**Philip Larkin**

**Biography**

Philip Larkin was born in Coventry in 1922 and died in Hull in 1985. He worked in university libraries for most of his adult life, holding the post of chief librarian at the University of Hull from 1955. He also wrote poetry of a very high quality and is generally acknowledged as being one of Britain's greatest poets of the 20th century.

He had a complex personality and outlook on life, in which self-deprecation, pessimism and mockery combined with more positive and hopeful attitudes. In a 1972 radio interview he stated that "Somebody once said that the great thing is not to be different from other people but to be different from yourself", and many "different people" can be discerned in Larkin's poems, sometimes even within the same poem.

Philip Arthur Larkin was born on August 9, 1922, in Coventry. He was the second child, and only son, of Sydney and Eva Larkin. Sydney Larkin was City Treasurer between the years 1922-44. Larkin’s sister, some ten years his senior, was called Catherine, but was known as Kitty.

He attended the City’s King Henry VIII School between 1930 and 1940, and made regular contributions to the school magazine, The Coventrian, which, between 1939 and 1940, he also helped to edit .

After leaving King Henry VIII, he went to St. John’s College, Oxford, and despite the war (Larkin had failed his army medical because of his poor eyesight), was able to complete his degree without interruption, graduating in 1943 with First Class Honours in English. His closest friends at Oxford were Kingsley Amis and Bruce Montgomery.

The first of his poems to be published in a national weekly was ‘Ultimatum’, which appeared in the Listener, November 28, 1940. Then in June 1943, three of his poems were published in Oxford Poetry (1942-43) . These were ‘A Stone Church Damaged By A Bomb’, ‘Mythological Introduction’, and ‘I dreamed of an out-thrust arm of land’.

After graduating, Larkin lived with his parents for a while, before being appointed Librarian at Wellington, Shropshire, in November of 1943. Here, he studied to qualify as a professional librarian, but continued to write and publish. In 1945, ten of his poems, which later that year would be included in The North Ship, appeared in Poetry from Oxford in Wartime.

Two novels, Jill and A Girl in Winter were published in 1946 and 1947 respectively.

In 1946, Larkin became assistant Librarian at the University College of Leicester. He completed his professional studies and became an Associate of the Library Association in 1949. In October 1950, he became Sub-Librarian at Queen’s University, Belfast. It was in Belfast that he applied fresh vigour to his poetry activities, and, in 1951, had a small collection, XX Poems, privately printed in an edition of 100 copies. Also, in 1954, the Fantasy Press published a pamphlet containing five of his poems. The Marvell Press, based in Hessle, near Hull, published ‘Toads’ and ‘Poetry of departures’ in Listen. It would be the Marvell Press that published his next collection The Less Deceived.

Larkin took up the position of Librarian at the University of Hull on March 21, 1955, and it was in October of that year that The Less Deceived was published. It was this collection that would be the foundation of his reputation as one of the foremost figures in 20th Century poetry.

It wasn’t until 1964 that his next collection, The Whitsun Weddings was published. Again, the collection was well received, and widely acclaimed, and the following year, Larkin was awarded the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry.

It was during the years 1961-71 that Larkin contributed monthly reviews of jazz recordings for the Daily Telegraph, and these reviews were brought together and published in 1970 under the title All What Jazz: a record diary 1961-1968. He also edited the Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse, which was published in 1973.

His last collection High Windows was published in 1974, and confirmed him as one of the finest poets in English Literary history. ‘Aubade’, his last great poem, was published in The Times Literary Supplement in December 1977. If this had been the only poem Larkin had ever written, his place in English poetry would still be secure.

A collection of his essays and reviews was published in November 1983 as Required Writing: miscellaneous pieces 1955-1982, and won the W.H. Smith Literary Award for 1984.

Larkin received many awards in recognition of his writing, especially in his later years. In 1975 he was awarded the CBE, and in 1976 was given the German Shakespeare-Pries. He chaired the Booker Prize Panel in 1977, was made Companion of Literature in 1978, and served on the Literature Panel of the Arts between 1980 and 1982. He was made an Honorary Fellow of the Library Association in 1980. In 1982 the University of Hull made him a Professor.

In 1984 he received an honorary D.Litt. from Oxford University, and was elected to the Board of the British Library. In December of 1984 he was offered the chance to succeed Sir John Betjeman as Poet Laureate but declined, being unwilling to accept the high public profile and associated media attention of the position.

In mid 1985 Larkin was admitted to hospital with an illness in his throat, and on June 11 an operation was carried out to remove his oesophagus. His health was deteriorating, and when he was awarded the much prized Order of the Companion of Honour he was unable, because of ill health, to attend the investiture, which was due to take place at Buckingham Palace on November 25. He received the official notification courtesy of the Royal Mail.

Philip Larkin died of cancer at 1.24 a.m. on Monday December 2 1985. He was 63 years old.

**High Windows**

"High Windows" is a case in point. It is the title poem of his third (and final) collection, published in 1974. He wrote relatively little poetry after this time, certainly not enough for another collection, and so the poems in this book can be seen as being as close to the "definitive" Larkin as is possible, given that it is not easy to arrive at a consensus as to what that definition might be.

The poem comprises five four-line stanzas in which there is rhyming of a sort; the first two stanzas rhyme (or half-rhyme) the second and fourth lines, but the other three have an ABAB pattern. However, the rhyming is almost casual (with a number of half-rhymes such as "back/dark" and "glass/endless") and is not relied upon to provide the poem's structure.

In terms of grammar, the poem consists of four sentences of varying lengths, split between the stanzas such that the final lines of each of the first four stanzas are continuous with the first lines of the next. The poem therefore reads like a single thought process, starting with a bold (and possibly shocking) statement and ending with something much more profound. It runs as follows:

*When I see a couple of kids*

*And guess he's f\*\*king her and she's*

*Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,*

*I know this is paradise*

*Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives --*

*Bonds and gestures pushed to one side*

*Like an outdated combine harvester,*

*And everyone young going down the long slide*

*To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if*

*Anyone looked at me, forty years back,*

*And thought, That'll be the life;*

*No God any more, or sweating in the dark*

*About hell and that, or having to hide*

*What you think of the priest. He*

*And his lot will all go down the long slide*

*Like free bloody birds. And immediately*

*Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:*

*The sun-comprehending glass,*

*And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows*

*Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.*

The poem was written in 1967, when Larkin was 45 years old and in charge of a large university library. He was therefore surrounded at his place of work by large numbers of students in their late teens and early twenties, at the height of the "swinging sixties" when young people had learned to express themselves fearlessly and not to be embarrassed by their sexual feelings for each other.

Larkin could hardly fail to be aware of the "bonds and gestures pushed to one side", but the paradise in question is not that of the young couple but the dream of "everyone old", himself included. He regrets that he could not have behaved in this way when he was younger, due to the unavailability of modern birth control methods, and he envies the modern generation their sexual liberation. He uses the image of a fairground "long slide" to picture the one-way ride to endless happiness that this is bringing "everyone young".

Larkin then throws the thought process backwards to imagine what the generation before his would have thought of his own prospect of liberation from constraint. However, this is expressed not in sexual but religious terms. It is release from fear of eternal damnation and offending the priesthood that he sees as their abiding desire, expressed in terms of envy of the next generation who will have the liberty that is denied to them.

The image of the long slide is used again as the means to achieve freedom. Once on the slide the desired outcome is inevitable, and Larkin reverses the traditional image of sliding downwards to perdition by emphasising that freedom must lie at its base, as does happiness for the generation that Larkin envies.

However, the final stanza brings all this to a halt in a rather startling way. The natural conclusion to the two scenarios that Larkin has offered would be the suggestion that every generation, going back to time immemorial, has thrown off the shackles of its parents and found liberty by sliding away from its constraints. But the image that Larkin has of his own situation is that the promise of godless and hell-less freedom has not been achieved. Instead, his thoughts turn to the "high windows" of a church or cathedral where he is still on the inside with the sunlight shining down on him. The promised freedom has therefore been an illusion.

The poem ends with a despairing recognition that there is no ultimate freedom. The young couple might hope for endless happiness, but what is endless is the "deep blue air" that "shows nothing, and is nowhere". It is the windows that are "sun-comprehending" and not people with their mortal longings.

By making "High Windows" the title poem of his collection, Larkin makes the point that the individual can never have what he or she ultimately wants, because they can never know what that is. Just as freedom from religion is not the answer, neither is 1960s "free love" and, Larkin implies, the same will apply to every imagined desire of future generations.

**Symbols**

Windows separate Larkin from the rest of the world. He stands in front of windows and watches the world pass him by. He observes the world through the window of a train in "The Whitsun Weddings" (1965) and watches his neighbor through his own window in "Love Again" (1979). Larkin is physically separate from the subject he describes in each of these instances. He longs to be near the subject but the clear glass of the window creates a barrier. His psychological sense of being disconnected and cut off from the world manifests as a physical object. Larkin's perspective on the outside world is muted and hidden behind glass and the windows become symbols of this feeling of detachment.

Larkin is separated from the world by windows but he still cannot tear himself away from them. His windows are typically clear and unimpeded. They provide him with a safe, secure place from which to cast an objective eye over everything. Larkin may be physically separate from the subjects of his poems but he believes that he sees them with real clarity. The window provides some degree of protection against the weather or against being seen. The sexual desire with which he views his neighbor in "Love Again" is almost voyeuristic but he is confident that he will not be caught. Larkin would not be able to do the same if the window was not creating his separation from society.

The isolation invoked by the window also provides a barrier from pain or criticism. Larkin feels safer and more able to express himself honestly when placed behind the glass. The windows then become symbols of the benefits Larkin derives from his social isolation. The windows symbolically demonstrate the honesty with which he can treat the world when he knows he is not connected to it.

Windows are such a powerful image in the work of Philip Larkin that he named an entire collection after them. High Windows (1974) is a collection that features a poem titled "High Windows." The windows in this poem are different to the isolating, protecting windows from other works. These windows are specifically described as high. They are out of reach and almost transcendent. They symbolize the vast, great unknown that Larkin considers in the poem. They show him the "deep blue air" and the endless sky behind. The symbolic meaning of these high windows is different to the low windows. The low windows are disconnected from human society and the high windows hint at some greater, more abstract unknown. Larkin is not a religious or a spiritual man but questions about his mortality or legacy force him to consider the prospect of the unknowability of the universe. The high windows symbolize his occasional desire to engage with such transcendent ideas even if he does not believe in them

**The Explosion**

*On the day of the explosion*

*Shadows pointed towards the pithead:*

*In the sun the slagheap slept.*

*Down the lane came men in pitboots*

*Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke,*

*Shouldering off the freshened silence.*

*One chased after rabbits; lost them;*

*Came back with a nest of lark's eggs;*

*Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.*

*So they passed in beards and moleskins,*

*Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter,*

*Through the tall gates standing open.*

*At noon, there came a tremor; cows*

*Stopped chewing for a second; sun,*

*Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed.*

*The dead go on before us, they*

*Are sitting in God's house in comfort,*

*We shall see them face to face -*

*Plain as lettering in the chapels*

*It was said, and for a second*

*Wives saw men of the explosion*

*Larger than in life they managed -*

*Gold as on a coin, or walking*

*Somehow from the sun towards them,*

*One showing the eggs unbroken.*

One of the most dangerous occupations in the world, and throughout history, is that of the coal miner. When all goes well, the lingering certainty of respiratory disease looms in the background, a natural consequence of digging miles into the earth to dredge up the black substance that has heated homes for centuries. When all does not go well, death comes either instantly to those near the explosion that constitutes a daily hazard of mining coal, or slowly to those trapped below ground by the avalanche caused by the explosion. Black Lung disease (Pneumoconiosis, caused by inhaling coal dust) is a particularly unpleasant cause of death. Philip Larkin’s poem “The Explosion,” inspired by a documentary he viewed on a real-life coal mine disaster, references that common side effect of working in the mines: Down the lane came men in pitboots/Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke . . .” The more prevalent cause of a miner’s downfall, as clearly suggested in the title, however, is the ever-present threat of an explosion caused by the inadvertent rupture of a methane gas repository. So sudden and violent is the explosion, that there is little or no warning, which maximizes the number of dead. Larkin’s poem captures the suddenness of these occurrences by leading the reader through two abrupt transitions. The first transition involves the routine depiction of the miners heading to work down the long, dark mine shaft, followed by the muffled sounds of the explosion:

*So they passed in beards and moleskins,*

*Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter,*

*Through the tall gates standing open.*

*At noon, there came a tremor; cows*

*Stopped chewing for a second; sun,*

*Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed.*

Larkin then, switching for this stanza alone to a different font or print type, delivers his second transition, the consequences of the “tremor”:

*The dead go on before us, they*

*Are sitting in God’s house in comfort,*

*We shall see them face to face -*

That quickly, untold numbers of miners are dead, their widows and children left alone and destitute. Larkin has succinctly acknowledged and immortalized the sacrifice of individuals who confronted this danger every day for minimal compensation. He does not, however, suggest that the soul has perished with the body, and his poem clearly reflects a need to believe that the suddenness with which these lives were taken has not precluded a further meeting among loved ones lost. The scene shifts to a chapel where a memorial service has taken place, and during which the fallen are remembered as a unit or a team working as one and assuming their place in another world, forever together:

*It was said, and for a second*

*Wives saw men of the explosion*

*Larger than in life they managed -*

*Gold as on a coin, or walking*

*Somehow from the sun towards them,*

Philip Larkin was British. The history of coal mining in Great Britain is one of perpetual economic servitude in which one generation follows the next down the mines, opportunities for advancement or alternative means of sustenance minimal at best. If one grows up in a mining town, one is expected to spend one’s life a miner. Such cultures spawn a sense of camaraderie and unity that is vital to the safest possible operation of the mine, so minimal is the room for error. “Gold as on a coin” suggests the value of these lives and the commonality among their communities.

Early in his poem, Larkin refers to a “nest of lark’s eggs.” The meaning of this reference is unclear until one reaches the end of the poem, and contemplates the author’s meaning with regard to the stanza that ends “Somehow from the sun towards them . . .” Again, the unity of the miners is recognized, both in life and in death. Eggs come in bunches, and are obviously fragile. Miners work as a team, each dependent upon the other, in the confined spaces in which eggs are laid (and subsequently packaged). The poem ends with this line: “One showing the eggs unbroken.” The miners return to their wives in a spiritual sense, together and unbroken. The fragility of life has not deprived them of the strength of their convictions or of the formidability of their bond

***Forms and Devices***

“The Explosion” is written in trochaic tetrameter without rhyme, both of which are very unusual in the poetry of Larkin, who used the iambic meter, usually pentameter and hexameter, and brilliant rhyme. There must have been something in the event and his treatment of it that insisted on this meter. Perhaps it was the transformation of very ordinary workers into people on a higher plane that demanded he abandon his usual metrical practice. Trochaic tetrameter does have a parallel in American literature: It is the meter that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow used in The Song of Hiawatha (1855). Larkin does not fall into the monotone chant that Longfellow did, but the meter does have a propulsive effect as it moves from the announcement of the event to its occurrence and consequences. Larkin does use the traditional sound patterns such as alliteration: “In the sun the slagheap slept.” The miners are also portrayed predominantly through the use of verbs: “One chased after rabbits; lost them;/ Came back with a nest of lark’s eggs;/ Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.”

There is also some significant imagery in the poem. For example, the first tercet contrasts the shadows that “pointed” to the pithead with the sun that “slept” on the slagheap. The slagheap is also an indicator of the world with which the poem deals: a mining community with its own special landscape. The workers are also defined with a few class-specific images: They wear “pitboots,” their talk is “oath-edged,” and they cough “pipe-smoke.” The men, unaccustomed to talk, are described as “Shouldering off the freshened silence.” It is a gesture that says more than words about the type of people these workers are. They speak with their bodies to relieve the silence.

There is an interesting shift in diction, tense, and speaker in the sixth tercet, which is presented in the formal and resounding language of the preacher in a church or, more likely, a chapel. The preacher uses the future tense, while the wives use a past tense that reunites them with their men. This formal language is also contrasted with the simpler words ascribed to the wives of the dead men, and the passage uses a significant metaphor. The dead miners are “Gold as on a coin, or walking/ Somehow from the sun” toward their wives. The metaphor defines the transformation of the miners from ordinary working men to men of value and even greatness as the figure on a gold coin suggests. Furthermore, the sun image also returns at this point of the poem. The sun is no longer sleeping at the slagheap; rather, it is behind the men as they are walking to their spouses.

The description of one of the workers finding a lark’s eggs is an image that develops into a metaphor and, finally, a symbol. The worker does not destroy these eggs or displace them; he shows them to his fellow workers and then returns them to the grass. In the last, isolated line in the poem, the worker is evoked once more. He is “showing the eggs unbroken.” The unbroken eggs are a symbol of the world and lives of the miners. Even in death, their world remains as it was, or perhaps it is even enhanced; it is unbroken.

**Days**

*What are days for?*

*Days are where we live.*

*They come, they wake us*

*Time and time over.*

*They are to be happy in:*

*Where can we live but days?*

*Ah, solving that question*

*Brings the priest and the doctor*

*In their long coats*

*Running over the fields*.

**Summary**

Larkin asks his audience "What are days for?" He suggests that days at the place in which people live and move. Days define the passing of time and provide a time in which to be happy. There is a question whether people can live in anything other than days. This kind of question requires the priest and the doctor to run across the fields to provide an answer.

**Analysis**

"Days" is a short but deceptively complicated poem. The 10 lines of free verse across two stanzas have no particular rhyme scheme or meter. The poem is broadly separated into two halves by the use of two rhetorical questions. The opening line is a question that establishes the premise. The first five lines outline the idea of "days" and their purpose. A day divides up a unit of time and provides a time in which people can live and in which people can be happy. The first half of the poem closes with another rhetorical question. The poem asks whether it would be possible to live in anything other than days. The second stanza is a single sentence spread across four lines in answer to the question. This idea of living anywhere other than in days seems absurd and the solution requires the presence of a priest and a doctor.

The days to which Larkin refers are the units of time that count out people's lives. Each day passes and divides a life up into repeated cycles of work and social activity. Days are not a social construct because they are dictated by the sunrise and the sunset but the way in which humans conceive of days is entirely abstract. A day means eight hours of work, a few hours spent with friends or family, and then sleep. This cycle is repeated endlessly and the idea of existing outside of days is the idea of existing outside of this socially constructed circle. Larkin is asking whether it is possible to break free of society's expectations and suggests that any attempt to answer this question results in the doctor and the priest rushing across the field.

The priest and the doctor respond to the question with an urgent speed. The image of the priest and the doctor running across the field suggests that they are hurrying to a set destination. The presence of both a priest and a doctor suggests death. The doctor is able to provide healing or relief from physical pain whereas the priest can perform a spiritual healing or last rites. The question of whether someone can live anywhere other than days is answered only by the dead. Death may be the only escape from the routine cycle of work and sleep that is the same every day. The haste of the doctor and the priest suggests that they are rushing to save a person from finding out the answer.

**Symbols**

Larkin's use of days as a symbol is similar to his use of the postman. A day is a measurement of time used to divide people's lives. Each passing day is one less day a person has to live. Larkin's days no longer measure only time but become a symbol of people's mortality. This symbolism means that a day is not something to be enjoyed but something to be marked off and measured. Larkin is unable to truly enjoy his life because he spends all of his time measuring the days until he dies and worrying that he has not spent them well. The way in which he uses days as a symbol becomes a reflection of this.

Days are not enjoyed by Larkin. He draws a difference between the way he discusses events and outings and the way he conceives of days. The poem "Days" from The Whitsun Weddings (1964) is an example of this difference. He acknowledges that days can be enjoyed but never touches on how. There is little evidence that Larkin looks forward to or enjoys the passing of a day. The way in which he talks about days as a metaphor reveals the extent to which he has allowed his middle-aged pessimism to remove all enjoyment from his life.

"Days" also makes a key alteration to the symbol of the day. Larkin admits that "days are where we live" and seems to concede the importance of the passing of time when it comes to one's ability to enjoy themselves. People live their lives in the passing of time and this admission seems to suggest a crack in Larkin's pessimism. However, he chooses his words carefully and reminds the audience that days are "where" people live rather than when. This turns days into a physical space rather than a temporal one. Days are no longer something that just happen to people but they are a place that people go. This key symbolic difference leaves Larkin separated from society once again. Days are where people go to live but these days seem to be a place that is forbidden to Larkin. He uses the inclusive pronoun "we" when describing days as physical spaces but seems unable to accept that he is ever able to live in a day as other people do. Larkin's specific and careful choice of words symbolizes the different perspective he has of society and how this isolates him from the world.

**Stevie Smith**

**Biography**

Florence Margaret "Stevie" Smith was born on September 20, 1902 in Yorkshire, England. Her father left the family to join the North Sea Patrol when she was very young. At age three she moved with her sister and mother to the northern London suburb Palmers Green. This was her home until her death in 1971. Her mother died when she was a teenager and she and her sister lived with their spinster aunt, an important figure throughout her life, known as "The Lion." After high school she attended North London Collegiate School for Girls. She began as a secretary with the magazine publisher George Newnes and went on to be the private secretary to Sir Nevill Pearson and Sir Frank Newnes. She began writing poetry in her twenties while working at George Newnes. Her first book, Novel on Yellow Paper, was published in 1936 and drew heavily on her own life experience, examining the unrest in England during World War I. Her first collection of verse, A Good Time Was Had By All (1937), also contained rough sketches or doodles, which became characteristic of her work. These drawings have both a feeling of caprice and doom, and the poetry in the collection is stylistically typical of Smith as it conveys serious themes in a nursery rhyme structure.

While Smith's volatile attachment to the Church of England is evident in her poetry, death, her "gentle friend," is perhaps her most popular subject. Much of her inspiration came from theology and the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. She enjoyed reading Tennyson and Browning and read few contemporary poets in an attempt to keep her voice original and pure. Her style is unique in its combination of seemingly prosaic statements, variety of voices, playful meter, and deep sense of irony. Smith was officially recognized with the Chomondeley Award for Poetry in 1966 and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1969. Smith died of a brain tumor on March 7, 1971.

**Not Waving but Drowning**

*Nobody heard him, the dead man,*

*But still he lay moaning:*

*I was much further out than you thought*

*And not waving but drowning.*

*Poor chap, he always loved larking*

*And now he's dead*

*It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,*

*They said.*

*Oh, no no no, it was too cold always*

*(Still the dead one lay moaning)*

*I was much too far out all my life*

*And not waving but drowning.*

"Not Waving but Drowning" is the most famous poem by British poet Stevie Smith, and was first published in 1957. The poem describes a drowning man whose frantic arm gestures are mistaken for waving by distant onlookers. On a less literal level, the poem speaks to the isolation and pain of being misunderstood, and is a kind of parable about the distance between inner feelings and outward appearance.

**Summary**

The speaker opens by declaring that no one could hear the dead man, who was still, paradoxically, lying there and crying out in pain. A first person speaker, perhaps the dead man himself (the poem is deliberately ambiguous), then interjects: "I was always a lot further away than people realized—and I wasn't waving at people back on land; I was moving my arms about because I was drowning."

The crowd then talks about the dead man, saying how unfortunate he was to die while playing about in the water—and how he had a such a playful nature while he was alive. These people theorize that he died from the cold, his heart simply too weak to stand it.

The first person speaker interjects again, saying that it definitely wasn't the cold that did it—because, in fact, it was always too cold. (In a parenthetical aside, it's revealed that the dead man is still lying out in the water and crying out in pain.) The speaker (again, perhaps meant to be paradoxically taken as this dead man himself) restates that he'd always been far away from everyone else, for his entire life—and that all this time his movements hadn't been him waving to people, but rather the sign of him drowning.

**Themes**

**Communication and Misunderstanding**

A playful and light-hearted tone masks a serious subject in “Not Waving but Drowning.” On the surface the poem is about a man who drowns because his movements are mistaken for friendly waving by people ostensibly back on shore. Taken less literally, however, the poem speaks to the pain of being misunderstood and the frequent failure of communication between human beings.

The poem begins by drawing the reader’s attention to “the dead man,” who has just drowned. But strangely—even paradoxically—he is still “moaning,” or crying out in pain, though no one (except, of course, for the reader) can hear him. Immediately, then, the poem sets up a breakdown in communication.

The poem also moves between pronouns throughout—referring to the dead man in the third person, before switching over to the first person "I" and back again. The "I" could refer to the dead man; a separate speaker; or even the poet herself. It’s hard to know for sure who the speaker is, there are no quotation marks to clarify who is speaking when, and nobody can hear the man—who's dead, and thus shouldn't be speaking, anyway! The poem is intentionally ambiguous and unreliable, underscoring its argument about the way communication works—or, more accurately, doesn’t work.

If this "I" is taken as the dead man himself, then he is somehow commenting on his life from beyond the grave. And he explains that his own death was, in part, caused by this kind of failure to be understood. He was far “out” in the water and, accordingly, people mistook his flailing arms—a call for help—for “waving.” Because they thought he was playing around, no one tried to save him. There's a total disconnect between the message that the man intended to send and the one that people actually received.

After this initial set-up, the poem presents two different takes on what happened to the man—what the crowd on the shore thinks, and what the man says himself. The disparity between these takes is stark: the crowd thinks the water must have been too cold for the man's heart to handle, but the man denies this theory, insisting that, in fact, the water had “always” been too cold (meaning this time was no different).

Instead, it was the distance between himself and the nearest help that actually killed him. “I was much too far out all my life,” the man says, and this distance led to his being fatally misunderstood in his moment of need.

Of course, this can be read allegorically as representing emotional distance; the man isn't literally swimming all the time. If the man had been emotionally closer to others, they might have understood him better, and he wouldn’t have died in this way. The crowd had a certain idea of who this man was, and such assumptions blinded them to the reality of what was actually happening.

That is, this man might have seemed totally happy from the outside—after all, he supposedly “always loved larking”—but inside he actually felt completely disconnected from those in his life. Communication failed to bridge this gap—his actions made people think he was happy, when actually he was close to death. There is an implicit argument here that people should strive to listen to others more intently, because the poem seems to suggest that this kind of disconnect is common—perhaps even that failing to be understood by others is, sadly, a central part of being alive.

**Mental Illness and Isolation**

Closely related to the poem's thematic treatment of communication and misunderstanding is its potential allusion to mental illness. That is, the poem can be taken as an extended metaphor or allegory for the specific pain and isolation of diseases like depression—which make the man feel like he is "drowning" yet unable to effectively ask for help. It's worth noting here that Smith herself struggled with depression for much of her life, and her own experiences likely informed the poem. The man's mistaken gestures, in this reading, suggest the divide between appearances and reality, between how people dealing with such illnesses are feeling internally and how the world sees them and/or how they present themselves to the world.

Drowning—with its insinuation of suffocation and crushing pressure—is often used to metaphorically represent the weight of mental illness. The man's disease makes him feel as though he is drowning, and the fact that he is "much further out than" people think implies that those around him have no idea how much he is struggling, how deeply depressed—and how close to the figurative edge—he really is.

Indeed, the crowd theorizes that the "cold" simply caused the man's heart to give out, but the man then adamantly insists that "it was too cold always." Taken metaphorically, he's saying that he always felt alone, discomforted; emotional warmth was never part of his experience. That the crowd believes the man to have "always loved larking" is thus tragically ironic, a testament to others' total inability (or, interpreted less generously, refusal) to understand the inner emotional turmoil of another human being.

In this interpretation of the poem, the man's distance from the world is the direct result of his internal anguish, as his illness has prevented him from emotionally connecting with those around him even if he wanted to do so. The poem thus suggests that part of the horror and pain of mental illness is feeling so distant and isolated from other people that even one's cries for help go unheard.

**Pretty**

*Why is the word pretty so underrated?*

*In November the leaf is pretty when it falls*

*The stream grows deep in the woods after rain*

*And in the pretty pool the pike stalks*

*He stalks his prey, and this is pretty too,*

*The prey escapes with an underwater flash*

*But not for long, the great fish has him now*

*The pike is a fish who always has his prey*

*And this is pretty. The water rat is pretty*

*His paws are not webbed, he cannot shut his nostrils*

*As the otter can and the beaver, he is torn between*

*The land and water. Not ‘torn’, he does not mind.*

*The owl hunts in the evening and it is pretty*

*The lake water below him rustles with ice*

*There is frost coming from the ground, in the air mist*

*All this is pretty, it could not be prettier.*

*Yes, it could always be prettier, the eye abashes*

*It is becoming an eye that cannot see enough,*

*Out of the wood the eye climbs. This is prettier*

*A field in the evening, tilting up.*

*The field tilts to the sky. Though it is late*

*The sky is lighter than the hill field*

*All this looks easy but really it is extraordinary*

*Well, it is extraordinary to be so pretty.*

*And it is careless, and that is always pretty*

*This field, this owl, this pike, this pool are careless,*

*As Nature is always careless and indifferent*

*Who sees, who steps, means nothing, and this is pretty.*

*So a person can come along like a thief—pretty!—*

*Stealing a look, pinching the sound and feel,*

*Lick the icicle broken from the bank*

*And still say nothing at all, only cry pretty.*

*Cry pretty, pretty, pretty and you’ll be able*

*Very soon not even to cry pretty*

*And so be delivered entirely from humanity*

*This is prettiest of all, it is very pretty.*

To most people, “pretty” is a huge compliment. Well, to most of us, for someone to call us “pretty” is a huge compliment. But what about “beautiful?” Which compliment do you prefer? Depending on who you talk to, the answer could be totally different. In Stevie Smith’s poem, “Pretty” she describes many things that she believes are “pretty.” The applause is necessary for Smith in several lines of the poem, but especially when describing the falling leaf. Now the falling of a leaf symbolizes to most people, simply the onset of Autumn. To Smith, the falling of a leaf is much more than that. Falling itself is typically unfortunate, sometimes humorous to those of us on the comedic side. But think about it, when a leave falls, is it alive? Well .. no it’s not because its life-source is the tree that it grew from, much like a fetus growing within its mother’s womb right? Yes. Smith sees past the ugliness and misfortune of the dead, falling leaf and sees its beauty. Its beauty is comparable, because it has a uniqueness that is “pretty.” The same thing can be said of the rain. When you ask a child if they like the rain, most of them will probably say no. Why not? Well the rain is also considered as an unfortuante occurrence, much like the falling, dead leaf. Again, Smith finds beauty in the rain, something she notes as “pretty.” Smith is trying to say in the poem that so many things are “pretty” and they are “pretty” in their own ways. “This field, this owl, this pike, this pool are careless,” in this line Smith states that to be careless is a good thing, carelessness doesn’t always mean reckless or clumsy. Carelessness can mean dauntlessness, the inability to be intimidated, that is not pretty. That is BEAUTIFUL.

Pretty is a poem that entertains and puzzles at the same time. It focuses on the use of the word pretty and explores the implications of its meaning particularly with regards to nature.

The reader is taken along on a guided tour through natural scenery, following certain animals, having to adjust to the speaker's whims and folk philosophy as the poem progresses.

Repeated use of the word pretty means that the reader never loses touch with the central theme: the relationship between specific language used by humans (in this case the word pretty) and the natural world.

Stevie Smith, in typical fashion, uses an idiosyncratic and ironic tone with which to explore the idea of prettiness within nature. With powerful imagery, ambiguous language and surreal hints she attempts to answer her own opening question in the first line:

Why is the word pretty so underrated?

Following this initial question, with accompanying autumnal scenes, the speaker then goes on to introduce different animals, expanding all the time on the meaning of what it is to be pretty. Eventually, pretty ends up in an existential vacuum, along with humanity. Fascinating. Disturbing.

Published in 1972 in New Selected Poems, Pretty is a poem that challenges our notions of what is pretty, whether or not what we experience in nature is reality or a tainted version, altered by our human emotion and cultural values.

Novelist, cartoonist and poet, Stevie Smith worked for most of her adult life in a magazine publishing office in London. She gained popularity as the decades passed, despite a reputation as an outsider, and was well known for her curious live readings on radio and in the flesh. She died in 1971, aged 69.

Her poetry reflects her rather quirky, outsider's world view, being humble, comic, despairing, dark and ironic.

**Analysis**

Pretty is an unusual poem by Stevie Smith not only because it features the word pretty itself 18 times but also due to the idiosyncratic way the speaker explores the notion of prettiness within nature.

Each stanza has it syntactical oddities - unpunctuated lines with no enjambment - commas galore, dashes and exclamation marks, caesura that needn't be there - in particular stanza 4 which has no line end punctuation but is in effect four separate sentences. And stanza 5 likewise.

All of this places extra weight on the role of the reader, who is given a certain amount of freedom when it comes to pace, pause and delivery but may experience some unease as they make their way through this paradoxical poem.

There is repetition, contradiction and an alternative investigation of certain natural phenomena - primarily focusing on animals. As the poem progresses it shifts from an ideal aspect of the natural world - leaves falling, which most see as pretty - to the predatory world of the pike and the owl.

The way humans experience the natural world is brought into question, deemed extraordinary because it is pretty. Nature is subject to our value systems being imposed upon it, whilst it remains careless and indifferent and someone being there and stealing a look and demanding that it be pretty, pretty, pretty....is misuse of the language.

This misuse of the language, this repetition of pretty eventually becomes futile because either it negates the true meaning of the word pretty (whatever that meaning is) or the person dies figuratively - delivered entirely from humanity - which becomes a sort of ultimate prettiness.

Towards the middle of the poem the human eye is introduced - the eye abashes (is embarrassed) - the way it sees things, wants to take in everything. As humans we see nature's prettier side but is it really pretty?

The poem becomes a little surreal as the disembodied eye rises above the wood in cinematic fashion, giving an overview of the countryside, fields, hills, sky.

**Ted Hughes**

**Biography**

Edward James Hughes was born on August 17, 1930, in Mytholmroyd, on the Calder River, one of England’s first industrialized rivers yet also near the wildness of the moors. Hughes was the youngest of three children of Edith Farrar, who traced her ancestry back to the martyr Bishop Farrar, and William Hughes, a carpenter, who was one of only seventeen of an entire regiment to have survived the battle at Gallipoli in World War I. When Hughes was seven, the family moved to Mexborough; there, Hughes led a double life of living in town but often roaming about on nearby farms and estates. The landscape and the language of West Riding and South Yorkshire were undoubtedly significant in shaping Hughes’s sensibility: his fascination with animals, natural processes, and archaic myths; the conflict between wilderness, farm, and industrialization; the rhythms of collapse and renewal; and the spare, physical language of the people are present throughout his poetic career.

In 1948, Hughes won an open exhibition to the University of Cambridge. He postponed his studies at Cambridge until 1951, choosing to serve for two years in the National Service, in the Royal Air Force (RAF) as a mechanic at an isolated radio transmission station in Yorkshire. Though he planned to study English literature at Pembroke College, Cambridge, he changed in his third year to archaeology and anthropology. He graduated in June, 1954, the same month that his first poem, “The Little Boys and the Seasons,” appeared in the Cambridge journal Granta. For the following two years, he worked as a rose gardener, a night watchman in a steel works, a zoo attendant, and a schoolteacher.

In late February, 1956, Hughes met Sylvia Plath, who had arrived from the United States on a Fulbright Scholarship to study. Her own literary career had begun in 1950 with the publication of her poetry. Four months after their first meeting, Plath and Hughes were married. In Plath’s Letters Home (1975), she states that she learned through Hughes “the vocabulary of woods and animals and earth” and felt herself like “adam’s woman [sic].” Hughes brought to Plath’s attention the mythologic underpinnings of poetry as conceptualized by the British poet, novelist, and essayist Robert Graves in his The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth (1948). In turn, Plath brought Hughes into contact with the poetry being published in the United States. On his behalf, Plath typed and sent the manuscript of Hughes’s first collection, The Hawk in the Rain (1957), which was selected by the poets W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Marianne Moore in a competition for the publication of a first book of poems in English. Published simultaneously in England and the United States, The Hawk in the Rain gained immediate critical recognition.

In 1957, Hughes and Plath went to the United States to teach, Plath at Smith College and Hughes at the University of Massachusetts. After a year, they abandoned their teaching in order to spend more time writing. In the spring of 1959, Hughes received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in December they returned to London. In 1960, Hughes’s second collection of poems, Lupercal, appeared, and Plath published her collection of poems The Colossus, and Other Poems. In 1960, their first child, Frieda Rebecca, was born. Growing weary of the city, the family moved to a thatched rectory in Devon, and in 1962 their second child, Nicholas Farrar, was born. During this period, Hughes was at work not only on some of the poems and stories in Wodwo (1967) but also on plays and articles; Plath was completing her novel The Bell Jar (1963) and was at work on her Ariel (1965) poems. By the middle of the year, their marriage was collapsing, with Hughes leaving her for another woman; they returned to London separately, where in February, 1963, Plath committed suicide.

By holding imaginary dialogues with his children, Hughes created three children’s books, How the Whale Became (1963), The Earth-Owl and Other Moon-People (1963), and Nessie the Mannerless Monster (1964), also published as Nessie the Monster (1974), and thereby avoided falling into silence. In 1967, Wodwo was published, as was his text Poetry in the Making: An Anthology of Poems and Programmes from “Listening and Writing,” which describes to students the practice of writing. In 1970, Hughes married Carol Orchard, the daughter of a Devon farmer. In 1970, Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow was published; this cycle of poems is perhaps Hughes’s most important contribution to Anglo-American poetry because of its spare language, the trickster figure of Crow, and the desperate vitality of the voice.

In 1971, Hughes collaborated with the director of the National Theatre, Peter Brook, to create and produce Orghast for the Fifth Shiraz Festival in Iran. Orghast, both the name of the play and the play’s invented language, is based on various myths and folktales, especially that of Prometheus. Hughes continued his interest in dramatic and cyclical poems with Gaudete (1977). Simultaneously, Hughes’s vision of the natural world became increasingly acute in Remains of Elmet (1979), Moortown (1979), River (1983), and Wolfwatching (1989). In December, 1984, Hughes was named England’s poet laureate, succeeding John Betjeman. The publication of Birthday Letters (1998) with its use of first-person and intimate autobiographical details of domestic life marked a stylistic departure in his life’s work. He died in North Tawton, Devon, on October 28, 1998.

**Hawk Roosting**

"Hawk Roosting" is a poem by Ted Hughes, one of the 20th century's most prominent poets. In the poem, taken from Hughes's second collection, Lupercal, a hawk is given the power of speech and thought, allowing the reader to imagine what it's like to inhabit the instincts, attitudes, and behaviors of such a creature. The hawk has an air of authority, looking down on the world from its high vantage point in the trees and feeling like everything belongs to it. The poem is particularly keen to stress the way that violence, in the hawk's world at least, is not some kind of moral wrong—but a part of nature. "Hawk Roosting" is one of a large number of poems in which Hughes explores the animal world.

*I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.*

*Inaction, no falsifying dream*

*Between my hooked head and hooked feet:*

*Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.*

*The convenience of the high trees!*

*The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray*

*Are of advantage to me;*

*And the earth's face upward for my inspection.*

*My feet are locked upon the rough bark.*

*It took the whole of Creation*

*To produce my foot, my each feather:*

*Now I hold Creation in my foot*

*Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -*

*I kill where I please because it is all mine.*

*There is no sophistry in my body:*

*My manners are tearing off heads -*

*The allotment of death.*

*For the one path of my flight is direct*

*Through the bones of the living.*

*No arguments assert my right:*

*The sun is behind me.*

*Nothing has changed since I began.*

*My eye has permitted no change.*

*I am going to keep things like this*.

**Summary**

I, a hawk, sit at the top of the forest with my eyes shut. I'm doing nothing, holding no false dreams between my head's curved beak and the curved talons of my feet. In my sleep, I dream about killing my prey perfectly and eating them.

The trees are so well-suited to my way of being! The air I float on and the sun's light seem perfectly adapted to my way of life, and the earth faces the sky so I can inspect it.

My feet are gripped tightly to the branch. It took millions of years to make my foot, and every single feather. Sometimes, I hold other products of Creation in my foot when I catch them.

Other times I soar high into the sky, revolving the world around me as I spiral up in slow circles. I kill when and where I want, because the world belongs to me. I have no use for clever but false logical thinking: my politeness is ripping the heads off my prey—

That's how death gets dished out. And my one true way takes me straight through life, causing others to die. I need no logical justifications for my actions.

I fly between the earth and the sun, and it has always been this way. My gaze has not allowed anything to changed. I will keep things like this forever.

**Themes**

**Nature and Violence**

In “Hawk Roosting,” Ted Hughes imagines the interior thoughts of one of the great birds of prey: the hawk. The poem is told entirely from the perspective of the hawk, which is personified as having the powers of conscious thought and a command of English. What the hawk lacks, however, are human qualities like mercy and remorse: it is ruthless and direct in its thoughts about hunting prey, though this violence is presented matter-of-factly, as simply part of who the hawk is. Imagining what goes on in the mind of the hawk facilitates a deeper meditation about nature, which the poem presents as both majestic and fearsome. Violence, the poem suggests, is just as much a part of nature as is beauty, and the natural world isn’t subject to human notions of morality.

The hawk is a killer, and part of the poem’s aim is to make clear just how natural this violence is. To that end, the opening line depicts the hawk sitting at the “top of the wood,” symbolizing its place at the top of its ecosystem. And the poem is graphic in its depiction of the bird’s violence throughout—the hawk refers to its “Manners” as “tearing off heads” and its flight path as “direct / Through the bones of the living.” The hawk’s life is literally governed the “allotment of death.” In other words, it is meant to kill.

The hawk knows this, and comments on the way that nature seems to be perfectly designed to facilitate the hawk’s hunting. Nature is “of advantage to me,” it says, and describes itself as the product of “the whole of Creation.” "Creation" here refers to both nature and the entirety of existence, while also alluding to a religious worldview. This religious element is relevant to the poem because much of human morality is based on or informed by religion (and vice versa). The mention of Creation speaks to the hawk’s prowess, but also to the incredible way that nature evolves to create the conditions for its creatures to flourish—even if those same creatures are essentially killing machines.

The hawk insists upon its rightful place within the natural order by describing the prey that it holds “in my foot” as part of “Creation” too. The hawk understands that both it and its prey have their roles to play, even if one seems easier to stomach than the other. In other words, the hawk’s capacity for violence is as natural as things that seem more innocent: flowers or puppies, for example!

This understanding that killing and violence are an integral part of nature informs the hawks’ attitude and personality. It rejects human understanding and morality, claiming that it has no need for “falsifying dream[s]” or “sophistry.” Sophistry is the use of clever but false arguments, which the hawk, acting in accordance with its true nature, has no need for. As such, humans are wrong to project their moral frameworks—especially the equation of violence with evil—onto the natural world. Nature, insists the hawk, is governed by its own laws.

That’s why the hawk has only “one path”; it’s one true way is that of a killer—killing is its nature. And that’s why the hawk states that “Nothing has changed since I began […] I am going to keep things like this.” Its way of being is innate and natural, and it will continue to be this way, stoking fear in the hearts of its prey. The poem, then, explores nature by focusing on one small part of it, the hawk. Through giving voice to the hawk, the poem insists on the way in which nature is both miraculous and violent. It argues that violence and innocence, in the natural world at least, coexist in balance—and that human moral frameworks don’t really apply accurately to creatures like the hawk.

**Analysis**

This poem is written in the form of a monologue or a soliloquy. The speaker here is a hawk(whichis a bird of prey, attacking smaller birds and eating them to feed himself). The hawk here is to beimagined as speaking and expressing his ideas about himself and the universe of which he is a denizen.The hawk speaks with a sense of authority, and with the fullest possible confidence in himself. Indeed,we feel amazed by his egoism and his self-centredness. His egoism is boundless and infinite. Thisegoism finds expression in the following lines:

*‘I kill where I please because it is all mine.‘*

*‘No arguments assert my right.‘*

*‘Nothing has changed since I began.*

*My eye has permitted no change.*

*I am going to keep things like this.‘*

The hawk belongs to the animal world; and this poem, therefore, belongs to the category of Hughes’s animal poems. (The word “animal” in this context includes birds).

**The Horses**

*I climbed through woods in the hour-before-dawn dark.*

*Evil air, a frost-making stillness,*

*Not a leaf, not a bird -*

*A world cast in frost. I came out above the wood*

*Where my breath left tortuous statues in the iron light.*

*But the valleys were draining the darkness*

*Till the moorline - blackening dregs of the brightening grey -*

*Halved the sky ahead. And I saw the horses:*

*Huge in the dense grey - ten together -*

*Megalith-still. They breathed, making no move,*

*with draped manes and tilted hind-hooves,*

*Making no sound.*

*I passed: not one snorted or jerked its head.*

*Grey silent fragments*

*Of a grey silent world.*

*I listened in emptiness on the moor-ridge.*

*The curlew's tear turned its edge on the silence.*

*Slowly detail leafed from the darkness. Then the sun*

*Orange, red, red erupted*

*Silently, and splitting to its core tore and flung cloud,*

*Shook the gulf open, showed blue,*

*And the big planets hanging -*

*I turned*

*Stumbling in the fever of a dream, down towards*

*The dark woods, from the kindling tops,*

*And came to the horses.*

*There, still they stood,*

*But now steaming and glistening under the flow of light,*

*Their draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves*

*Stirring under a thaw while all around them*

*The frost showed its fires. But still they made no sound.*

*Not one snorted or stamped,*

*Their hung heads patient as the horizons,*

*High over valleys in the red levelling rays -*

*In din of crowded streets, going among the years, the faces,*

*May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place*

*Between the streams and the red clouds, hearing the curlews,*

*Hearing the horizons endure.*

“The Horses” is a thirty-eight-line poem in free verse, written mostly in two-line stanzas. Like many of Ted Hughes’s poems, it reflects his fascination with nature, especially animals—their appearance and behavior, their own peculiar places in the world. The poem begins with the narrator in a bleak state of mind. Taking a walk in the dark before dawn could be invigorating, but he perceives “Evil air, a frost-making stillness,” and his breath leaves “tortuous statues in the iron light.” In these first few lines, Hughes paints a stark, dreamlike picture in black and gray.

Horses, a familiar enough sight during the day, become strange when the narrator sees ten of them in the gathering dawn. They do not react when he passes by. They seem to be objects, not living beings, chiseled out of a frigid landscape: “Grey silent fragments/ Of a grey silent world.” The narrator, who listens “in emptiness on the moor-ridge,” appears emotionally depleted. His spiritual emptiness leaves him vulnerable to the morning breaking dramatically around him. He hears a bird (a curlew) cry out in the stillness. He sees the sun light up the landscape in orange and red. The single sound and the vibrant colors expose a new world—complete with water and distant planets in the sky—lurking immediately below the winter night’s seemingly impenetrable surface.

In this poem, the sun does not rise; it erupts: “Silently, and splitting to its core tore and flung cloud,/ Shook the gulf open, showed blue,/ And the big planets hanging.” As is often the case in Hughes’s poems, a familiar occurrence in nature takes on a muscular force, a startling violence. The narrator, having watched the landscape erupt into color, turns again to the horses. Like the landscape, they are waking up. Their stony stillness gives way to small signs of life: “Their draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves/ Stirring under a thaw.” The horses, however, remain stoically silent, at one with their surroundings.

The horses shape the observer’s memory of the scene. He is overwhelmed by their appearance in a landscape transformed so swiftly from icy desolation to apocalyptic beauty. Described early in the poem as “huge” and “megalith-still,” the horses are powerful creatures with the will to remain controlled and quiet even as the “frost showed its fires.” While the narrator has described himself as empty and stumbling about as if he were “in the fever of a dream,” the horses appear calm, sure of their place in the world, able to endure all things. The poem ends with the narrator hoping, in a sentence construction reminiscent of prayer, that he will always remember the horses. Significantly, he now identifies them as “my memory.” They have become something both personal and abstract, and they seem to embody a spiritual resilience of which the narrator did not seem capable in the first lines of the poem.

**Forms and Devices**

“The Horses” is somber in style as well as content. Its many monosyllabic words help create its weighty, serious sound. It is necessary to pause repeatedly in a monosyllabic line such as “The frost showed its fires. But still they made no sound.” The rhythm is further slowed in this instance by the long vowel sounds and the full stop in the middle of the line. Frequent alliteration adds to the poem’s intensity. The repetition of initial sounds (“draining the darkness,” “making no move,” “hung heads patient as the horizons”) creates a solemn, lingering echo.

The repetition of key words is also significant to the poem’s overall effect. In stanza 6, for example, Hughes describes the horses with their “draped manes and tilted hind-hooves,” and in stanza 15, he again mentions their “draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves.” The repetition of words and images heightens the horses’ unchanging quality. They have a permanence about them that is both unnerving and awe-inspiring.

Hughes also repeats the word “still” to great effect. It first appears as a noun in the second line, “a frost-making stillness,” paradoxically suggesting a kind of active stasis. Then the horses are portrayed as “megalith-still.” Though alive, the animals seem as fixed and static as enormous stones. After the sun rises, the description of the horses (“still they stood”) suggests resilience as well as lack of movement. The next time they are described as still (“But still they made no sound”), the word evokes restraint, the power to resist the upheaval of the overwhelming sunrise. In its last use, “still” describes the poet’s desire to remember the horses’ quiet power (“May I still meet my memory”).

Such a shift in usage is a subtle analogue to the shift in the poet’s perceptions of the horses and the landscape. One can see a similar effect in Hughes’s use of color imagery. In the poem’s opening lines, everything is black and gray, dark and empty. Then the sunrise brings violent orange and red into the picture and exposes the blue gulf.

The colors are so powerful that the poet attempts to retreat to the dark woods where he had been earlier. Outside the woods, however, he sees the horses calmly tolerating the exposure that comes with daylight. In this new context, “the red levelling rays” and, in the last stanza, “the red clouds” are transformed into images as beautiful and memorable as the horses.

For a poem so loaded with visual images, “The Horses” places an intriguing emphasis on listening. This emphasis is underscored by the poem’s own echoes and solemn rhythms. Yet the landscape described is profoundly silent, except for the curlew’s cry in stanza 9. At the end, the speaker (in the “din of the crowded streets”) wants to remember not only “hearing curlews” but also “Hearing the horizons endure.”

The silent horizon, paradoxically, becomes an enduring sound in the poet’s mind. Sight and sound, sound and silence, shape his memory of a scene. Hence his memory—to continue the process of silence naturally evolving into sound—becomes the poem that is read silently yet heard in one’s own mind.