different from one to seeks to serve his own means in a very different way?

The poet is well known for writing letters to various friends and colleagues. In a "Letter to Friend About Girls," Larkin confides in friend, saying that he always felt as if it was a losing battle to get girls. The friend receives admonishment for choosing pushovers, while Larkin is nearly mystical due to his fecklessness.

Although there are many self-help books on the market there are none that can accurately convey what it feels like to be selfless. Larkin equates the selflessness to waiting in a hospital on a cold morning while selfishness which Larkin prefers equates listening to jazz next move fire with a drink in hand.

## Section 2 Analysis

This section reveals a lot about Larkin, his desires, thoughts, and actions. There is an element of selfishness to the man, as can be seen in "Self's the Man," regarding his friend Arnold who gives all of himself to his family. Larkin cannot image doing so, preferring to spend his time on his own needs and desires. However, the differences on the surface are not always so distinct underneath as both men are doing what pleases and fulfills them.

As with many Europeans, Larkin shows his love and reverence for things representative of days gone by. This can be seen in several poems about places and locations in the UK, from England to Ireland. An example of this is "An Arundel Tomb." Larkin wonders if the earl and the countess encased in the tomb had any idea that they would be together in this way for so very long. The manner of dress is of note to Larkin, foreign in its pre-baroque style.

References to Ireland, the land and churches are also topics of interest to the poet, although the customs may often seem foreign and strange.

Poems like "At Thirty-one When Some are Rich" shows Larkin's somewhat melancholy side, wishing for things that are out of reach yet the poet is not willing to reach for them. Larkin writes as if he got old when he turned 26, and 31 is just one step closer to old age and resignation.

Photographs are an interesting topic. Many people fill their houses with photographs in albums and frames to represent memories of people and things of yesteryear. However, Larkin wonders if the pictures can mean anything to those who simply observe them. Is it possible for the camera to capture the meaning of the setting or the personalities of the people in the photographs or are they merely remembrances?

# Section 3

## Section 3 Summary

On a trip from England to sunny Bombay, Larkin is prepared to leave behind and dismiss his native land for its outdated traditions and obsession with "mawkish nursery games."

The poet shows his skill for observation and imagination in "The Large Cool Store." The store has displays of clothing, laid out in various sizes and colors. It is obvious which clothes are meant for the work day world and which are meant for evening.

"Here" is a tale of traveling through rural countryside and into a large town, filled with statues and domes. There are tattoo parlors, consulates and ships in the harbor. The people in the town wear cheap suits and aspire to own washers and dryers, and come down from the hills to find their heart's desires. Yet there is loneliness and silence. While nobody is looking, the weeds grow and flower and make way for the beaches that seem somehow out of reach.

The subject of leaves is a common one for Larkin. In many poems the author speaks of leaves and autumn, sometimes as a welcome respite from the heat of summer, at other times, a metaphor for ruin and decay or even death. The leaves are present as the buildings are abandoned and give in, slowly, to decay. One can see the way it once was when things were new but now it only waits for winter and death.

"Breadfruit" is a sweet coming of age poem about young boys who dream about native girls bearing breadfruit. The young brides will teach the boy how to perform various sexual positions on the beach and eventually the boy becomes a man and falls into the way of family life, leaving behind those carefree times. As the man ages, there are children, bills to pay, and illnesses. Maturity has finally fallen when the old men dream of the native girls bearing breadfruit.

"Wild Oats" details a time in Larkin's life when he almost married a woman who was one he could talk to, a friend of a "bosomy rose" that the poet desired. The woman Larkin took out wore specs and was someone he could talk to and to whom he could correspond through letters. The two planned to marry seven years and 400 hundred letters later. Larkin bought a ring and the pair planned to marry. After making the arrangements, both agreed that Larkin was too selfish and withdrawn to marry. The couple separated but Larkin still carries two photos of the bosomy rose, referring to them as unlucky charms.

Many people find the park idyllic with its playground, grass, sun and lake. Larkin finds that the scene does not suit him. It is for the old or ill to enjoy as they toddle along, kept company only by empty chairs and characters swathed in trench costs and digging through the garbage. Those people watch the goings on around them, deliveries being

made and children walking home from school, and wondering what it would be like to be someone else. Larkin says he prefers his secretary and in-box, saving the park for when he is old and ready for the cemetery.

There is an ode to a billboard on which a girl poses by palm trees and tries to coerce passers by to visit a tropical locale. The girl was only on the billboard for a couple of weeks before she was turned into a snaggle-toothed character enjoying a drawn-in penis, overly enhanced breasts, and an unflattering mustache. Larkin says the girl was "too good for this life," and eventually the poster was torn, leaving only her hand, while underneath there was an advertisement urging people to fight against cancer.

There are times when a man might feel out of his element and yet is for one reason or another, forced to participate. Larkin speaks of this subject in "The Dance." The poet dresses up in evening clothes and goes to a familiar site - a barn that is decorated and contains professionals as well as a band that is highly acclaimed. Larkin heads for the bar and spots an interesting woman. The couple speaks with their eyes and Larking approaches her. There are signs of interest from the woman, yet Larkin is dragged off by a man who insists on supper and conversation with his wife. The entire time Larkin is at the dance, he keeps telling himself that this is alien territory and he should not have come. In fact, the poet wonders why anyone would choose to be there when they could be in bed or listening to records.

The crowd begins to thin out and instead of leaving as he had planned, Larkin spends time at the bar listening to war stories from the bartender. Eventually, he sees the girl again and joins her at a table. Both have been drinking and suddenly Larkin sees the girl's endless parade of Saturday nights.

The poet talks of an "Ape Experiment Room" where animals are held in mesh cages and tested by a PhD who is the only person that would think of such tests.

As a librarian, Larkin must assert authority over the university students. The poet muses that his job is to tell girls to pull their socks up while wishing he could tell others to pull their pants down.

"High Windows" is a poem of youth and how each generation views those that come after. Through high windows, Larkin sees two kids and wonders about the things they do, envying their youth and labeling it paradise. Then again, what did people think of him forty years ago, when times had changed and the chokehold of society had loosened? Through the high windows, there are no words but the thoughts of those below and one can see the great blue beyond that leads to nowhere.

The poet takes a humorous look at 1963 in the poem "Annus Mirabilis." In 1963, there was a new sexual freedom that floated through society, although too late for Larkin to enjoy as he might have as a young man. Larkin says that instead of beginning at age sixteen, accompanied by shame, sexual intercourse became not a sort of bargaining but the product of a society that ceased to quarrel about it. According to Larkin, it all began, "Between the end of the Chatterley ban and the first Beatles LP."

Larkin writes of a death of a man who seemed to be a "proper sport" and one who "devoted his life to others." The poet drinks to him, a large gin and tonic, in a private pledge.

There is a poem written about Larkin's biographer, Jake Balokowsky, a teacher who had to put his own desires on hold in order to please his wife's parents and resents it. The man looks forward to the time when he can take a couple semesters off to work on a pet project.

## Section 3 Analysis

Larkin is fond of referring to those people who are less metropolitan than he, although the poet is not entirely savvy. Still, Larkin looks at people with limited access to world things as being less than, in some ways. This can be seen in several poems, including, "The Locals Snivel Through the Fields." The poet's observations of the people around him show a great deal of insight into the lives and unfulfilled dreams of the people, sharing with the reader the opportunity to examine what their existence might be like.

Larkin is an avid people watcher and gains a great deal from observing others, in their natural habitat as well as in unfamiliar situations. One good example of observation can be seen in "The Dance," in which Larkin watches the people who attend the dance at the local barn. The people dance and drink and seem nearly oblivious to their surroundings, while Larkin is only too aware that he is in a place that makes him feel uncomfortable. There is a girl at the dance Larkin is particularly interested in and takes delight in watching and analyzing her even if in some ways, the girl's life seems sad.

Two other examples of observation, as well as the attitude changes in society, can be seen in "High Windows" and "Annus Mirabilis." In "High Windows," Larkin observes two students walking on campus through the library window and contemplates what it must be like to be in their shows. In "Annus Mirabilis," Larkin muses about the changes in society regarding the sexual revolution and how it affects young people.

# Section 4

## Section 4 Summary

Larkin writes "Homage to a Government" about soldiers who are sent home for lack of money. The poet says that it is OK to bring the soldiers home, because the places that need to be guarded and orderly will have to learn to do these things for themselves. Although the action of bringing the soldiers home may make changes in the country the next year, the statues will still be standing and the town squares will look the same. The children will not notice that anything has changed and Larkin asserts that the best thing that one can do for those children is to give them money.

The poet talks about the sea, and how walking along the seaside brings back memories of things crowded beneath the horizon, from the beach to towels, to water and to a boat on the water. Children toddle about as their parents clown around with them inadvertently teaching them how to grow up.

There is more than one poem in which Larkin discusses hospitals. The hospital buildings are very tall, and the poet can view one from his window knowing that there are people in it who are dying.

"Dublinesque" is a poem about Larkin's visit to Dublin and a funeral scene that takes place in the city. This seems strange to Larkin, as people in their finery march down the ancient streets in a procession behind the hearse. It is a gray and dreary day, and yet people walk behind the hearse, keeping time. There is great sadness, however, it is also obvious to Larkin that the group had great fondness for the deceased and will honor him by singing one of the famous Irish tunes about beauty.

"Poem About Oxford" was written for a girl named Monica who is from Girton. Larkin reminisces about their times together in the city, and how the girl wishes Larkin wasn't going to school at Kings College. Thirty years down the road when things have become new and strange they will always have their memories of each other during the Second World War.

"This Be The Verse" is a poem about parents unintentionally messing up their children. Whether or not the parents mean to, they often fill the child with his faults while tossing in some extras for good measure. However, the parents cannot be blamed for this behavior as they received the same treatment from their parents, who Larkin refers to as "fools in old-style hats and coats, who half the time were sloppy-stern and half at one another's throats." Larkin's solution to this problem is to get away as quickly as possible, and perhaps more importantly, don't have any children of your own.

The poet talks about journaling in the poem "Forget What Did." When thinking about keeping a journal many people think of the things they ought to write about - all of joyous or dramatic happenings that have had some deep effect upon the writer. Larkin

prefers to believe that the empty pages should always be filled with observations such as the flowers as they bloom, and how the birds come and go.

Larkin revisits the subject of age in "I Have Started to Say." In the poem, Larkin says that he has started to talk about his life using such phrases as "A quarter of a century" or "Thirty years back." The phrases tend to slip from his lips, making him breathless and wondering if there is anything else last that will happen other than death.

The poet writes about another hospital in "The Building." The building is large, standing higher than the most elegant hotel. Except that visitors do not arise by taxi, and inside there "hangs a frightening smell." There something about the hospital waiting room that reminds the poet of an airport lounge filled with paperbacks and a place to buy tea. Like many who can be found in a local bus station, the people look resigned and tired while waiting for a nurse to bring some news. It is a scary place, particularly when one must travel to the appointed floor with little to no news and are afraid of what they might see along the way. The world outside seems to be completely separate, where there is red brick, traffic, and children playing games. Regardless of the outcome of the news Larkin says that it is inevitable that each person will die. It may not be in this hospital, but it will happen somewhere.

The theme continues in the next three columns titled "Heads in the Woman's Ward," "The View," and "The Old Fools." These poems written in 1972 and 1973, are quite depressing and speak of the inevitability of death. While at one time a person's life was a celebrated and joyous old age brings terror into delirium. Larkin asks what is left now that he stands atop the hill. Surely there will be times to come when there is a sort of befuddled thinking, lack of memory and a type of absence from reality and one's surroundings.

"The Life with a Hole in it" is Larkin's response to people who comment that he has always done everything he wanted to do, and always got his own way. The concept makes Larkin laugh, because he considers the statement to be an inversion of all that is true. However, people are going to think what they will and it doesn't really matter to Larkin what the others think. The poet believes that life is a three-way struggle that consists of a person's desires, the world's desires for you, and the "unbeatable slow machine that brings what you get."

"Morning at Last: There in the Snow" is a poem about the morning after an evening spent with a lover. The only thing the morning brings is footprints in the snow and everything else is gone with the night. But when the rain comes in washes away the footprints, what will there be to remind one of the night before?

"Aubade" is a poem that addresses what happens when Larkin awakens in the middle of the night. It is in the night when one can see what is truly there. No matter what happens during the daytime, nighttime brings the inevitability of death, of mistakes, as well as the good things one never accomplished or the love never received. Religion makes the attempt to dispel the fear involved with death, although nothing truly works. Even when the daylight comes, the thought and reality of death is always in the

periphery. When the daylight fully comes into the room it is time to get up and go to work and watch the postmen go door-to-door.

It is a common concept that is a person gets older, the more he knows. Larkin refuses to give in to this idea and instead claims that during the second 25 years of his life he has spent time losing knowledge gained while University. The poet refuses to pay attention to the news of the goings-on in the world and instead embraces the fact that he often forgets faces or places that he has been. As he grows older, Larkin believes that eventually he will know nothing and that his mind will "fold into itself like fields, like snow."

The topic of death is also talked about in a poem titled "The Mower." Larkin's lawn mower has stalled twice and he bends down to find out what is wrong. Underneath the poet finds a hedgehog that has been killed by the blades of the mower. The hedgehog had been hiding in the tall grass. Larkin had seen the hedgehog once before, and had even fed it at one time. Feeling bad for killing the animal, Larkin buries its. The next morning, the hedgehog does not wake up and the poet states that the first day after death the absence always feels the same and it is important to remember that we should be kind to one another while we still have the opportunity.

"Dear CHARLES, My Muse, Asleep or Dead" is a poem written to Cornish poet Charles Causley. This is only one of many poems Larkin wrote to his idol and friend, whose style and manner work Larkin appreciated and enjoyed. The work is a letter written in a poetic form in order to celebrate Charles' birthday. Causley's birthday was the 24th of August, which Larkin refers to as the best of months since August was also the month of his birth. Larkin jokes that it's good to be a Leo and "Isn't it comforting to be so lordly, selfish, vital, strong?"

Larkin says aging becomes sad as people begin to forget about your birthday with no parties or presents. However, it is more important to make lasting friends through the things one writes.

Party politics does not discuss government, rather what a person should do when he is at a party and his drink is almost gone. There is the decision of what to do about the remaining drink. Should one ration it until someone comes around and offers more? Or is it better to drink what one has in the hopes that someone will notice and come to fill the glass?

## Section 4 Analysis

Although the poems in the collection are not typically separated by topic or date, the works in this section tend to have a common thread in the topic of death. Larkin began writing about death at an early age and becomes almost obsessed with its inevitability. Larkin is neither an old or sick man and the obsession seems to make little sense given his health and age. However, there are quite a few poems that address death. Death will happen to everyone sooner or later, it is simply a matter of time and place.

This series of poems was written in the mid 1970s, when Larkin was in his fifties. The content of the poetry could have been written by a much older man, particularly one who is ill or dying. Perhaps Larkin's views on death were a sort of precognition considering that the poet died at age 63.

There are some obvious regrets in Larkin's life that come out with the writings about age, lost opportunity, aging, and dying. Through Larkin's writings, one can tell that although he grew up in a time that was not as free as the 1960s, the poet still had his share of good times with being a vital young man with little responsibilities and plenty of sexual exploits. There is no hint, however, of what caused Larkin to believe that his youth had waned so quickly and why he lamented death at such an early age.

There are some humorous points to this section, as well as some sentimentality. This can be seen in "Dear CHARLES, My Muse, Asleep or Dead" and "Party Politics." Larkin tries hard not to be ordinary or trite in the letter written to Charles Causley, but rather to be entertaining to the man who is his idol and his friend.

In "Party Politics" Larkin's biggest concern is what to do about his drink. First of all, the poet does not remember drinking the first half but comes out of a sort of fugue to discover that half of it is gone. The dilemma at hand is whether one should finish the drink in hopes of getting another or nurse what's left in the glass so it does not appear that the first drink had been consumed too quickly or that the man is socially awkward and not able to get his own refreshments.

# Section 5

## Section 5 Summary

The Early Poems 1938-45 are a collection of Larkin's work before his first published collection which took place in 1951.

The first of four poems are dedicated to the seasons.

The first poem, "Winter Nocturne," was published in the Coventrian in 1938. The poem speaks of the night in late December, when there is nothing outside but silence and mist. The dark creeps in, silent like death, and one can only remember the green trees and faded summers.

The second poem, "Fragment from May," was also published in the Coventrian in 1938. Larkin speaks of how winter reluctantly withdraws and instead is replaced with bright colors and flowers "leaping and laughing in the boist'rous wind." The poet compares the new greenery and blossoms to the freshness of a child's cheek.

The third poem, "Summer Nocturne," was published in the Coventrian in 1939. The poet talks about the perfume of the night air and how it contains a mixture of flowers, giving off a confused rapture of scent. Larkin claims that he would give anything if only the charm of the night and moonlight would stay, but it is not to be.

The fourth poem, "We see the spring breaking across rough stone," was published in 1939. This work talks about spring breaking and how there is no time to pay it heed, although it is a welcome respite from the cold of winter and the harbinger of the summer to come.

"Street Lamps" is a creative and fascinating poem about the presence of street lamps as they come out to combat the night, which Larkin says "slinks, like a puma, down the sky." The street lamps work hard to cast away the shadows and stand guard through the night until dawn comes. The poet says that he remembers one night when a street lamp refused to go out and made an attempt to rival the sky, but eventually knew that it was time to give the work over to the sun.

One of the longest poems in this section, "After-Dinner Remarks," discusses the aftereffects of a good meal. The poet talks of being content as the evening comes that then becomes sad when he thinks about past unmet desires. Larkin dreams of things such as a kiss and the sea and claims that he has many reflections that are complex.

"Midsummer Night 1940" talks about evening falling in Wales, on the hills and towns of England, and waiting for the soothing tide at a deserted beach. The end of the day brings exhaustion for some, while others sneer at those who might believe in ghosts or that the moon is made of cheese.

"As a war in years of peace" talks about parting and how there are remnants left behind, whether the parting is due to a father's death, lingering leaves, or a trailing steamer. The fact that there are things left behind catches Larkin unaware and he cries as he ponders, never seeing a particular person again, when once he thought there was indifference.

"Last Will and Testament" is a humorous piece written to the students who will follow Larkin and his friends as they leave university. Larkin, along with his good friend Bernard Noël Hughes, bequeath a number of things to their friends and to those students they have not yet met. The first things to be given away are Larkin's and Hughes' corporeal remains so that they might be used in science class for dissection, with special attention being shown to the viscera. The only exception to this bequest is that their ears be left to the Musical Society. To further the new students' knowledge the men bequeath their books, along with their "witty marginal notes." To the staff, and they leave a good laugh along with a copy of Rudyard Kipling's "If" to hang on the office wall. There are various things left to the library and the English master, the German master, and the art master. The scholarships that were never won are left to those who need support. Several staff members and members of the administration are mentioned by name, along with their bequests. All received something except for one to whom Larkin writes, "And Mr. H.B. Gould we leave... alone." To one person is left the candle that can be burned at either end without ill effect. Finally, the students leave behind The Coventrian, the paper that they had been so devoted to, in hopes that one might succeed where they did not.

"The house on the edge of the serious wood" is written much like a children's nursery rhyme, even more so that the work titled, "Nursery Tale." It is a story of the house on the edge of the wood and the animals' reaction as someone approaches; how they attempt to protect themselves from the acts of a stranger but running away or pretending to be dead.

"May Weather" contains a clever metaphor regarding an awkward dress rehearsal held by May in an attempt to prepare itself for summer.

A dreamlike quality can be found in the poem titled, "Mythological Introduction." Larkin speaks of a girl laying on the grass holding her arms out for love. The girl says that she is the whitest cloud in the sky and the crossroads of the senses, home to the four seasons. However, when the girl gets up from the grass, the earth had devoured her side.

"The School in August" tells of an empty place that holds echoes of children and the sunbeams. There is no longer anyone in the sewing class and the piano is quiet and still. All notices have been taken away and score books stored, and even the desks are hollow and covered with dust.

Larkin continues with his theme of night into morning with the two poems titled "The Moon is Full Tonight" and The Horns of the Morning." There is a certain silence and

solitude in the night until the moon shines full. That silence leaves on the horns of the morning, when the earth becomes brilliant with the sun.

There are several poems that speak of loneliness, such as "Love, We Must Part Now," "Morning has Spread Again," "Dawn," and "Kick up the fire and let the flames break loose."

"Night-Music" is a poem dedicated to the stillness of the night, and the noise of those things not often heard in the day. Larkin talks about the sounds made by the rising wind, the voice of the black poplar, the stars, and streams.

There are several poems dedicated to sailing and the sea, such as "The North Ship: Legend," "Songs: 65° N," "70° N: Fortunetelling," "75° N: Blizzard" and "Above 80° N." In these poems Larkin talks about ships on the sea starting off together but then parting to go on their own way, in various directions and into things that each one meets along the way. "Songs: 65° N" talks about a recurring bad dream from which Larkin wakes with night terrors. There are many strange sights being seen along these voyages that may be found in ancient mythology, such as a woman with 10 claws.

## Section 5 Analysis

The poems chosen for this section, "The Early Poems 1938-45," show a sense of innocence that is no longer apparent in Larkin's later works. None of the work is particularly innocent as it may be equated with naivety; rather, it is not as cynical as the later works.

Larkin addresses a wider variety of topics in The Early Poems 1938-45, whereas the later poems were more focused on certain topics, such as death and regret. In the earlier poems, there was a lot that Larkin wanted to say but never had the opportunity to do so, at least not with an audience who was likely to listen.

There are several poems dedicated to the seasons. In the later works, the poems often include double entendre or contain metaphors that can easily be linked to the various aspects of the seasons, such as falling leaves acting as a metaphor for death. In the earlier works, the tributes to the seasons focus more on the actual season and the changes that are brought about in nature as the year progresses. Larkin has a great sense of observation and is able to tie together the physical changes of temperature and weather to the emotional changes in the landscape as well as in the people who are witnessing the changes.

There are many poems about death and loneliness in this section, but they are not as prevalent or as dark as the ones contained in the later work. The references to death in this section are more consistent with a broken heart or death of an ideal or emotion rather than the physical death of the body.

Larkin shows the same type of humor in this section, from the ability to be clever to the pleasure of being facetious. The metaphor used in "May Weather" of the month of May

having worked hard to prepare for the performance of ushering in summer is clever. Larkin is able to impart the nervousness behind a dress rehearsal, the awkwardness of not being fully prepared, and the commitment to move forward regardless.

There is a great deal of humor shown in "Last Will and Testament." Larkin wrote the poem with his good friend and university friend Bernard Noel Hughes. The poem has many elements that give away the age of the young men and is at times, silly as well as being delightful and funny. The poem was undoubtedly published in The Coventrian, the school newspaper, to the delight of fellow students, faculty, and staff.

# Characters

## Philip Larkinappears in All

Philip Larkin (1922 - 1985) was an English novelist, poet, jazz critic, and university librarian. Born in Coventry, in the West Midlands of England, Larkin was schooled at the King Henry VIII School in Coventry. During World War II, Larkin was rejected for service in the military and took the opportunity to attend St John's College at Oxford, to pursue a degree in English language and literature.

Larkin met Kingsley Amis at Oxford, a man who became a lifelong friend and who appears frequently in Larkin's letters. After graduating from Oxford, Larkin went to work as a municipal librarian in Wellington, Shropshire. Larkin went on to become the assistant librarian at University College in Leicester, sub-librarian at Queen's University in Belfast, and then in 1955, the poet became the librarian at the University of Hull, where Larkin remained until his death in 1985.

Larkin's first notable work was "The Less Deceived," published in 1955. The poet also realized success with his next two works, "The Whitsun Weddings" published in 1964, and "High Windows" published in 1974.

Unlike many poets, Larkin received a good deal of notoriety for his work while he was still alive. After the death of the English Poet Laureate John Betjeman, Larkin was presented with the honor but declined, saying that his work was not meaningful enough.

Larkin continues to receive accolades for his work, often referred to as the "greatest poet in the latter half of the twentieth century." In 2003 the Poetry Book Society honored Larkin as "the nation's best-loved poet," and in 2008 Larkin was named as "the greatest post-war writer" by The (London) Times.

## Charles Causleyappears in Dear CHARLES, My Muse, Asleep or Dead

Charles Causley (1917-2003) was an English writer and poet from Cornwall. Causley's work is often complimented for its base in Christianity, directness, and many associations with his Cornish heritage. These characteristics plus Causley's use of simplicity is one of the reasons he so heavily influenced other English writers and poets, including Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, and Ted Hughes, a writer who was also Causley's closest friend. These men, along with a group of select British poets would later be called upon to publish a book of poems for Causley's 65th birthday as a tribute.

Professionally, Causley started at age sixteen, forced to go to work due to his father's death. Later, Causley joined the Navy and served as a coder in World War II. The poet's first collection of poems was published in 1951 and included a well received poem titled

"Song of the Dying Gunner A.A.1." The next collection was published in 1953 and Causley continued to publish until his death in 2003.

Causley also taught at a school in Launceston in the UK. The poet was rather self-contained and rarely left Launceston although he did so when required. The longest period spent away from home was when Causley was invited, on two occasions, to act as a visiting Fellow at the University of Western Australia in Perth.

Causley's awards include a 1958 Fellowship in the Royal Society of Literature; in 1967, Causley was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry; and in 2000, the poet was awarded with the title of Companion of Literature by the Royal Society of Literature.

## Sidney Bechetappears in For Sidney Bechet

Sidney Bechet - Jazz saxophone player and idol to Larkin

## Arnoldappears in Self's the Man

Arnold - character in "Self's the Man" who has given up all of his personal freedom to care for his family.

## C.G.B.appears in He Hears That His Beloved Has Become Engaged

C.G.B. - Man who must learn to come to grips with the fact that his beloved has been engaged to another man.

## Franz Kafkaappears in The Literary World

Franz Kafka - German philosopher and author who appears in Part I of "The Literary World."

## Mrs. Alfred Tennysonappears in The Literary World

Mrs. Alfred Tennyson - Mrs. Tennyson is featured in Part II of "The Literary World" as one who takes care of everything for her husband so that he may do nothing but write.

## Mr. Bleaneyappears in Mr. Bleaney

Mr. Bleaney - Main character in the poem about a man who had rented a flat before Larkin.

## Jake Balokowskyappears in Posterity

Jake Balokowsky - Larkin's biographer and educator.

## Rosemaryappears in Femmes Damnees

Rosemary - One of the women mentioned in "Femmes Damnees."

# Objects/Places

## Englandappears in The Whitsun Weddings, , An Arundel Tomb, Homage to the Gover

Philip Larkin was born in England, in the town of Coventry, which is located in now what is known as the Western Midlands. Growing up in a traditional English household offered Larkin the opportunity to study and read although there was a great deal of isolation involved in the poet's childhood.

Upon graduating from secondary school, Larkin was refused for military service and instead, stayed in England to study at St John's College at Oxford. While at Oxford, Larkin studied English literature and language.

After graduating from Oxford, Larkin went to work as a municipal librarian in Wellington, Shropshire. Larkin went on to become the assistant librarian at University College in Leicester, sub-librarian at Queen's University in Belfast, and then in 1955, the poet became the librarian at the University of Hull, where Larkin remained until his death in 1985.

Although Larkin was afforded many opportunities to travel throughout the UK as well as internationally, the poet had little or no desire to leave his native country, or even the town in which he lived. Many considered Larkin to be an isolationist, although he was not unfriendly.

There were times in later years when Larkin did venture from England. There were several trips to Ireland, as well as two separate trips to Perth, Australia, where Larkin was a visiting Fellow at the University of Western Australia.

## Irelandappears in Dublinesque, Church Going

Although Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom, many of its customs and traditions are quite different than those in Britain, a fact on which Larkin comments in some of his work. Larkin seemed to like Ireland. In the poetry, the author refers to the ancient streets and the quaintness of the towns. This can be seen in "Dublinesque," where Larkin describes to people and their attire as they walk down the stucco streets of the city.

Larkin comments on the ancient aspects of the country, from the funereal customs mentioned in "Dublinesque" to the artifacts and spirits of those who once attended the ancient church in "Church Going."

The attitudes of the Irish are typically seen as jovial and yet reverent, an unusual combination. Larkin is surprised by the procession in the funeral scene, each person following the hearse wears a degree of sadness with their finery, yet there is also a

sense of celebration of the life of the deceased, something that is not commonly seen in Britain.

## New Orleansappears in To Sidney Bechet

New Orleans is the American home to jazz and often included performances by world class musicians including saxophonist Sidney Bechet.

## Air-Stationappears in Autobiography at an Air-Station

Air-Station - Location in which Larkin and other passengers are forced to wait for an undisclosed amount of time due to a plane delay.

## Cornwallappears in Dear CHARLES, My Muse, Asleep or Dead

Cornwall - Home to Charles Causley.

## Prestatynappears in Sunny Prestatyn

Prestatyn- Sunny, tropical location being advertised on the defaced billboard.

## The Seaappears in I am Washed Upon a Rock, The Wave Sings Because it is Moving

The sea is a popular topic with Larkin, as the characteristics of the turbulent water offer many poetic elements.

## Universityappears in Schoolmaster, Poem About Oxford

University - Throughout the poet's life, he worked at several universities which served as an inspiration for several poems.

## Royal Station Hotelappears in Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel

Royal Station Hotel - Name of the isolated and lonely hotel used in "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel."

## Dublinappears in Dublinesque

Site of "Dublinesque" where the poet witnesses a funeral.

# Themes

## Youth

The poems in Collected Poems by Philip Larkin often referred to youth, behaviors, impressions, freedom, and the loss of youth as it regards the aging process. Larkin begins to show disappointment and regret regarding his age in the poems "On Being Twenty-Six," "Maturity," and "At Thirty-One When Some are Rich." In the first poem, although Larkin is only 26 years old, it appears that he feels as if the bloom of youth has faded.

Additionally, there are several problems where Larkin is envious of the people younger than he, from those who are experiencing their first loves to students who remind Larkin of his long gone university days. The poet yearns for those carefree times and is saddened by being forced to live the life of an adult, and the loss of freedom, and lack of responsibility.

This ideal of youth is somewhat contradictory for Larkin, who continues to work as a librarian at the University, while still engaging in the same attitudes as he did when he was younger. This can be seen mostly in the various and numerous relationships with women and the inability to accept the responsibility off a committed relationship.

## Seasons

Philip Larkin seems to have a great fondness for writing about the seasons, particularly autumn. There are poems dedicated to summer, the heat of August, clothes on the line, and thunderstorms. Examples of Larkin's view of summer can be seen in poems such as "Mother, Summer, I" and "Midsummer Night 1940."

There are poems dedicated to spring, with rain showers, new greenery, the freshness of the season, the sense of rebirth and newness. An example of a poem dedicated to spring can be seen in "Spring," and "May Weather."

There are also poems and dedicated to winter, such as "Thaw," and "Winter Nocturne."

The most discussed season is autumn. Philip Larkin relates his mother's nervousness about the heat and storms of summer and the comfort that autumn brings. With autumn comes a sense of routine and normalcy that finally allows the poet's mother to relax.

Autumn is also seen as an end in many ways. The season can be seen as an end to summer and freedom from school and responsibilities; the end to lush greenery and warm weather. There are also metaphors used in relation to death - the dying leaves in the coming of winter.

Although the poet may view autumn as a time of ending, it is not altogether melancholy as he seems to be able to find some good in all seasons, recognizing their purpose.

Good examples of Larkin's view of autumn can be seen in "Autumn" and "Now the Leaves Suddenly Lose Strength."

## The UK

As a citizen of the UK, Philip Larkin has some distinctly European attitudes regarding behavior and outlook. This can be seen in a variety of poems including "The Locals Snivel Through the Fields," "An Arundel Tomb," "The Whitsun weddings" and "Dublinesque."

In some ways the European attitudes are much more liberal than in other parts of the world. This can be seen in "Administration," where Larkin fulfills his responsibilities as librarian by telling some girls to pull up their knee socks while secretly wishing he could tell other girls to pull their pants down.

Even Larkin finds some customs of more foreign parts of the UK to be unusual. This can be seen in the funeral scene in the poem Dublinesque." The funeral in this particular poem is quite different in that people are less solemn than they would be in Britain. Although there are elements of great sadness, there is also what Larkin refers to as "an air of great friendliness." People follow the hearse down the streets dressed in elaborate finery but they are also singing, revealing evidence of the fondness for the deceased.

There are also some references to the British government as can be seen in the poem's "Homage to a Government," "When the Russian Tanks Roll Westward," and "Party Politics."

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view used in the collected poems of Philip Larkin changes from first person to third person omniscient, depending on the topic. The first person is more personal and subjective and is used mainly when Larkin is describing his own feelings and experiences. A good example of the first person can be seen in "Mother, Summer, I," "To My Wife," and "I Remember, I Remember."

An example of Larkin's poetry that uses first person from another person's perspective is "Deep Analysis." In this poem Larkin takes on the persona of a woman who has been rejected and does not understand why the man of her dreams has chosen to bestow his affections on another. The use of first person in this instance is more effective than if the poet had used a third person omniscient since most of the observations and emotions are internal.

The poems written in third person omniscient tend to be those of observation of the seasons, behaviors of others, or inanimate objects. Good examples of these problems include, "Many Famous People Have Trod," "Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel," and "The Large Cool Store." In the polls that use third person omniscient, the poet has the ability to relay to the reader the complete picture, rather than the single vision or impressions reviewed by one person.

## Setting

The settings used throughout Collected Poems by Philip Larkin are typically located somewhere in the United Kingdom. There are some exceptions, such as the poem "To Sidney Bechet," in which Larkin refers to New Orleans, the city which some people consider to be the center of jazz.

There are many poems set in or around various universities in the UK he many of which employed Larkin during his career as a librarian. Some of these settings can be seen in "Administration," "The School in August," and Schoolmaster."

Although Larkin was known for not venturing far from the town in which he lived there are references to various places in Ireland. The poet claimed that there were several customs and behaviors that seemed exceptionally foreign, which was surprising to him. Examples of some of these poems are "Church Going" and "Dublinesque."

There are also a significant portion of the poems that do not name specific locations, only generalized references, such as the town, the sea, through a window, and other sites that could be transferred from nearly any place.

## Language and Meaning

Philip Larkin was a lover of literature, particularly poetry written by authors such as W.H. Auden and Charles Causley. The author's devotion, along with his formal university training in English literature and language, formed the basis of the nature of Larkin's work. Although the author had studied classic poetry as well, the more modern methods appealed to him, which is obvious in the forms and words he chose to represent his work.

The Language and Meaning in Collected Poems by Philip Larkin is straightforward and simple. There are only rare occasions when the poet falls back on traditional poetic vernacular. Instead, Larkin is much more of a modern poet, speaking plainly and leaving little room for excessive interpretation.

The influence of poet Charles Causley can be seen in Larkin's use of simple statement. Causley was well known for stating things so simply that many often incorrectly categorized the poet's work for adults as part of the body of work written for children. The work is not childish by any means but can be easily understood even by those who do not study poetry as a general rule.

Additionally, the language used by Larkin is straightforward and not filled with flowery sentiment. There is a well executed use of descriptive words that make the work rise above the ordinary. The words used by Larkin show the extent of his education and academic training while not coming across as condescending or patronizing. Even the simplest poems offer the preferred absence of ordinary words, which makes the reading all the more pleasurable.

## Structure

Collected Poems by Philip Larkin is a book of poetry that is comprised of 311 pages. There are two sections to the book: Poems 1946-83 and Early Poems 1938-45.

The first section, Poems 1946-83, is 221 pages in length. The second section, Early Poems 1938-45, is 86 pages in length. The average length of the two sections is 154 pages in length.

There are 172 poems contained in the first section, Poems 1946-83. The shortest poem is 1 page in length; the longest poem is 5 pages in length. The average length of the poems in section one is 1 page.

There are 70 poems in the second section, Early Poems 1938-45. The shortest poem is 1 page in length; the longest poem is 5 pages in length. The average length of the poems in section two is 1 page.

There is no clear division or pattern to the order of the poems beyond the separation of the early poems and the more modern poems. The poems in each section are not

separated by date, topic, location, or point of view. Although it might be more streamlined if the topics or dates were separated by section, the structure would have been less effective and the poems less enjoyable if the reader was forced to read several poems in a row about a particular subject.

# Quotes

"Death is a cloud alone in the sky with the sun."
Pg. 6

"How easily I disperse the scolding of snow."
Pg. 19

"Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives."
Pg. 32

"Give me a thrill, says the reader, give me a kick; I don't care how you succeed, or what subject you pick."
Pg. 34

"No one can tie you down or set you free."
Pg. 36

"Always too eager for the future, we pick up bad habits of expectancy."
Pg. 52

"Seeds of light were sown on the failure of evening."
Pg.60

"Where can I turn except a way, knowing myself outdistanced, out-invented?"
Pg. 96

"Only the young can be alone, freely."
Pg. 182

"Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms inside your head, and people in them, acting."
Pg. 196

"Memories strike home, like slaps in the face."
Pg. 231

"But there are some who mutter: 'Joy is for the simple or the great to feel, neither of which we are.'"
Pg. 237

"Who can confront the instantaneous grief of being alone?"
Pg. 285

"So every journey that I make leads me, as in the story he was led, to some new ambush, to some fresh mistake"
Pg. 289

# Topics for Discussion

Do you see a significant difference in Larkin's early works opposed to those written shortly before he died? Explain.

Which poems do you find more aesthetically pleasing, those written in formal structure, as prose or free verse?

Do you think Larkin's poems are more suited to people, objects, or typical observations? Explain.

Is the influence of Charles Causley evident in Larkin's simplistic poems? Discuss.

Why do you think Larkin was so reluctant to leave the comfort of the university towns when he easily could have undertaken extensive travel?

How do the modern poems involving sex and out dated attitudes mesh with the more formal works?

Larkin writes many poems about relationships with various women. Do you think the lack of longevity in his relationships has anything to do with the poet's nature as an internally focused, highly celebrated poet?