

Afternoons by Philip Larkin

The one with the young mothers

This is a melancholy poem, which reflects on the subject of marriage. The poem deals with Larkin's view on young mothers watching their children playing in a playground and he concludes that marrying young leads to the mothers losing their identities. Larkin's description of young mothers taking their children to a playground seems normal but the narrator's point of view on life is expressed. What seems like an ordinary, everyday occurrence highlights the theme of change and how it cannot be avoided, like the passing of time.

Key Quotations:

- The title "Afternoons" suggests the end of the day and time passing.
- The tone is wistful and the poem has a sense of longing for the past – "summer is fading."
- The language suggests there is little meaning in the lives of the "young mothers" – "hollow" and "assemble" suggest routine and boredom creating a sense of emptiness.
- The idea of time passing is developed throughout the poem – "their beauty has thickened" suggests aging.
- The last line "to the side of their own lives" echoes the idea of "setting free their children" from the first stanza. There is the implication that their lives are ruled by their children who "expect to be taken home."

Context:

- Philip Larkin's poetry celebrates the ordinary details of day to day life
- Larkin never married, had children or even left the UK in his whole life

Structure:

- The first stanza deals with Larkin's rather cynical view of marriage and deals with the idea that the young mothers are isolated. Larkin's use of language emphasizes the recurring theme of emptiness within the young mothers and how regimented their lives have become.
- In the second stanza Larkin moves from the general view into the individual and describes the mothers as being alone with little support from their working husbands.
- In the third stanza Larkin focuses back onto the children and how because of them the mothers are unable to live their own lives and they are merely looking in. Their dreams, aspirations and needs have been put to the side.

Possible Themes and Links:

- Time passing – *To Autumn* and *As Imperceptibly as Grief*
- Loss of innocence/growing up – *Death of a Naturalist*

The title suggests that the young mothers are in the 'afternoons' of their lives where children have taken away their identities and their lives are not their own.

Afternoons

The trees are 'bordering' which is almost stopping the mothers escaping.

'Summer' could represent the happy times in life and the verb 'fading' implies that their life/happiness is coming to an end.

Summer is fading:

The leaves fall in ones and twos
From trees bordering

Decline is gradual and almost unnoticeable.

The adjective 'new' suggests that this is a new stage in the mothers' lives or it could also suggest that there is a new generation.

The new recreation ground.

In the hollows of afternoons

The word 'hollows' suggests that the mothers' lives are empty.

Young mothers assemble

The word 'assemble' suggests that the mothers gather without choice and that it is routine.

At swing and sandpit

Setting free their children.

The children are being set 'free'. Freedom is something that these mothers crave.

Behind them, at intervals,

Stand husbands in skilled trades,

'Behind them' suggests that the mothers do not feel like they are supported by their husbands.

An estateful of washing,

'Skilled trades' suggests that the women are not recognised for how they raise their children. They don't earn any qualifications and are almost seen as being unskilled.

And the albums, lettered

Our Wedding, lying

Near the television:

Before them, the wind
Is ruining their courting-places

The mothers do not have their own identities and Larkin is suggesting that all of the women do the same tasks.

'Lying' suggests that the wedding album is ignored just like their relationships with their partners. This is not the most important thing anymore in their lives.

That are still courting-places

(But the lovers are all in school)

And their children, so intent on

Finding more unripe acorns,

Expect to be taken home.

The 'lovers' are who the parents used to be before they had children. Or the 'lovers' could be the younger generation of people who are in new relationships.

The adjective 'unripe' suggests that the children are unaware of what life will be like when they are older. They are still naïve.

Their beauty has thickened.

Something is pushing them
To the side of their own lives

'Expect' suggests that the children make demands on their mothers and that their mothers have no choice.

The word 'thickened' suggests that the mothers are growing older and they are not as beautiful as they used to be. They have no time to look after themselves.

Philip Larkin

The word 'something' suggests that the mothers do not realise who or what is 'pushing' them. The verb 'pushing' suggests that the mothers are being forced away from their own lives. The most important thing in their lives is their children. The mothers are almost at the side now looking in on a life that isn't theirs; a life that they have no control over.