

AMBULANCES BY PHILIP LARKIN


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AMBULANCES

- 'Ambulances' was completed in January 1961 and published in Philip Larkin's third major collection, *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964).
- Main Theme : Death

LARKIN'S MAJOR THEMES

- Religion
- Meloncholy
- Death
- Pessimism
- Alienation
- Realism
- Isolation
- Love
- Nature
- TmeBoredom
- Sex

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- 'Ambulances' is an exploration of the pervading sense of death that occurs in constrained societies; in cities, especially, death is ever-present due to the differing ages of the population, the inherent risk of city life, and other factors. Although nowadays, death is far less common than it was in, say, the Medieval era, there is still a stigma and a fear surrounding the question of death, and it is perhaps this reason that led Larkin to exploring it in poetry.

STANZA 1

- From the opening stanza of the poem, Larkin makes a point of showing how elite, almost, ambulances are – they are ‘closed like confessionals’, implying a privacy and a divinity to an ambulance, and indeed, to death itself; as vehicles, they are hardly considered sacred, but for Larkin, in this moment, they are. There is something mysterious and pervasive about an ambulance, and the way Larkin writes about it puts it apart from everything else – it ‘threads / loud noons of cities, giving back / none of the glances they absorb’, and seems to be almost floating along the road, never quite touching the living population.

STANZA 2

- The moment of death is captured outside of the viewer; it is transformed through the eyes of ‘children strewn on steps or road, / Or women coming from the shops’, and because it has suddenly become a sideshow, it contrasts and conflicts with the previous stanza, where the ambulance was written about as a ‘confessional’. Although death is, itself, a very private moment, there are always those on the fringe edges that catch sight of it, and stand, and gawk.
- Notice the dehumanization of the word ‘it’, and how Larkin focuses not on the actual corpse, but on the stretcher, always skirting around the issue of death, never quite approaching it head on.

STANZA 3


- The 'solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do', writes Larkin. For Larkin, at least in this stanza, he questions why we bother doing the things we do; there is no point to life, as we will all wind up dead and in the ground at the end of it, sooner or later. However, Larkin's point is that this is not something known to people, and it is only when we are witness or around death that it occurs to us that there is an end to life, an end to existence, there is a blank nothingness to follow (something that Larkin was particularly afraid of) our lives.

STANZA 4

- However, Larkin does not merely write that life ends, and there is nothing after; he first points out what the end of life means – ‘the unique random blend / of families and fashions’. At the end of life, that is all that is left of a person: their family, and their habits, their memories strewn across a generation or two. It could be argued that there is not, in fact, any sort of emptiness, however this is not a point that Larkin explores – it is not something that the dead person understands, or knows, after they are gone, and this is specifically about death in all its self-centered application; death as an experience only for the deceased, and not for the people who struggle on afterwards.

STANZA 5

- In the final stanza, Larkin finally explains what death is: ‘the exchange of love to lie / unreachable inside a room’; even the power of love, and life, and family, cannot push death aside, and it is the ultimate fate of man to die. Here, the ambulance is referenced again , in ‘the traffic parks to let go by’; it is the room that puts the people who have died ‘unreachable’ to all the things that they lived for; however, this is not the only point that the ambulance makes.

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- Larkin references it as a kind of omen, stating that it ‘brings closer what is left to come, / And dulls to distance all we are.’ As a reminder of death, the ambulance reminds us all that we are not immortal, and we will not survive forever.
 - The final stanza also points out that every brush with death we experience – however indistinct – further isolates us, makes us introspective, and forces us to ruminate on our own experiences, our own lives, our own fragile existence.