The trusted guide to achieving top marks in Leaving Cert Poetry

For each poet, Poetry Focus provides the following exam-focused features:

- A concise biographical introduction puts the poet in context
- A synopsis of each prescribed poem provides a useful overview
- Individual poem glossaries assist and extend understanding
- Striking images paired with key quotes ignite the imagination
- Initial response questions encourage and improve personal interaction
- Study Notes on each poem provide a focused discussion of theme and style
- Fresh commentary shows students how to articulate and express to a top-grade standard
- Analysis sections provide graded sample paragraphs with examiner’s comments
- Class/Homework exercises are examination-style for extra practice
- Summary Points provide a snapshot of the key aspects of each poem
- Leaving Cert Sample Essays with marking scheme and examiner’s comments
- Updated Sample Leaving Cert Questions with Sample Essay Plans

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EXTRA FEATURES IN YOUR eBook
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- Additional sample graded paragraphs focusing on Developing Your Personal Response
- Investigate Further feature provides carefully selected and placed weblinks

Resources for Poetry Focus 2018 are also available on GillExplore.ie, our new smart, reliable and easy-to-use resources platform.

THE AUTHORS
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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>v</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EAVAN BOLAND</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The War Horse</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child of Our Time*</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Famine Road</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shadow Doll</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside History</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Moment*</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pomegranate</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love*</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Cert Sample Essay</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROBERT FROST</th>
<th>141</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Tuft of Flowers*</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mending Wall*</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Apple-Picking</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Road Not Taken</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birches</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out, Out—*</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Pools</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquainted with the Night</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide, Provide</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Cert Sample Essay</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAUL DURCAN</th>
<th>57</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nessa</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Girl with the Keys to Pearse's Cottage</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Difficulty that is Marriage</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife Who Smashed Television Gets Jail*</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents*</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Windfall', 8 Parnell Hill, Cork</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport*</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's Day, 21 June 1992</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Arnolfini Marriage</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie Joyce</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The MacBride Dynasty</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Short Poems</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Cert Sample Essay</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS</th>
<th>195</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God's Grandeur</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring*</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw Flame</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Windhover</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pied Beauty</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felix Randal</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inversnaid*</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, not Day</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Worst, There is None</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord, if I Contend</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Cert Sample Essay</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JOHN KEATS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To One Who Has Been Long in City Pent</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ode to a Nightingale</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ode on a Grecian Urn</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Belle Dame Sans Merci*</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Autumn</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright Star, Would I Were Steadfast as</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thou Art</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Cert Sample Essay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PHILIP LARKIN</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wedding-Wind</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Grass</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Going</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Arundel Tomb</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Whitsun Weddings</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCMXIV</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambulances*</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trees</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Explosion*</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Grass</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Cert Sample Essay</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JOHN MONTAGUE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing the Pig</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trout</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Locket*</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cage*</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windharp</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Legendary Obstacles</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Same Gesture</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like Dolmens Round My Childhood*</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wild Dog Rose</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Welcoming Party</td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Cert Sample Essay</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucina Schynnning in Silence of the Nicht</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Second Voyage</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths and Engines</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street*</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fireman’s Lift</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All for You</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilcash</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bend in the Road</td>
<td>464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Lacking the Killer Instinct</td>
<td>469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Niall Woods and Xenya Ostrovskia,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married in Dublin on 9 September 2009*</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Cert Sample Essay</td>
<td>479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Glossary of Common Literary Terms</strong></td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The poems marked with an asterisk are also prescribed for the Ordinary Level course.*
Introduction

Poetry Focus is a modern poetry textbook for Leaving Certificate Higher Level English. It includes all the prescribed poems for the 2018 exam as well as succinct commentaries on each one. Well-organised and easily accessible study notes provide all the necessary information to allow students to explore the poems and to develop their own individual responses and enhance their skills in critical literacy. There is no single ‘correct’ approach to answering the poetry question. Candidates are free to respond in any appropriate way that shows good knowledge of and engagement with the prescribed poems.

- **Concise poet biographies** provide context for the poems.
- **Initial response** questions follow the text of each poem. These allow students to consider their first impressions before any in-depth study or analysis. These questions provide a good opportunity for written and/or oral exercises.
- **Study notes** highlight the main features of the poet’s subject matter and style. These discussion notes will enhance the student’s own critical appreciation through focused group work and/or written exercises. Analytical skills are developed in a coherent, practical way to give students confidence in articulating their own personal responses to the poems and poets.
- **Analysis is provided using graded sample paragraphs** which aid students in fluently structuring and developing valid points, using fresh and varied expression. These model paragraphs also illustrate effective use of relevant quotations and reference.
- **Class/Homework exercises** for each poem provide focused practice in writing personal responses to examination-style questions.
- **Summary points** provide a memorable snapshot of the key aspects to remember about each poet.
- **Full sample Leaving Certificate essays** are accompanied by marking-scheme guidelines and examiners’ comments. These show the student exactly what is required to achieve a successful top grade in the Leaving Cert. The examiner’s comments illustrate the use of the PCLM marking scheme and are an invaluable aid for the ambitious student.
- **Sample essay plans** on each poet’s work illustrate how to interpret a question and recognise the particular nuances of key words in examination questions. Student evaluation of these essay plans increase confidence in developing and organising clear response to exam questions.
- **Sample Leaving Cert questions** on each poet are given at the end of their section.
- **A glossary of common literary terms** provides an easy reference when answering questions.

The FREE eBook contains:

- **Investigate Further** sections which contain useful weblinks should you want to learn more.
- **Pop-up key quotes** to encourage students to select their own individual combination of references from a poem and to write brief commentaries on specific quotations.
- Additional sample graded paragraphs called ‘Developing your personal response’.

**HOW IS THE PRESCRIBED POETRY QUESTION MARKED?**

Marking is done (ex. 50 marks) by reference to the PCLM criteria for assessment.
- Clarity of purpose (P): 30% of the total (15 marks)
- Coherence of delivery (C): 30% of the total (15 marks)
- Efficiency of language use (L): 30% of the total (15 marks)
- Accuracy of mechanics (M): 10% of the total (5 marks)
Each answer will be in the form of a response to a specific task requiring candidates to:

- Display a clear and purposeful engagement with the set task (P)
- Sustain the response in an appropriate manner over the entire answer (C)
- Manage and control language appropriate to the task (L)
- Display levels of accuracy in spelling and grammar appropriate to the required/chosen register (M)

**GENERAL**

‘Students at Higher Level will be required to study a representative selection from the work of eight poets: a representative selection would seek to reflect the range of a poet’s themes and interests and exhibit his/her characteristic style and viewpoint. Normally the study of at least six poems by each poet would be expected.’ (DES English Syllabus, 6.3)

The marking scheme guidelines from the State Examinations Commission state that in the case of each poet, the candidates have **freedom of choice** in relation to the poems studied. In addition, there is **not a finite list of any ‘poet’s themes and interests’**.

Note that in responding to the question set on any given poet, the candidates must refer to the poem(s) they have studied but are not required to refer to any specific **poem(s)**, **nor are they expected to discuss or refer to all the poems they have chosen to study**.

In each of the questions in **Prescribed Poetry**, the underlying nature of the task is the invitation to the candidates to **engage with the poems themselves**.

**EXAM ADVICE**

- You are not expected to write about any **set number of poems** in the examination. You might decide to focus in detail on a small number of poems, or you could choose to write in a more general way on several poems.
- Most candidates write one or two well-developed **paragraphs** on each of the poems they have chosen for discussion. In other cases, a paragraph will focus on one specific aspect of the poet’s work. When discussing recurring themes or features of style, appropriate cross-references to other poems may also be useful.
- Reflect on **central themes** and viewpoints in the poems you discuss. Comment also on the use of language and the poet’s distinctive **style**. Examine imagery, tone, structure, rhythm and rhyme. Be careful not to simply list aspects of style, such as alliteration or repetition. There’s little point in mentioning that a poet uses sound effects or metaphors without discussing the effectiveness of such characteristics.
- Focus on **the task** you have been given in the poetry question. Identify the key terms in the wording of the question and think of similar words for these terms. This will help you develop a relevant and coherent personal response in keeping with the PCLM marking scheme criteria.
- Always root your answers in the text of the poems. Support the points you make with **relevant reference and quotation**. Make sure your own expression is fresh and lively. Avoid awkward expressions, such as ‘It says in the poem that...’. Look for alternatives: ‘There is a sense of...’, ‘The tone seems to suggest...’, ‘It’s evident that...’, etc.
- Neat, **legible handwriting** will help to make a positive impression on examiners. Corrections should be made by simply drawing a line through the mistake. Scored-out words distract attention from the content of your work.
- Keep the emphasis on why particular poets **appeal to you**. Consider the continuing relevance or significance of a poet’s work. Perhaps you have shared some of the feelings or experiences expressed in the poems. Avoid starting answers with prepared biographical sketches. Details of a poet’s life are better used when discussing how the poems themselves were shaped by such experiences.
- Remember that the examination encourages **individual engagement** with the prescribed poems. Poetry can make us think and feel and imagine. It opens our minds to the wonderful possibilities of language and ideas. Your interaction with the poems is what matters most. Study notes and critical interpretations are all there to be challenged. Read the poems carefully and have confidence in expressing your own personal response.
Philip Larkin was born in 1922 in Coventry, England. He did not enjoy his childhood: ‘Get out as early as you can/And don’t have any kids yourself’. Nor did he like school. He had a stammer and was short-sighted, although he read widely and contributed to the school magazine. After graduating from Oxford, he went on to become a librarian. Larkin became a great admirer of Thomas Hardy’s poetry, learning from Hardy how to make the commonplace and often dreary details of his life the basis for extremely tough, unsparing and memorable poems. He published several collections of poetry, much of which reflect ordinary English life. His searing, often mocking wit rarely concealed the poet’s dark vision and underlying obsession with universal themes of mortality, love and human solitude. Yet Larkin’s poems face the trials of living and dying with an orderly elegance that always moves the reader. Philip Larkin believed poetry should come from personal experience: ‘I write about experiences … simple everyday experiences … I hope other people will come upon this … pickled in verse … and it will mean something to them.’

INVESTIGATE FURTHER

To find out more about Philip Larkin, or to hear a reading of his poems, you could do a search of the useful websites such as YouTube, bbc.co.uk and poetryarchive.org or access additional material on this page of your eBook.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prescribed Poems</th>
<th>HIGHER LEVEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. ‘Wedding-Wind’</strong>&lt;br&gt;A celebration of the healing power of love and marriage. The speaker is a young bride who is looking forward to a life of happiness.</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. ‘At Grass’</strong>&lt;br&gt;A nostalgic narrative poem describing retired racehorses, in which the poet reflects on the changes brought about by time and the contentment of old age.</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. ‘Church Going’</strong>&lt;br&gt;Conversational and self-mocking, Larkin meditates on the role and significance of churches and religious practice in people’s lives.</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. ‘An Arundel Tomb’</strong>&lt;br&gt;This bittersweet exploration of the power of love to transcend time was written after the poet visited the tomb of the medieval Earl and Countess of Arundel.</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. ‘The Whitsun Weddings’</strong>&lt;br&gt;The central theme is marriage in all its complexity and its importance within an increasingly urbanised society.</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. ‘MCMXIV’</strong>&lt;br&gt;The Roman numeral title stands for 1914, the start of World War I. For Larkin, the date marked the end of innocence for the young soldiers and their families.</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7 ‘Ambulances’*
This poem uses the symbol of an ambulance to outline Larkin’s views on the futility of life and the inevitable reality of death.  

8 ‘The Trees’
This short poem, contrasting nature (the trees) and the lives of human beings, is another review of the theme of transience.  

9 ‘The Explosion’*
An affirmative poem based on a tragic coal mine accident. There were reports that at the time of the explosion, some of the miners’ wives saw visions of their husbands. 

10 ‘Cut Grass’
Another short lyric about the cycle of life and death. The poem’s title image suggests how life and natural growth can be abruptly ended.
WEDDING-WIND

The wind blew all my wedding-day,
And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind;
And a stable door was banging, again and again,
That he must go and shut it, leaving me
Stupid in candlelight, hearing rain,
Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick,
Yet seeing nothing. When he came back
He said the horses were restless, and I was sad
That any man or beast that night should lack
The happiness I had.

Now in the day
All’s ravelled under the sun by the wind’s blowing.
He has gone to look at the floods, and I
Carry a chipped pail to the chicken-run,
Set it down, and stare. All is the wind
Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing
My apron and the hanging cloths on the line.
Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind
Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread
Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep
Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?
Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, conclude
Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?

‘and the hanging cloths on the line’
INITIAL RESPONSE

1. How realistic do you think Larkin’s portrayal of marriage is? Support your views with reference to the text.

2. Trace the tone in this poem. Does it change? What is different in the attitude of the speaker in the second section?

3. In your opinion, why does the poem end with three questions?

STUDY NOTES

‘Wedding-Wind’ was published in 1946. This narrative poem (Larkin was also a novelist) records details of a wedding day, night and the morning after. Larkin adopts the persona of a young bride to tell the story. He said, ‘I can imagine ... the emotions of a bride ... without ever having been a woman or married.’ This poem is a celebration of the joy of passionate love.

This direct, personal poem’s opening section begins with the young bride stating that ‘The wind blew all my wedding-day’. This ‘high wind’ blew throughout her day and the wedding night. Is it a symbol for passion and change? Is the poem linking the energy of the natural world with the force of human love? The adjective ‘high’ for Larkin meant elevated and elevating experiences. People rise above the ordinary to experience a spiritual feeling. The restless atmosphere of the day and night is caught in the description of the stable door ‘banging, again and again’. This mundane detail shows Larkin’s ear for the ordinary. The young woman relates how her husband has to ‘go and shut’ the banging door. Larkin believed that life as it was lived by ordinary people should and could provide the subject for poetry. The young bride feels inadequate, ‘Stupid in candlelight’, ‘seeing nothing’. Her new husband returns, saying ‘the horses were restless’. She feels compassion for all living things that are not experiencing the happiness ‘I had’.

The second section of the poem is an interior monologue by the bride as she observes the destruction caused by the ‘wind’s blowing’. ‘All’s ravelled under the sun’: the debris of the storm is clear for everyone to see. Both the world and the bride have been changed by some huge elemental
force. She is now a woman of responsibilities. She recognises the practicalities of farming. There is no honeymoon. ‘He has gone to look at the floods’ and she has gone to feed the chickens. The detail of her ‘chipped pail’ lends a human, imperfect note to the scene. She sets the pail down and begins to reflect (‘stare’).

Now, unlike last night, she is seeing. The wind, this powerful force of nature, was a predator, ‘Hunting through clouds and forests’ (line 16). The violent force of the wind is contained in the verb ‘thrashing’. Does this have connotations of the violent passion of love? Again, an ordinary sight, clothes hanging on a washing line (‘My apron and the hanging cloths on the line’), makes the poem accessible to all, academic and non-academic. There is no exclusive reference to classical mythology, but the common stuff of life. The poem concludes with three questions. The young woman wonders if she will survive the ‘joy my actions turn on’. The compound word ‘bodying-forth’ and the verb ‘borne’ suggest pregnancy. The simile ‘like a thread/Carrying beads’ implies praying and the sacredness of the holy state of matrimony. Or this thread could refer to a necklace, a gift or symbol of love given between the young couple.

The second question poses the problem of sleep: ‘Shall I be let to sleep’ (line 20). The bride now feels that every day is ‘perpetual morning’, as life seems full of exciting possibilities, so it is impossible to rest. She feels so blessed by love that she has almost been made immortal: ‘Can even death dry up’ her joy? She believes that these ‘new delighted lakes’ can never be ‘dry’, even though the wind dries water from the land. She is compelled to make a sign, ‘conclude/Our kneeling as cattle’. The biblical tones of the compound word ‘all-generous’ show an optimistic view that joy can outlive death.

Larkin wanted his readers to experience his poetry and say, ‘I’ve never thought of it that way before, but that’s how it is.’ He believed poetry should come from personal experience. Larkin disliked the idea that poetry should come from other poems. He was opposed to Modernism, a poetry movement that is allusory and inaccessible to the ordinary person. It is interesting to note that this poem takes a private, human experience and links it with nature. Does this lend a note of danger to the experience of young, passionate love? Parallel to the poem, dramatic changes were taking place in English society. The Second World War had just ended, followed by the depression of the 1950s, the affluence and student unrest of the 1960s and the emergence of socialism and multiculturalism. This rural English experience of young love is preserved by Larkin, ‘pickled as it were in verse’, despite all the changes taking place.
Larkin believed that poetry should help us ‘enjoy and endure’. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Support your view with references from the poem.

**Sample Paragraph**

I believe that this poem helps us enjoy life, thanks to the beautiful, passionate narrative of this young bride. The wind represents change and dynamism in the natural world, as well as in the world of the young woman. It is ‘sacred’, a ‘high wind’, which both scatters and cleans, ‘All’s ravelled under the sun by the wind’s blowing’. The human details of ordinary life shine under the craftsmanship of Larkin, ‘chipped pail’, ‘stable door … banging, again and again’, ‘hanging cloths on the line’. The ordinary, somewhat irksome chores which we all must endure become the basis of passionate poetry as the young bride wonders whether all this ‘joy of action’ can be ‘borne’. We are elevated, as the woman is, by the optimistic, mystical vision that love cannot be dimmed by death. We kneel at the ‘all-generous waters’. Larkin has helped us to enjoy and endure.

**Examiner’s Comment**

This short paragraph addresses both aspects of the question (enjoy and endure). The response shows a real appreciation of Larkin’s poetic beliefs. More detailed analysis and comment on the key quotations would have resulted in a higher grade. However, the style throughout is assured and vocabulary and expression are very good. Falls just below the top grade.

**CLASS/HOMWORK EXERCISES**

1. Write a paragraph on how effectively Larkin uses metaphors to communicate his message in this poem. Support your answer with reference to the text.

2. ‘In his poem, “Wedding-Wind”, Larkin conveys an entirely positive view of married life.’ Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the text.

**SUMMARY POINTS**

- Key themes include the joy of romantic love and the frailty of happiness in life.
- Narrative, conversational style expressed through the voice of a young bride.
- Recurring images of the countryside reflect the pleasures of marriage.
- Rhythm and sound effects are important throughout the poem.
The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and mane;
Then one crops grass, and moves about
- The other seeming to look on -
And stands anonymous again.

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
Two dozen distances sufficed
To fable them: faint afternoons
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,
Whereby their names were artificed
To inlay faded, classic Junes -

Silks at the start: against the sky
Numbers and parasols: outside,
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,
And littered grass: then the long cry
Hanging unhushed till it subside
To stop-press columns on the street.

Do memories plague their ears like flies?
They shake their heads. Dusk brims the shadows.
Summer by summer all stole away,
The starting-gates, the crowds and cries -
All but the unmolesting meadows.
Almanacked, their names live; they

Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,
Or gallop for what must be joy,
And not a fieldglass sees them home,
Or curious stop-watch prophesies:
Only the groom, and the groom’s boy,
With bridles in the evening come.
Glossary

At Grass: a reference to the retirement of old racehorses.

mane: the hair on the back of a horse’s neck.

crops: eats, chews.

Two dozen distances sufficed: 24 races were enough.

To fable: to make famous.

Cups and Stakes and Handicaps: various types of horse races.

artificed: displayed (on trophies, etc.).

inlay: ornamental fabric.

classic: traditional, important June races.

Silks: shirts (‘colours’) worn by jockeys.

Numbers: betting numbers displayed by bookies.

parasols: ladies’ umbrellas.

Squadrons: long lines (of parked cars).


plague: irritate.

unmolesting: harmless, gentle.

Almanacked: listed in the racing records.

groom: worker who looks after the horses.

bridles: restraints placed on the heads of horses.

INITIAL RESPONSE

1. Using close reference to the text, describe the atmosphere/mood in the opening stanza.

2. How does Larkin convey the excitement of the racecourse in stanza three? Refer to the text in your answer.

3. Choose two memorable images from the poem and briefly explain their effectiveness.
‘At Grass’ was written in 1950 after the poet had seen a documentary film about a retired racehorse. Larkin, himself a lover of horses, saw them as exploited during their racing careers. This strikingly reflective poem, exploring the changes brought about by the passage of time, has been interpreted as a criticism of the passing fashion of celebrity and as a requiem for a bygone age.

Stanza one begins with a short description of two horses sheltering in the distance. Larkin remarks that ‘The eye can hardly pick them out’ before he has even explained what there is to pick out. It is only when a slight breeze ‘distresses tail and mane’ that the horses come to life. Even then, the ‘cold shade’ setting has a vague suggestion that these forgotten (‘anonymous’) animals are close to death. There is an evocative visual quality within these early lines and a mood of wistful sadness dominates.

In contrast to this feeling of stillness, Larkin begins to imagine the racehorses in their prime ‘fifteen years ago’. The nostalgic flashback in the second and third stanzas recalls their triumphs in ‘Cups and Stakes and Handicaps’, enough ‘To fable them’ and ensure their reputation in racing history. The thrill and glamour of ‘classic Junes’ is recreated through vibrant images of the jockeys’ colours (‘Silks’) and the ‘Numbers and parasols’. Cinematic details (‘empty cars’, ‘littered grass’) and the excited cheering (‘the long cry’) of the crowds all convey the joy of unforgettable race meetings.

Stanza four returns to the present as Larkin considers the conscious experiences of the horses themselves. The line ‘They shake their heads’ is playfully ambiguous, both a negative response to the earlier question (‘Do memories plague their ears like flies?’) and an actual movement which horses carry out naturally. Larkin’s elegant imagery communicates the subtle advance of time: ‘Summer by summer’ as ‘Dusk brims the shadows’. There is a strong sense that at the end of their lives, these once-famous horses deserve to take their ease in ‘unmolesting meadows’. Interestingly, the most remarkable verbs in the poem – ‘fabled’, ‘artificed’, ‘inlay’, ‘Almanacked’ – are all concerned with the way people have seen and recorded these horses. They have become racecourse stories, names engraved into trophies and recorded in official histories.

The dignified language and slow rhythm of stanza five suggest both the tranquil freedom of these retired horses and the reality that they are nearing the end of their long lives. For the moment, though, they ‘gallop for what must be joy’ – a typical Larkin comment which throws doubt onto an assertion even while in the process of making it. The poem ends on a consolatory note. Now that the horses have ‘slipped their names’ and are no longer chasing fame or glory, they can ‘stand at ease’, enjoying the peace and quiet. Broad assonant effects emphasise their sense of quiet fulfilment: ‘Only the groom, and the groom’s boy,/With bridles in the evening come’. The inverted syntax and mellow tone add to the sense of finality. In completing the natural cycle of their lives, Larkin’s racehorses offer a model for the human condition of youth, achievement and old age. Characteristically, the development of thought in the poem moves from observation to reflection, leaving us to appreciate the blend of celebration and sadness that mark this beautiful poem.
ANALYSIS

Using close reference to the text, comment on the poet’s use of contrast in ‘At Grass’.

Sample Paragraph

Philip Larkin uses two distinct settings in ‘At Grass’. This is a very effective device to highlight the past and present lives of the racehorses. At the start of the poem, he describes two horses grazing – but they are ‘anonymous’. There is a dreamy, timeless feeling to the picture Larkin paints. I thought that even the title of the poem was similar to the title used of a painting of racehorses. There is very little movement involved in the description of the retired horses – in complete contrast with the middle section of the poem, where Larkin brings us back to their glory days, winning ‘Cups, Stakes and Handicaps’. The hustle and bustle of the busy racetracks is seen in the colourful images and lively rhythms – ‘Silks at the start against the blue sky’. The scene is noisy, with race goers shouting and reporters rushing to write their ‘stop-press columns’ after the winners are announced. The two contrasting atmospheres are very different. At the end of the poem, we see the two old horses ‘stand at ease’ – even the gentle sibilant sounds are in contrast with the hectic description of ‘littered grass’ at the race meetings. The tone in the last lines of the poem as the grooms ‘in the late evening come’ is gentle and subdued, highlighting the final days of these champion horses. Overall, Larkin uses contrasts very effectively to show the dramatic changes in the lives of these great horses, who have swapped their past glory for a well-earned rest.

Examiner’s Comment

This is a well-sustained and focused response that examines the poet’s use of contrasting settings, moods and sound effects in some detail. The commentary is informed and interesting. However, the answer is less successful due to the inaccurate quotations. This solid response just falls below the top grade.

CLASS/HOMEWORK EXERCISES

1. Describe the tone of the poem. Is it celebratory, sorrowful, resigned or realistic, or a combination of these? Refer to the text in your answer.

2. “Larkin is able to to address the sensitive issues of human life without ever becoming sentimental.’ To what extent is this true of ‘At Grass’? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
Summary Points

- Transience, ageing, and the natural cycle of life and death are central themes.
- Contrasting patterns of imagery – subdued, vibrant.
- Variety of tones – nostalgic, celebratory, reflective, realistic, resigned.
- Effective use of evocative imagery, sound, contrast and flashback.
CHURCH GOING

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new –
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort or other will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,
A shape less recognisable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gowns-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation – marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these – for which was built
This special shell? For, though I’ve no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

‘Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in./If only that so many dead lie round’
INITIAL RESPONSE

1. What impression do you have of the speaker in the first two stanzas of this poem? Support your answer with reference to the text.

2. List two images that you consider to be spiritual in ‘Church Going’. Comment on their effectiveness.

3. How does this poem change after the first two stanzas? What are the main considerations of the poet? Refer closely to the poem in your response.
'Church Going' was written in 1954 as part of Larkin's poetry collection *The Less Deceived*. He adopts his famous persona of the self-deprecating, observant, conversational outsider. Larkin said he felt the need to be on 'the periphery of things'. The title is a pun, suggesting both the attendance of religious ceremonies (church-going) and also suggesting that religious practice/religion itself was on the way out, passé. The inspiration for the poem came from an actual event experienced by Larkin when he stopped to look at a church while on a cycling trip.

In the first stanza, Larkin is an interloper/intruder who only enters the church when he’s sure it’s empty (‘nothing going on’). The run-on line movement mirrors the poet popping inside (‘I step inside’). The onomatopoeic closing of the door echoes in ‘thud shut’. We hear what is happening. A jaded tone of one who has seen and done it all before sounds from the phrase ‘another church’. He now gives us a general view of the church from floor to wall: matting, wooden seats, stone walls. He then closes in for a detailed view: ‘little books’, flowers that are ‘brownish now’. This telling detail suggests something is not fresh; it’s dying. Is this similar to church-going? Larkin felt strongly that when you go into church, you get a feeling that something is over, derelict.

He now becomes dismissive as he describes the sacred objects as ‘some brass and stuff’. He says it is ‘Up at the holy end’. He is indifferent rather than ignorant: ‘I don’t bother about that kind of thing,’ he once declared. The atmosphere is ‘tense’, not serene; the church is ‘musty’, stale smelling. The silence is all pervasive, ‘unignorable’. The atmosphere has been stewing or fermenting a long time, like tea or beer – only ‘God knows how long’. This fact makes him anxious to show respect. He had already removed his hat, but now he cuts a slightly ridiculous figure as he removes his cycle-clips ‘in awkward reverence’.

He moves around in the second stanza, like an uninformed tourist, randomly touching things (‘run my hand around the font’). The use of the present tense in the first two stanzas gives an immediacy to the description. A telling question, ‘Cleaned, or restored?’, shows the poet’s mind at work. It also shows that there is a community at work, and therefore continuity. The roof is being preserved, just as Larkin is preserving the church in his poem. Yet the dismissive, casual, conversational tone returns when he says that he thinks ‘the place was not worth stopping for’.

A more formal, serious voice now is heard as the poet’s inner self comes into focus. He begins to meditate in stanza three on the importance of churches (‘wondering, too,/When churches fall completely out of use/What we shall turn them into’). This knowledgeable voice knows the ecclesiastical vocabulary: ‘parchment’, ‘pyx’. In the future, these will no longer be used for ceremonies, but stored ‘in locked cases’. Larkin was fond of the traditions of the Anglican Church, but now the old world is fading. He imagines the future of these churches as ‘rent-free’, worth nothing, housing only ‘rain and sheep’. Here is a desolate outlook. The use of the plural first person pronoun ‘we’ suggests...
that Larkin thinks we will all be confronted with what to do with these large empty buildings. The negative view continues as the churches are described as ‘unlucky places’.

In **stanza four**, superstition is overtaking belief. This is ‘dark’, ‘dubious’; Larkin doesn’t approve. However, he feels the power will remain (‘Power of some sort’), and eventually, as always happens, nature will reclaim it: ‘Grass ... brambles ... sky’. This landscape recalls the opening view of the interior of the church. Now, in Larkin’s imaginings, it lies open to the elements. The long sentence shows the **ruminative mood** of the poet, as he wonders, in **stanza five**, who will be the last to seek out this place for what it once was, a dynamic church. He dismisses the learned academics (‘ruin-bibber’), someone mad for old buildings.

In **stanza six**, Larkin wonders if his ‘representative’, ‘Bored’, will be one who understood the church’s role in marking the great human landmarks of a life: birth, marriage and death. The poet is happy to be part of this space: ‘It pleases me to stand in silence here’. In the **seventh stanza**, the **contemplative voice** states, ‘A serious house on serious earth it is’. He realises he will be someone who is drawn to this place, as it is a place ‘to grow wise in’ as he experiences the essence of life, being alone (‘dead lie around’).

Larkin uses a traditional form of English poetry, a formal stanza pattern of seven nine-line stanzas. The rhythm is iambic pentameter, the traditional rhythm of English verse. The large, spacious form of the poem echoes the cavernous space of the church. The **regular rhyme scheme** punctuates this ordered but disappearing world. This poem is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s sonnet recording the ruins of England’s monasteries: ‘Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang’. Both poems are shot through with melancholy for a disappeared world.

**ANALYSIS**

From your reading of ‘Church Going’, what insights have you gained about Larkin’s views on religion and spirituality? Support your answer with reference to the poem.

**Sample Paragraph**

I feel I have gained insight about religious belief from this poem, although the poet is dismissive of yet ‘Another church’; in the opening stanza. Larkin offhandedly remarks that ‘the place was not worth stopping for’. Nevertheless, he also admits that this empty church deserves reverence, however ‘awkward’. This place has a ‘Power of some sort’. When Larkin’s more serious side emerges, at the end of the poem, he acknowledges that people need religion – it is a kind of ‘hunger’. We cannot exist totally on the level of animals, or in the shallow state of the arch, cynical,
critical sneer. He uses the word, ‘gravitating’, as if church-goers are pulled by an irresistible force ‘to this sacred ground’. I believe that Larkin is distinguishing organized religion from human spirituality. He obviously has respect for the spiritual yearning that makes people look for a deeper purpose to their lives. In this sense, ‘Church Going’ is a positive poem and the church itself is a ‘proper’ place to grow ‘wise in’. The final line of the poem, ‘If only that so many dead lie round’, shows us that this place marks the real and final stage of life. We live our lives in the shadow of our death, our loved ones’ deaths, and the death of all living things. This might not be optimistic, but it does emphasize a basic truth which has given me an important insight into reality.

Examiner’s Comment
This top grade paragraph directly responds to the question in a focused way. The answer traces the development of thought in the poem and integrates precise quotation to lend weight to the discussion points. Vocabulary and syntax are excellent throughout. Some of the expression is particularly impressive, e.g. ‘Larkin is distinguishing organized religion from human spirituality’. Overall, a competent and assured standard.

CLASS/HOMEWORK EXERCISES

1. Larkin stated that the ‘impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art’. What is Larkin trying to preserve in the poem ‘Church Going’? In your opinion, does he succeed or fail? Support your answer with reference to the text.

2. Choose three contrasting tones which Larkin uses in this poem. Which two of the tones do you identify with most? Explain your answer.

SUMMARY POINTS

- The significance of religion and the search for meaning in life are key themes.
- Interesting images and metaphors create atmosphere and reflect meaning.
- Contrasting tones – disappointed, critical, casual, sad, reflective, humorous.
- Effective use of rhetorical questions, alliteration, assonance, rhyme.
AN ARUNDEL TOMB

Side by side, their faces blurred,
The earl and countess lie in stone,
Their proper habits vaguely shown
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,
And that faint hint of the absurd –
The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque
Hardly involves the eye, until
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still
Clasped empty in the other; and
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace
Thrown off in helping to prolong
The Latin names around the base.

They would not guess how early in
Their supine stationary voyage
The air would change to soundless damage,
Turn the old tenantry away;
How soon succeeding eyes begin
To look, not read. Rigidly they

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths
Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.
Now, helpless in the hollow of
An unarmorial age, a trough
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins
Above their scrap of history,
Only an attitude remains:

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

'What will survive of us is love'
**Glossary**

**Title:** The title refers to a 14th-century monument of the Earl of Arundel and his wife in Chichester Cathedral, West Sussex, England.

- **proper habits:** appropriate burial clothes.
- **pleat:** fold.
- **pre-baroque:** plain, simple design (before the elaborate 17th-century baroque style).
- **gauntlet:** glove.
- **effigy:** figure, sculpted likeness.
- **supine:** lying down.
- **tenantry:** tenants living on a landlord’s estate.
- **thronged:** crowded.
- **strewed:** spread across.
- **Bone-riddled ground:** buried human remains.
- **unarmorial:** unheroic.
- **trough:** channel.
- **skeins:** threads or coils (of smoke).
- **transfigured:** transformed.
- **blazon:** sign, symbol.

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**INITIAL RESPONSE**


2. Select two illustrations from the poem to show Larkin’s keen eye for detail. Comment briefly on the effectiveness of each example.

3. Write a short personal response to this poem, highlighting the impact it made on you.

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**STUDY NOTES**

‘An Arundel Tomb’ was written in 1956 after Larkin had visited Chichester Cathedral. He said that the effigies were unlike any he had ever seen before and that he found them ‘extremely affecting’. The poem can be viewed in many ways – as a meditation on love and death, as a tribute to the power of art or even as a celebration of English history. Despite differences of interpretation, ‘An Arundel Tomb’ has always been a favourite of Larkin readers. It was read aloud at his memorial service held in London’s Westminster Abbey in 1986.

In **stanza one**, we are immediately located before the stone statue of the Earl and Countess of Arundel. Larkin’s description of the couple seems detached, the tone one of **ironic hesitation**. The couple’s ‘blurred’ faces (eroded by time) are indistinct. Indeed, the earl’s outdated armour and the ‘little dogs under their feet’ add a ludicrous dimension (a ‘faint hint of the absurd’) to the commemorative monument.

The poet continues to criticise the ‘plainness’ of the lifeless sculpture in **stanza two**. It is etched in an unappealingly dull ‘pre-baroque’ style. But he is suddenly taken by one particular detail. The earl’s
left hand has been withdrawn from its ‘gauntlet’ and is ‘holding her hand’. This affectionate gesture between husband and wife has an immediate impact on Larkin – ‘a sharp tender shock’. The image of ‘His hand withdrawn, holding her hand’ stops the poet in his tracks. We can sense Larkin’s concentration in the slow rhythm and emphatic ‘h’ alliteration of line 12. Do the joined hands represent the triumph of love over time, or is that just wishful thinking?

In stanza three, Larkin reflects on the relationship between the earl and countess. Line 13 is puzzling: ‘They would not think to lie so long’. Is this an obvious reference to the couple’s long rest in the tomb? Or have they failed to find a heavenly afterlife? Might there be a pun on the word ‘lie’? Perhaps the loving hand-holding is an untrue representation? Larkin wonders if the sculptor invented this demonstrative touch to make the statue more interesting to the general public and to ‘prolong’ the earl’s family name long after the Latin inscription would be understood.

Stanzas four and five focus particularly on the passing of time, a central theme in the poem. The earl and countess could not have imagined the effects of the damp cathedral air (‘soundless damage’) eroding their tomb. Great social change has also happened over the centuries; ‘the old tenantry’ and the use of Latin – and the importance of Christianity, presumably – have disappeared. Larkin’s strikingly sensory images evoke the changing seasons: ‘Snow fell, undated. Light/Each summer thronged the glass’. The signs of natural vitality and rejuvenation are in stark contrast to the ‘Bone-riddled ground’ over which modern-day visitors to the cathedral (‘endless altered people’) arrive to view the monument.

The countless tourists to the medieval couple’s tomb have long been ‘Washing at their identity’ (stanza six). There is a suggestion of erosion (the earl and countess are no longer understood as they once were) and purification (the couple are idealised as romantic and artistic symbols). Larkin asserts that the effigies are ‘helpless’ in this ‘unarmorial age’. The poet’s cynical tone reflects his distaste for the vulgarity and ignorance around him. Today’s generation has a shallow appreciation of love – ‘Only an attitude remains’.

This idea is developed in stanza seven, where Larkin questions the public’s misguided response to the statue. For him, the sentimental yearning to see the couple’s ‘fidelity’ as a triumph of love over death is an ‘Untruth’, and something the earl and countess probably never intended. Nonetheless, the instinctual desire for enduring love may well be another admirable aspect of human behaviour. Many commentators view the final lines (‘Our almost-instinct almost true;/What will survive of us is love’) as a positive affirmation by Larkin. Others see in it a typically despondent statement of the opposite (namely, self-deluding hope in the face of reality). Like the rest of the poem, the ending is typically paradoxical and thought provoking, allowing us to decide for ourselves about Larkin’s attitude concerning the power of love to transcend time.
ANALYSIS

‘In addressing universal themes of love and death, Philip Larkin often uses ambiguous language.’ Discuss this statement, with particular reference to ‘An Arundel Tomb’.

Sample Paragraph

Larkin’s poetry is noted for its ambiguity. The opening description of the rigid figures carved in stone is both sympathetic and satirical. The adjective ‘blurred’, used to describe their faces, suggests they are anonymous and unreal. Inactivity and action are described in contrasting imagery, ‘their supine stationary voyage’. What is real? Larkin finds the detail of the ‘little dogs under their feet’ ridiculous and the patronising tone suggests the spoiled and privileged former existence of the earl and the countess. However, this detail could be viewed as a humanising touch on the part of the sculptor. Suddenly another detail catches his attention and he is stopped with a ‘sharp gentle shock’. The earl’s hand is depicted as withdrawn from his gauntlet and ‘holding’ his countess’s hand. Is this suggesting a sentimental attitude or the universal triumph of love over death? Larkin continues to tease us through the word ‘lie’. The couple ‘lie in stone’. This could refer to the position of their bodies, but it could also mean they are sending out a false message that they are a loving couple whose love has vanquished death. But the earl and countess ‘would not think to lie so long’, they never planned to give this false impression. The typically paradoxical ending challenges us to consider the truth of the poet’s final enigmatic statement: ‘What will survive of us is love’.

Examiner’s Comment

A well-illustrated personal response that examines Larkin’s subtle use of language: ‘This could refer to the position of their bodies, but it could also mean they are sending out a false message that they are a loving couple whose love has vanquished death.’ Expression throughout the paragraph is excellent: ‘The opening description of the rigid figures carved in stone is both sympathetic and satirical’. A successful top grade answer.
CLASS/HOMEWORK EXERCISES

1. Outline the main theme presented in ‘An Arundel Tomb’. In your answer, trace the way the poet develops his ideas during the course of the poem.

2. ‘Philip Larkin has often been criticized for the gloom and moroseness of his poems.’ Discuss this statement, with particular reference to ‘An Arundel Tomb’.

SUMMARY POINTS

- Central themes include love, mortality and the endurance of art.
- Descriptive/narrative opening leads to wonder and reflection.
- Effective use of vivid imagery, onomatopoeia, steady rhythm and set rhyme.
- Tone varies from the ironic and cynical to the ambivalent and positive.
THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:
Not till about
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense
Of being in a hurry gone. We ran
Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street
Of blinding windscreens, smell the fish-dock; thence
The river’s level drifting breadth began,
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.

All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept
For miles inland,
A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.
Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and
Canals with floatings of industrial froth;
A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped
And rose: and now and then a smell of grass
Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth
Until the next town, new and nondescript,
Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

At first, I didn’t notice what a noise
The weddings made
Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys
The interest of what’s happening in the shade,
And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls
I took for porters larking with the mails,
And went on reading. Once we started, though,
We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

As if out on the end of an event
Waving goodbye
To something that survived it. Struck, I leant
More promptly out next time, more curiously,
And saw it all again in different terms:
The fathers with broad belts under their suits
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,
The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that
Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.
Yes, from cafés
And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed
Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days
Were coming to an end. All down the line
Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round;
The last confetti and advice were thrown,
And, as we moved, each face seemed to define
Just what it saw departing: children frowned
At something dull; fathers had never known
Success so huge and wholly farcical;
The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral;
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
At a religious wounding. Free at last,
And loaded with the sum of all they saw,
We hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of steam.
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
Long shadows over major roads, and for
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem
Just long enough to settle hats and say
I nearly died,
A dozen marriages got under way.
They watched the landscape, sitting side by side
– An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,
And someone running up to bowl – and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:
There we were aimed. And as we raced across
Bright knots of rail
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give. We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.
Glossary

**Title**: Whit (Pentecost) Sunday, the seventh after Easter, was a popular time for weddings.

19 **nondescript**: ordinary.
25 **skirls**: high-pitched cries.
26 **larking**: joking, carrying on.
28 **pomaded**: perfumed.
29 **parodies**: imitations.
30 **irrelately**: hesitantly.
37 **seamy**: lined.
38 **smut**: rude or suggestive comments.
38 **perms**: waved hairstyles popular at the time.
40 **olive-ochres**: green and gold colours.
41 **unreally**: falsely.
44 **annexes**: reserved areas.
57 **gouts**: great spurts.
65 **Odeon**: popular cinema name.
73 **Pullmans**: luxury rail carriages (sleeping cars).
79 **arrow-shower**: short outburst of rain.

*INITIAL RESPONSE*

1. What is Larkin’s attitude to the wedding parties that he describes in stanzas three and four? Refer to the text in your answer.

2. Select two visual images from the poem to show Larkin’s eye for observational detail. Comment briefly on the effectiveness of each example.

3. Write a short personal response to ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, highlighting the impact it made on you.

*STUDY NOTES*

*Larkin began writing ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ in 1957, and spent over a year drafting it. He said, ‘You couldn’t be on that train without feeling the young lives all starting off, and that just for a moment you were touching them. Doncaster, Retford, Grantham, Newark, Peterborough, and at every station more wedding parties. It was wonderful, a marvellous afternoon.’ While the poem is lengthy by Larkin’s standards, it moves typically from specific observation to an insightful reflection of love and marriage."

The poem’s positive **title** immediately suggests celebration. Larkin’s personal narrative makes use of everyday colloquial speech (‘I was late getting away’) to introduce this seemingly ordinary account of his afternoon journey from Hull to London. The **opening lines** of **stanza one** build to a steady rhythm, like a train leaving a railway station. At first, the poet’s senses are engaged but not fully absorbed in his surroundings. However, his language (‘The river’s level drifting breadth’) conveys the numbing drowsiness of a warm summer day. Larkin’s characteristic eye for detail evokes the **claustrophobic atmosphere** inside the carriage: ‘All windows down, all cushions hot’. The panoramic
picture of the outside view ‘Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet’ reveals his appreciation of nature and an enthusiasm for the English landscape.

Although the poet seems somewhat removed from the rest of society, his sense of place and expressive description continue into stanza two: ‘Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle’. The June weather is personified (‘the tall heat that slept’), adding to an already oppressive mood. Occasional run-through phrasing (‘hedges dipped/And rose’) echoes the movement of the train on its ‘curve southwards’. Always a realist, Larkin includes a number of unappealing images associated with the industrial age: ‘floatings of industrial froth’ and ‘acres of dismantled cars’. This convincing sense of the familiar is characteristic of a poet who is known for vividly recording life in post-war England.

Stanza three focuses on the various wedding groups arriving on the station platforms. Larkin gradually realises that the ‘whoops and skirls’ he hears on the platforms are the animated voices of ‘grinning and pomaded’ girls who are seeing off the honeymooners. The poet’s tone wavering between derision of the guests’ style (‘parodies of fashion’) and admiration of their glamorous ‘heels and veils’.

Despite his ironic detachment, Larkin cannot help but be increasingly attracted (‘more curiously’) to the small dramas taking place around him. He observes the various groups – ‘fathers with broad belts under their suits’, ‘mothers loud and fat’. For much of stanza four, his attitude is condescending, referring to one vulgar uncle ‘shouting smut’. He is equally disdainful of the clothes on show (‘lemons, mauves and olive-ochres’) and the cheap ‘jewellery-substitutes’.

The poet’s apparent class superiority is also evident in stanza five as he begins to wonder about the tawdry wedding receptions that have been taking place in ‘cafés’ and ‘banquet-halls up yards’. Despite all this derision, Larkin detects a more important undertone beneath the brash celebrations. All the newlywed couples are about to leave their familiar lives behind. The inherent sadness and inevitability of the moment are summed up as ‘The last confetti and advice were thrown’. Meanwhile, real life resumes for the children after the enjoyment of the day, while proud fathers feel relieved that all the fuss is over. For Larkin himself, however, the occasion has brought him closer to the people he has been observing and criticising.

Stanza six marks a change in the poet’s outlook. More sensitive than before, he imagines how the older, more realistic wives view married life pragmatically as ‘a happy funeral’, likely to bring both joy and sorrow. This ‘secret’ is not yet understood by the impressionable younger girls carefully ‘gripping their handbags tighter’ and who presumably have more romantic notions about marriage. Larkin sees them as facing ‘a religious wounding’, a typically ambiguous comment, suggesting both the wedding ritual and the likely hurt that lies ahead. From this moment, the poet associates himself more closely with the newlywed couples aboard the train (‘Free at last’). He is no longer merely a detached observer as ‘We hurried towards London’. The poem’s rhythm gathers pace, perhaps reflecting his growing mood of optimism.
The lines maintain their momentum in **stanza seven** as Larkin’s fellow-passengers relive the excitement of the day (‘I nearly died’). The train journey has let the poet realise that the people he has seen are all interconnected (‘their lives would all contain this hour’). This is coupled with the poignant understanding that it is only Larkin himself who is conscious of this fact (‘none/Thought of the others they would never meet’). This overview of how the random lives of individuals form a greater pattern is teased out further as he uses an **inventive rural simile** to describe London’s numerous ‘postal districts packed like squares of wheat’.

At the start of **stanza eight**, there is little doubt that Larkin is aware of the full significance of this weekend outing. The ‘dozen marriages’ have made a lasting impact on the poet. As the train arrives at its destination, he reflects on ‘this frail/Travelling coincidence’. Is he simply saying that all of life can be viewed as a journey where we meet people by chance, and that some of these encounters have the power to change us? The **last lines** reach a high point ‘as the tightened brakes took hold’ and the poem ends on a **dramatic note** (‘A sense of falling’), suggesting both danger and adventure. The final image of the distant ‘arrow-shower … becoming rain’ is an exciting one, hinting at romance, beauty and even sadness. Elusive to the end, Larkin’s poem invites us to consider the wonderful experience of life in all its richness.

**ANALYSIS**

It has been said that Philip Larkin’s poetry is gloomy and pessimistic. In your opinion, is this true of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’? Refer to the poem in your answer.

**Sample Paragraph**

Larkin is more of a realistic poet than a pessimistic one. In my opinion, he celebrated traditional English life in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’. He has a love for the English landscape. Even the fish-dock in Hull gets his attention. His description of the horizon ‘where the sky over Lincolnshire and the water meet’ is evidence of his love of his native land. He seems obsessed by the young wedding couples and their families when he sees them at the rail stations. He might be poking fun at them here and there, but it is all good-natured, never mean. Larkin laughs at the ‘nylon gloves and the jewellery substitutes’ and at the ‘uncle shouting out smut’ at the honeymooners. This is all very good-natured. And certainly not gloomy. I think the speaking tone he uses shows that he admires these happy wedding guests. He’s almost envious of their enjoyment. Philip hears the ‘whoops’ of the ‘mothers loud and very fat’, but he seems to be just smiling at their sense of fun. Not that Larkin is a complete bundle of laughs. There are some serious bits, of course. However, he is just being real
when he describes the secret comments of the experienced wives who see married life as ‘a happy funeral’. Overall, I think Philip is upbeat and celebrates working-class life.

Examiner’s Comment
A fairly solid response that makes a good attempt at tackling the question of Larkin’s tone. There are apt references to how the poet ‘celebrated’ traditional English life and how its overall attitude is ‘good-natured’. Expression is note-like and lacks control at times. The answer is further weakened by occasional slang, slightly inaccurate quotes, and overly familiar mention of ‘Philip’. Overall, an average middle grade standard.

CLASS/HOMEWORK EXERCISES

1. It has been said of Larkin that he observes ‘ordinary people doing ordinary things’. To what extent do you agree with this statement in light of your reading of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’?

2. ‘Larkin’s poems are memorable for their sharp wit and irreverence.’ Discuss this view, with particular reference to ‘The Whitsun Weddings’.

SUMMARY POINTS

- Key themes include marriage, class and culture in England during the 1950s.
- Contrasting atmospheres – the claustrophobic carriage, noisy stations, open countryside.
- Effective use of sensual imagery, sound, regular rhyme and rhythm.
- The final metaphor is startling and dramatic – and layered with meaning.
MCMXIV

Those long uneven lines
Standing as patiently
As if they were stretched outside
The Oval or Villa Park,
The crowns of hats, the sun
On moustached archaic faces
Grinning as if it were all
An August Bank Holiday lark;

And the shut shops, the bleached
Established names on the sunblinds,
The farthings and sovereigns,
And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,
The tin advertisements
For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
Wide open all day;

And the countryside not caring:
The place names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheat’s restless silence;
The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word – the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.
Glossary

Title: The title refers to the Roman numerals for 1914, the year that World War I began. It became known as the Great War, a landmark event in the 20th century.

4 The Oval: famous cricket ground near London.

4 Villa Park: Birmingham home ground of Aston Villa football club.

6 archaic: dated, old-fashioned.

8 lark: celebration, spree.

11 farthings and sovereigns: currency used at the time. The copper farthing was just a quarter of a penny, while the gold sovereign coin was worth £1.

15 twist: probably refers to a small piece of tobacco.

20 Domesday: medieval spelling of Doomsday (or Judgement Day); in 1086, William the Conqueror compiled a record of English land ownership in the Domesday Book.

24 limousines: luxury cars.

INITIAL RESPONSE

1. Suggest a reason to explain why the poet chose to write the title in Roman numerals. (Where else might the letters MCMXIV be seen?)

2. In your opinion, is Larkin’s view of the past accurate and realistic or is it sentimental and idealised? Refer to the text in your answer.

3. What do you think is meant by the final line, ‘Never such innocence again’? Briefly explain your answer.
This elegiac poem, written in 1960, has often been read as a nostalgic account of a vanished English way of life. The Roman numerals of the title evoke war memorials and the detailed descriptions seem to suggest old photographs. The whole poem consists of one long sentence, giving a sense of timelessness and connecting readers with the men lining up for army service.

Larkin’s meditation begins with a description of an old photograph of ‘uneven lines’ of British volunteers outside an army recruiting office at the start of World War I. In stanza one, the poet observes that the men are queuing happily, as if for a game of cricket or football. The tragic irony of their fate is suggested by the image of the sun shining on their ‘moustached archaic faces’ and their carefree expressions, ‘Grinning’ as if it was all just a ‘lark’. Larkin’s tone seems unclear. Does he admire the men’s idealism and courage or is there a sense that these raw recruits are naïvely seeking adventure?

The holiday atmosphere continues in stanza two with a wistful celebration of pre-war English life. Larkin lists some of the hallmarks of a bygone era: ‘farthings and sovereigns’, ‘children at play’, ‘cocoa and twist’. Trusted shops (‘Established names’) and public houses (‘Wide open all day’) add to this relaxed feeling of security. Overall, this idealised image of a long-lost England is one of innocence, freedom and stability.

The poet swaps the familiar town setting for the open countryside in stanza three. At first, the mood seems untroubled (‘not caring’). The alliterative effect and soft sibilant sounds of ‘flowering grasses, and fields’ evoke England’s green and pleasant land. But the positive mood is suddenly overshadowed by the reference to ‘Domesday lines’ – a chilling echo of the earlier ‘uneven lines’ of men whose lives are likely to end on the battlefield. The reality of mass war graves is further stressed by the unsettling image of the ‘wheat’s restless silence’. Larkin’s tone becomes increasingly critical as he focuses on the class divisions (‘differently-dressed servants’) prevalent within English society. Images of ‘tiny rooms in huge houses’ and ‘dust behind limousines’ suggest that social inequality was hidden away hypocritically.

The powerfully emotive force of stanza four emphasises the passing of an innocent age: ‘Never before or since’. Purposeful rhythm and repetition (‘never’ is used three times) reflect Larkin’s shocking realisation that the war would mark a turning point in our understanding of man’s inhumanity to man. The compelling image of countless naïve volunteers leaving their homes, unaware that their marriages would only last ‘a little while longer’, is undeniably poignant. Rather than being a hymn of sentimental nostalgia, the poem is dark with the shadow of unexpected death and we are left with an enduring sense of the human tragedy involved.
ANALYSIS

‘Philip Larkin powerfully evokes a lost land of innocence.’ Discuss this statement, with reference to ‘MCMXIV’.

Sample Paragraph
Many of Philip Larkin's poems on our course, e.g. ‘Ambulances’ and ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, give me a good insight into the past and ordinary English life. This is certainly true of his war poem ‘MCMXIV’. The poem begins with a series of images showing long lines of young men signing up to enlist in the war. They are ‘Grinning’ and have no notion of the horrors before them. Their innocence is very well seen in the way Larkin shows them standing ‘patiently’ as though they were waiting to enter a football stadium. There is a photographic quality to his descriptions. Life seems simple, carefree. The poet suggests this with images of bank holidays, familiar shop advertisements, young children playing and the pubs ‘Wide open all day’. But there is another, darker side to pre-war society – social division. Larkin reminds us of the ‘differently-dressed servants’ who are slaving away in ‘tiny rooms’ for the upper classes. By the end of the poem, he suggests that the innocent pre-war years were about to be replaced with a horrifying time of conflict, mass destruction and death. I found the final verse very effective, repeating the awful truth - ‘Never such innocence again’. The peace and harmony of the past would be shattered for all time.

Examiner’s Comment
An assured personal response, focused throughout and well-illustrated. The opening sentence contains a good example of cross reference. Quotations are integrated effectively and the answer ranges widely over the positive and negative aspects: ‘images of bank holidays, familiar shop advertisements’ and ‘long lines of young men signing up to enlist’. Good personal engagement at the conclusion secures the top grade.
CLASS/HOMEWORK EXERCISES

1. How does Larkin establish the underlying sense of death that pervades the poem? Refer closely to the text in your answer.

2. ‘In “MCMXIV”, Larkin controls his sense of outrage while offering present readers a searing exposé of modern warfare’. Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poem.

SUMMARY POINTS

• The significance of World War I and the passing of innocence are central themes.
• Tone varies - nostalgic, celebratory, ironic, sympathetic, critical, tragic.
• Descriptive details, evocative visual images and sound effects.
• Good use of powerfully emotive language and emphatic repetition.
AMBULANCES

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
They come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited.

Then children strewn on steps or road,
Or women coming from the shops
Past smells of different dinners, see
A wild white face that overtops
Red stretcher-blankets momentarily
As it is carried in and stowed,

And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true.
The fastened doors recede. Poor soul,
They whisper at their own distress;

For borne away in deadened air
May go the sudden shut of loss
Round something nearly at an end,
And what cohered in it across
The years, the unique random blend
Of families and fashions, there

At last begin to loosen. Far
From the exchange of love to lie
Unreachable inside a room
The traffic parts to let go by
Brings closer what is left to come,
And dulls to distance all we are.
INITIAL RESPONSE


2. From your reading of the second stanza, what evidence can you find of the poet’s superb eye for interesting detail?

3. Critics have said that Philip Larkin’s poems are more realistic than pessimistic. In your opinion, is this the case in ‘Ambulances’? Give reasons for your answer.
‘Ambulances’ is a reflection on life and mortality, written in the early 1960s when an ambulance was usually associated with bad news. Larkin once remarked that everything he wrote had ‘the consciousness of approaching death in the background’.

What do you think of when you see an ambulance? A serious road accident or some other emergency? Do you feel a sense of fear or of hope? People usually become apprehensive when they hear an ambulance siren. Are they genuinely concerned or are they just being inquisitive and voyeuristic?

From the outset of ‘Ambulances’, the tone is uneasy. There is an immediate sense of threat from these anonymous ‘grey’ vans that prowl around ‘Loud noons of cities’. Even in the hustle and bustle of urban life, nobody escapes. Larkin sees these vehicles as symbols of death. An ambulance can take anyone away at any time. The patient is confined and vulnerable in much the same way as everyone is unable to escape dying: ‘All streets in times are visited’. The dramatic opening line of the first stanza compares the ambulance van to a confessional – a place where people experience spiritual rebirth and make their peace with God. This religious image forces readers to face up to the inevitability of death. The poet personifies the vehicles, but they are as unresponsive as a corpse, ‘giving back/None of the glances they absorb’. Bystanders glance nervously at passing ambulances, perhaps hoping deep down that their time has not yet come.

However, the randomness of death is starkly emphasised by the line ‘They come to rest at any kerb’. We are all powerless against the stark reality of our mortality.

Stanza two demonstrates Larkin’s keen eye for vivid detail as he describes the reaction of onlookers when an ambulance arrives and disturbs a quiet neighbourhood. The street is suddenly transformed. Normal life stops for a moment as people consider the significance of what is happening. Simple, colloquial language illustrates the sharp contrast between everyday life (‘children strewn on steps or road’) and the hidden terror of death as the patient (now an unknown body described as ‘it’) is carried out to the ambulance. The colour images highlight the anguish of life-threatening illness (‘A wild white face’) and danger (‘Red stretcher-blankets’).

Larkin’s tone is much more reflective in stanza three. This is typical of his writing. The crowd of spectators watching the small drama taking place ‘sense the solving emptiness/That lies just under all we do’. They have been forced to confront the one underlying truth that all life ends with the mystery of dying. The poet himself was an atheist who could only believe in the ‘emptiness’ of oblivion after death. Unlike the earlier third-person description in the opening stanzas, the introduction of the pronoun ‘we’ gives the poem a universal significance. Death is our common fate and, in Larkin’s belief, makes life meaningless. This seems to be the central moment of truth, or epiphany, in the poem – the morbid discovery that human existence is futile. Modern secular society avoids death. It is a taboo subject that we only think about when we are forced to.
For Larkin, all of our daily concerns – cooking, playing, etc. – are merely ways of filling time until
death transports us to a state of ‘permanent and blank’ nothingness. As the ambulance pulls away,
the poet suggests that people’s whispered sympathy (‘Poor soul’) for the patient is really a selfish
expression of ‘their own distress’. Such irony is a common feature of Larkin’s cynical observations of
everyday life. In the final two stanzas, the mood of depression deepens as Larkin considers the dying patient
experiencing ‘the sudden shut of loss’. Stark imagery and a deliberate rhythm combine to suggest the
great change that death will bring, separating the individual from family and identity. The sensation of
being isolated inside the ambulance (‘Unreachable inside a room’) echoes the earlier alienation of the
confessional and adds to the growing sense of panic. Death will eventually alter (‘loosen’) everything.
Although the syntax (order of words) is complex at the end, Larkin manages to give a clear
impression of his own sombre philosophy. As with much of his work, he is able to take a particular
circumstance and find a general truth in it. The poem ends on a sweetly serene note of disillusion.
Although ambulances try to save lives, they are actually the messengers of unavoidable death. The
final disarming image leaves a lingering sense of bleakness. As the traffic parts and the ambulance
siren quickly fades away, death also ‘dulls to distance all we are’. For Larkin, there is no higher purpose
to human existence, no comforting afterlife.

ANALYSIS

‘Vivid details illustrate Larkin’s reflections on life and mortality.’ Discuss this statement, with particular
reference to ‘Ambulances’.

Sample Paragraph

The opening lines of ‘Ambulances’ contain many authentic images of the vans weaving in and
out of traffic as they ‘thread’ their way through a busy city. We are given an immediate sense of
the everyday setting and the noisy street: ‘Loud noons of cities’. This condensed image effectively
conveys a realistic impression of the city-centre sounds at midday. Larkin adds drama to the
scene by describing one ‘Light glossy grey’ ambulance suddenly coming to a ‘rest at any kerb’. It
is the immediate focus of attention. The poet fills in the dramatic scene with precise pictures of
the various spectators. Women coming from the shops stop and stare. There is realistic detailed
description of the ‘smells of different dinners’ and of the children who are innocently playing,
‘strewn on steps or road’. However, Larkin’s picture of the sick patient is the most convincing of all.
‘A wild white face’ staring up from the ‘Red stretcher-blankets’ suggests pain and fear. The vivid
images create a compelling sense of the seriousness of what is happening.
Examiner’s Comment

As part of a full answer, this strong paragraph is firmly focused on how Larkin selects vibrant and energetic images to convey meaning and reinforce themes: ‘many authentic images of the vans weaving in and out of traffic as they “thread their way through a busy city”’. The quotations are effectively used to illustrate the poet’s skill in creating key moments of drama surrounding the sudden arrival of the ambulance: “A wild white face” staring up from the “Red stretcher-blankets” suggests pain and fear’. A well-written top grade answer.

CLASS/HOMEWORK EXERCISES

1. How would you describe the dominant mood of ‘Ambulances’? Using evidence from the poem, write a paragraph showing how Larkin creates this mood. (Model your answer on the sample paragraph above.)

2. ‘Philip Larkin uses a variety of poetic techniques to express the deeper significance of ordinary everyday scenes.’ Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poem ‘Ambulances’.

SUMMARY POINTS

- The universal experience of mortality is central to the poem.
- Larkin uses the extended metaphor of the ambulance throughout.
- Characteristic use of colloquial language and closely observed details.
- Vivid, realistic imagery, bleak atmosphere and a dark, depressing tone.
THE TREES

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greennesss is a kind of grief.

Is it they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

‘The recent buds relax and spread’
INITIAL RESPONSE

1. Larkin compares and contrasts the world of nature in ‘The Trees’ with the world of man. List one similarity and one contrast and comment on their effectiveness. Support your views with reference to the poem.

2. ‘Like something almost being said’. In your opinion, what is almost being said? To whom and by whom is it being said?

3. ‘Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.’ Do you think this line is optimistic or full of false hope?

STUDY NOTES

*The Trees’ was written in 1967 and forms part of the High Windows collection. At this point, Larkin’s personal life had become complicated. His mother was suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer’s. This adds a special resonance to the last line of the poem. Do you think that people often long to ‘Begin afresh, afresh, afresh’?*

Larkin deals with the classic theme of transience (passing time) in this lyric poem. The language in the opening stanza is harmonious and sombre, as long vowel sounds (‘a’, ‘o’ and ‘u’) announce the arrival of spring. The event is seen as inevitable; Larkin conveys the feeling that this has happened so often before. The mystery of the leaves’ tentative arrival is suggested in the simile ‘Like something almost being said’. We know it’s going to happen, but we don’t know how or why. It just does. Note the use of ‘we’ – this is a message for all of us. The verbs ‘relax and spread’ vividly convey the abundant covering of leaves on the former bare branches. But this rejuvenation of nature is not greeted warmly by the poet, who states that it is ‘a kind of grief’. For whom is there sorrow? Man is unable to renew himself. Is the poet perhaps thinking of lost opportunities, what might have been? Or perhaps he is thinking of loved ones who are sick. The slow three-beat rhythm (iambic tetrameter) perfectly suits this lyrical meditation on the theme of decay and death.

In the second stanza, Larkin asks a rhetorical question to explore this thought further: ‘Is it that they are born again/And we grow old?’ The stark answer comes in the broken line ‘No, they die too’. He does not flinch from the unpalatable reality of the finality of all living things. Time passes relentlessly and mercilessly, and the passage through time is recorded ‘in rings of grain’ in the tree trunks. The trees’ appearance of renewal is just that – appearance, a ‘trick’. The rhyme here (cddc) is pertinent: ‘born again’ rhymes with ‘rings of grain’, emphasising that their trick of renewal is exposed in the tree trunk.
Larkin’s tone changes abruptly in the third stanza. The energy and life of the blossoming trees is celebrated in the metaphor ‘unresting castles’. Spring’s dynamic growth is shown in the compound word ‘fullgrown’ and in the assonance of ‘unresting’ and ‘thresh’. Life springs back ‘every May’. The trees, symbols of courage, are giving a message of hope to mankind as they seem to say, ‘Last year is dead’. There is no use grieving over what is gone; concentrate on the future. The trees’ exhortation is charged with urgency in the appeal ‘Begin afresh, afresh, afresh’. Is this what was hinted at in the earlier phrase, ‘Like something almost being said’? The vibrant rhetoric of spring demands that we seize the day. The life-force of the trees is sending out the hope-filled message: don’t give up. Is this longing for life attractive but false? Which is the abiding message of the poem: the vitality of life or the inevitability of death? Could it be both?

ANALYSIS

‘Larkin was a self-deprecating poet who often dismissed his own insightful reflections.’ Discuss this statement in relation to ‘The Trees’, using close reference to the text.

Sample Paragraph
Larkin mocked his poem ‘The Trees’ as ‘awful tripe’. It was here he wrote of his ‘astounded delight at the renewal of the natural world’. This lyric, with its theme of transience, emphasises this view, but also brings it a step further. Here is no attractive, false idea of renewal. The poet realises that the trees will – after renewing themselves year after year (unlike humans) – eventually die. The abrupt broken line, ‘No, they die too’, baldly states this fact. He calls their rejuvenation a ‘trick’, as if there is something false or deceitful in what they do. The passage of inexorable time is marked in the material, decaying world in ‘rings of grain’. This is definitely not ‘tripe’, but genuine insight into the nature of things, however unsavoury. I feel that his imagination is caught by the vitality and dynamism of the growing trees, which he describes as ‘unresting castles’. The onomatopoeic ‘thresh’ captures this swaying movement and sense of being vibrantly alive. The concluding line, with its repetitive appeal, to ‘Begin afresh, afresh, afresh’, seems to me to be a plea for hope. Life should be lived to the brim. So the voice of the trees/the voice of the poet is telling us to seize the day. I believe that Larkin was very wrong to be so dismissive of this lyric. It reminds us that each new day brings with it the possibility of wonder.
Examiner’s Comment
This focused paragraph eloquently argues the merits of Larkin’s poem. A clear viewpoint is established, detailing a range of points. Expression and vocabulary are impressive: ‘The passage of inexorable time is marked in the material, decaying world in “rings of grain”.’ The judicious use of quotation adds weight to this successful top grade response.

CLASS/HOMEWORK EXERCISES

1. Larkin said, ‘When you’ve read a poem, that’s it, it’s all quite clear what it means.’ Having read ‘The Trees’, would you agree or disagree with this view? Support your answer with reference to the text.

2. ‘Larkin’s poems often convey a strong sense of place which adds authenticity to the poet’s observations.’ To what extent is this true of ‘The Trees’? Support your answer with reference to the poem.

SUMMARY POINTS

- Larkin contrasts human transience with the renewal of nature.
- Tone varies – downbeat, calm, reflective, hopeful.
- Compact structure, vivid images, rich sounds.
- Effective use of metaphor, personification, repetition and rhetorical language.
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.
‘Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter’

**Glossary**

2. *pithead*: the top part of a mine.
3. *slagheap*: man-made hill formed from the waste of coal mining.
4. *pitboots*: heavy boots worn by miners.
8. *lark’s eggs*: the eggs of the skylark, a native bird of England and Ireland.
10. *moleskins*: heavy material worn by working men.
15. *Scarfed*: wrapped up.

**INITIAL RESPONSE**

1. Does Larkin give a realistic picture of the working men? Choose two realistic details (images) that you found effective.

2. In your opinion, is this a sentimental poem? Give reasons for your answer.

3. Comment on the concluding image as a symbol of redemption.
'The Explosion' documents a tragedy that can randomly happen to a community, but it offers a consolation that is not present in Larkin’s other poems. The word ‘explosion’ brings to mind a loud bang, destruction, dead bodies. What other words do you associate with the word ‘explosion’?

The source of this poem was a documentary Larkin watched on the coal-mining industry. The poem gives an account of an underground accident in which a number of miners lost their lives. Many of the miners’ wives were supposed to have seen visions of their husbands at the moment of the explosion. Larkin also said, ‘I heard a song about a mine disaster ... it made me want to write the same thing, a mine disaster with a vision of immortality at the end ... that’s the point of the eggs.’

The poem opens quietly as the scene is observed in stanza one and we are gently led into the drama: ‘On the day of the explosion’. Notice the word ‘the’. This is a specific event that will affect specific people. The details give a premonition of disaster: ‘Shadows pointed towards the pithead’. The alliteration of the explosive letter ‘p’ adds to the menace, as does the personification: ‘slagheap slept’. The image of a sleeping monster that will wreak havoc if awoken is suggested. The alliteration of ‘s’ emphasises the uneasy peace.

In contrast, along come the noisy miners, swearing and coughing in stanza two. An impression of proud, ordinary, strong young men from the tough world of the mines is given in a few well-chosen details: ‘pitboots’, ‘Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke’. The onomatopoeia in the line ‘Shouldering off the freshened silence’ gives an idea of their rough strength. They walk unknowing, but we know and this adds to the growing tension and suspense in the poem. We are brought closer to the miners in stanza three as we observe them playing about. One chases rabbits, but comes back with a ‘nest of lark’s eggs’. He ‘shows’ the eggs. These are men who are interested in and deeply respectful of nature. He ‘lodged’ the eggs in the grasses, where the mother bird could find them. We see the sensitivity in these tough men.

The miners are part of a close-knit community, as we learn in stanza four: ‘Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter’. The poignancy is becoming unbearable for the reader as we realise all will be blown apart by the event that is about to occur. The ‘tall gates’ are waiting, ‘standing open’, almost like the gates of the underworld, inescapable. These men meet their fate in stanza five (‘So they passed’). The language is almost biblical. The ending is becoming inevitable. Larkin records the accident calmly, without melodrama. Instead we are presented with the ripple effects of the explosion on nature: ‘cows/Stopped chewing’ and the sun ‘dimmed’ as it was supposed to have done at the crucifixion of Christ. Time stands still. The explosion only registered for a ‘second’. This is in contrast with the world of the men, where nothing will ever be the same again. But the rescue and the grief are unmentioned. We are left to imagine the horror.

In the final part of the poem (stanzas six to nine), the focus is changed. Now we are looking at the
wives and their reactions to the deaths. The passage from the Bible is in italics, words of comfort, a certainty of resurrection: ‘We shall see them face to face’. The wives believe this so strongly that they have a glimpse of their husbands and sons ‘for a second’. Notice the difference of the reaction of the wives and the animals. The women’s lives are irrevocably changed, but the animals resume their grazing. This terrible tragedy is of no consequence to the world of nature. They are unable to explain this vision ‘Somehow’. These men are as they were and also are now transformed, ‘Larger than in life’. They are walking in brilliant light. The sun is now the blazing sun of eternity. They are ‘Gold as on a coin’, a pure and enduring metal. The rhythm is stately and formal, which suits the religious viewpoint.

The poem ends on a note of affirmation, with the potent image of the unbroken eggs suggesting the hope of resurrection, the continuity of life and the strength of the ties of love. The last line stands alone, separated from the eight other three-line stanzas. Larkin’s scepticism is absent. He is moved by sympathy for these men and their families. As the poet has said (in ‘An Arundel Tomb’), ‘What will survive of us is love’. This is the last poem in his last collection of poetry. Is it being suggested that love triumphs over death? Is this a modern religious poem?

ANALYSIS

‘Memorable imagery illustrates the beautiful, consoling poetry of Philip Larkin.’ Discuss this statement with reference to ‘The Explosion’.

Sample Paragraph

Larkin captures the scene on the day of the explosion with a few well-chosen visual details. He alerts the reader to the possibility of disaster with the sinister image of the ‘shadows’ which ‘pointed towards the pithead’, almost as if they were arrows of destiny marking the target of the miners. The air of menace is further emphasised with the memorable image of the slagheap as it ‘slept’ in the sun. The personification suggests a sleeping monster that will cause chaos if woken up. The image of the ‘tall gates standing open’ appealed to me, as it suggested the entry of the men into death’s kingdom. The long vowel sounds slow the line. Death does not know time. These vowels, ‘a’ and ‘o’, lend a stately, solemn rhythm to the phrase, which reminds me of a ceremonial funeral march. The final image, contained in the floating last line, ‘One showing the eggs unbroken’, is full of optimism and hope, as it reminds me of Easter and the Resurrection of Christ. The image reflects a rare moment when Larkin has a positive attitude towards a Christian afterlife. The little eggs suggest renewal, the beginning of a new era. Larkin has laid aside his cynicism. The poem ends on this memorable image of transcendence, making the poem a beautiful religious credo.
Examiner's Comment

This is a succinct and well-controlled paragraph showing a close knowledge of the text. Expressive language use: ‘These vowels, “a” and “o”, lend a stately solemn rhythm to the phrase, which reminds me of a ceremonial funeral march’. Fluent writing throughout and effective use of quotation raise the answer to the highest grade.

CLASS/HOMEWORK EXERCISES

1. Write a paragraph on how the structure of the poem helps Larkin communicate his theme effectively. (Look at the arrangement of the stanzas scene by scene on the page, the use of run-on lines, the placement of key words, the use of italics and the separate last line.)

2. ‘Many of Philip Larkin’s poems are known for their underlying tension.’ To what extent is this true of ‘The Explosion’? Support your answer with reference to the poem.

SUMMARY POINTS

• The universality of death, the preciousness of life and the human need for a reassuring afterlife are central themes.
• Narrative/descriptive details portray the miners in all their ordinariness.
• Variety of tones – impersonal, subdued, sympathetic, formal, positive.
• Effective use of sound, contrast, imagery, metaphor and personification.
CUT GRASS

Cut grass lies frail:
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
Long, long the death

It dies in the white hours
Of young-leafed June
With chestnut flowers,
With hedges snowlike strewn,

White lilac bowed,
Lost lanes of Queen Anne’s lace,
And that high-builted cloud
Moving at summer’s pace.

‘Lost lanes of Queen Anne’s lace’
Glossary

| 2 Brief is the breath: life is short (the Bible says: ‘all the glory of man is as flowers of grass’). |
| 8 strewn: covered untidily. |
| 10 Queen Anne’s lace: cow parsley, a white wild flower with lace-like blooms. |

INITIAL RESPONSE

1. This poem gives a picture of a rural landscape. What colour predominates? List three examples. What is the colour white usually associated with? (Innocence, weddings, funeral flowers, purity, etc.) In your opinion, why does Larkin use this colour?

2. In your opinion, what is the mood of the poem? Does it change or not? Give evidence from the text to support your view.

3. Write a paragraph giving your own personal response to this poem. Refer closely to the text in your answer.

STUDY NOTES

‘Cut Grass’ is a lyric dealing with a recurring theme in Larkin’s poetry: passing time and death. Written in 1971, it appeared in his collection High Windows. It is a calm poem that Larkin saw as a ‘succession of images’. His verdict was, ‘I like it all right’. Yet it was written at the end of Larkin’s life, when he was very bitter about the state of England (‘what an end to a great country’). He was critical of socialism and immigrants: ‘I have always been right wing … I identify with certain virtues (thrift, hard work, reverence, desire to preserve).’

The Bible states that ‘All flesh is grass’. The title of ‘Cut Grass’ echoes this classic theme implicitly as we are reminded of the figure of Father Time/Death with his scythe. All living things are mown down. The setting of this poem is a meadow that has been recently mown. ‘Cut grass lies frail’ suggests the fragility and brevity of life against the relentless approach of inescapable death. The word ‘frail’ almost seems to expire as its sound drifts away at the end of the first line of stanza one. The short, unpredictable life of the grass is eloquently captured in the alliterative phrase ‘Brief is the breath’. Explosive ‘b’ sounds reflect the action of breathing in and out. This personification, continued in the verb ‘exhale’, implies the parallel between our tenuous hold on life and that of all living things. The full stop at the end of this line underscores the reality of death and its finality. In contrast to this,
the first stanza runs on into the next stanza to emphasise the fact that death is endless; it is not subject to time: ‘Long, long the death’.

**Stanza two** tells us when the grass in the meadow dies, just at the moment when all other things are growing profusely. The trees are beginning to come into leaf and the hedges are covered in foaming whitethorn, like snow (‘snowlike strewn’). The alliteration and **run-on lines** suggest the abundance of nature. Nature has the ability to renew itself, as the compound word ‘young-leafed’ suggests. We wonder: can man renew himself? The assonance (‘hours’, ‘flowers’) adds a poigniant, melancholy note to this stanza, as in the midst of life is death.

In the **third stanza**, this abundance continues as the succession of beautiful white images mirror each other: ‘White lilac bowed’ flows into frothy ‘lanes of Queen Anne’s lace’. This wild flower appears every summer in out-of-the way lanes throughout rural England. Is this poem also an elegy for a disappearing England? The **alliteration** of ‘l’ suggests the meandering, winding lanes of the countryside. Towering white clouds add to this picture of rural serenity, as they glide effortlessly by, ‘Moving at summer’s pace’. But all will die in their own time. This elegy is like a lament or requiem, its long vowel sounds suggesting the lingering of the bereaved, unwilling to let the dead go. The poet’s tone is sympathetic, resigned to the inevitable.

Here is no Christian consolation, no exhortation to live life passionately. The two-sentence poem is divided into short, abrupt phrases at the start which showcase the harsh finality of death. The poem then moves into the long run-on lines of the second sentence, which is stately and dignified and is suitable for a lament. The **regular rhyme scheme** (abab, cdcd, efef) underpins the fact that time passes and death comes; it is unavoidable. Larkin clearly valued traditional English poetry forms, as he valued England.

**ANALYSIS**

‘Larkin said he wrote two kinds of poetry, “the beautiful and the true”. Discuss this statement, with reference to ‘Cut Grass’.

**Sample Paragraph**

In my opinion, Larkin has indeed written a poem that resonates with truth. There is no escaping the sad finality of all human existence, ‘Brief is the breath’. The poet does not give us any consolation either in this elegy. The real truth of human mortality floats in our consciousness as timeless and as inevitable as the ‘high-builted cloud’ floats in the sky on a summer’s day. I also think this poem is beautiful, as the succession of idyllic images which are truly English are presented to us. The smell
of cut grass is suggested in the evocative line ‘Mown stalks exhale’. The abundance and generosity of nature is shown in the alliterative phrase ‘hedges snowlike strewn’. But for me the real beauty of the poem lies in the musical writing. It reminds me of a song lyric. The assonance of long vowel sounds (‘Long, long’) and slender vowels (‘White lilac’) evoke long, lazy summer evenings that are quintessentially English. The melancholic phrase ‘Lost lanes’ seems to be lamenting a lost way of life, as well as death, as the ‘l’ sound lingers on the ear. Larkin is a superb craftsman. The gentle fading sounds of the words ‘frail’ and ‘exhale’ both disappear, as all individual existence does into the inevitability of death. The finality of death is punctuated sternly by the full stop after ‘exhale’. The compound words ‘young-leafed’, ‘high-builted’ show the beauty of life. The regular rhyme scheme (abab, cdcd, efef) moves as effortlessly as the clouds ‘at summer’s pace’. Larkin expresses a classic, true theme in a beautiful way. Like him, I like this poem ‘all right’.

**Examiner’s Comment**

This top grade paragraph addresses the two elements of the question (‘beautiful’ and ‘true’). It shows a real appreciation of poetic technique: ‘The assonance of long vowel sounds (“Long, long”) and slender vowels (“White lilac”) evoke long, lazy summer evenings that are quintessentially English’. Fluent expression, particularly the impressive vocabulary, results in a strong, successful answer.

**CLASS/HOMEWORK EXERCISES**

1. Larkin’s poems show ‘loneliness, emptiness and mortality’. Do you agree that this is true of ‘Cut Grass’? Refer to the text in your answer.

2. Comment on Larkin’s use of sound in ‘Cut Grass’. Refer closely to the poem in your answer.

**SUMMARY POINTS**

- Key themes - the cycle of life and death.
- Short lyric form evokes the frailty and brevity of life.
- While the tone is poignant and elegiac, it is not solely negative.
- Effective use of imagery, personification, regular rhyme and onomatopoeia.
LEAVING CERT SAMPLE ESSAY

‘Philip Larkin explores the darker side of life, but with a warm, compassionate voice.’ Discuss this statement, supporting the points you make with suitable reference to the poems by Larkin on your course.

Marking Scheme Guidelines
Candidates are free to agree and/or disagree with the given statement. However, they should show clear evidence of personal engagement with the poetry of Philip Larkin. The key terms (‘darker side of life’ and ‘warm, compassionate voice’) should be addressed either implicitly or explicitly. Allow for a wide range of approaches in the answering.

Indicative material:
• Ambivalent attitude to love, death, religion
• Larkin projects a misleading/enigmatic persona
• Widely varying tones and atmospheres
• Can be seen to celebrate/criticise ordinary English life
• Ambiguous interpretation of his imagery
• Fatalistic/pessimistic attitude, etc.

Sample Essay
(Larkin explores the darker side of life with a warm, compassionate voice)

1. Philip Larkin seems to enjoy adopting a morose persona. His subject matter can be dark and he can be a very critical poetic voice. Larkin often reflects on the futility of life and the inevitability of death e.g. in his poem, ‘Ambulances’. Elsewhere, he addresses random tragedy in a sympathetic way (‘The Explosion’). His tone is sometimes filled with gloom and melancholy, ‘Brief is the breath’. He can be critical, ‘differently-dressed servants’. Yet I like Larkin’s poetry because he celebrates the healing power of love and marriage (‘Wedding Wind’). Many of his poems reveal an affection for English communities and ordinary people. He explores how love transcends time (‘An Arundel Tomb’). At times, his imagery is beautiful and affirmative and I enjoy his dry sense of humour.

2. I don’t know of a more touchingly tender moment than that described in ‘An Arundel Tomb’. At first, the poet seems detached at the sight of the tomb of the Earl of Arundel and his wife. Their faces are ‘blurred’, worn by time. The ‘little dogs under their feet’ are that ‘faint hint of the absurd’. But the poet draws the reader’s attention ‘with a sharp tender shock’ to this detail of affection. The Earl’s ‘hand is withdrawn, holding her hand’. The alliteration of ‘h’ and the stately rhythm emphasise the importance of close human relationships. Can love transcend time in this ‘stone fidelity’? The poem’s last line states ‘What
will survive of us is love'. Even if ‘Only an attitude remains’, I am comforted that the message is one of lasting love.

3. Love is also the subject of ‘Wedding Wind’. Larkin adopts the persona of a young bride, ‘I can imagine ... the emotions of a bride’. I found it interesting that life lived by ordinary people should be a subject for poetry. The imperfect detail, ‘/Carry a chipped pail to the chicken run’ and mundane sight of ‘My apron and the hanging cloths on the line’ glow due to the skill of the poet. Irritating jobs may have to be endured, but they are transfigured by the joy of the young woman, ‘this bodying forth by wind/Of joy my actions turn on’. These actions are ‘like a thread carrying beads’. The sacrament of marriage is vividly evoked by this simile. I realised that these ordinary actions form part of the state of holy matrimony. The young woman feels so blessed she wonders ‘Can even death dry up/These new delighted lakes’. Larkin has celebrated passionate young love in the English countryside.

4. ‘Ambulances’ reflect Larkin’s view of life’s futility. An ambulance arrives, a common experience in modern life. But Larkin adds ‘They come to rest at any kerb’. Suddenly the perspective has changed. The reader and the bystanders all hope that their time will not come soon. I found the way the poet allowed the second last stanza rush into the last one very interesting as I now became aware that it was mimicking what was happening. All ties were unravelling for the sick person. All that was familiar was receding, ‘the unique random blend/Of families and fashions, there/At last begin to loosen’. Here is a poet who is compassionate, who understands what it means to be human, and how terrifying it must be as sickness ‘dulls to distance all we are’.

5. Philip Larkin can also be dryly humorous. In his affectionate account of a summer train journey, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, I enjoyed the seaside postcard sketches of ‘mothers loud and fat;/An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,/The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes’. But he also made me think about the reality of families parting and changing as children set off on their new lives and parents are left behind, ‘The last confetti and advice were thrown’. The sheer richness of the experience of life is described.

6. Larkin explores death, the banal every day, sickness and the vulgarity of ordinary life. In my opinion, the reason Philip Larkin is popular is not because of his exploration of cruelty and fear, but because the warm voice of the poet emerges. The detail of the held hand, the image of the ‘thread carrying beads’, the compassion for the aloneness of the sick, ‘Far from the exchange of love to lie’, the heightened exciting distant ‘arrow shower ... becoming rain’ all remain in my memory. For me the sympathetic voice of the poet in the midst of life’s traumas is the reason for Larkin’s enduring popularity.

(aptrox. 740 words)
Examiner’s Comment

A well-organised essay, confidently written and showing some close personal engagement with Larkin’s poetry: ‘In my opinion, the reason Philip Larkin is popular is not because of his exploration of cruelty and fear, but because the warm voice of the poet emerges’. Some points deserve fuller discussion, e.g. ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is superficially treated in Paragraph 5. However, there is effective use of quotations and the expression throughout is impressive.

SAMPLE LEAVING CERT QUESTIONS ON LARKIN’S POETRY

1. ‘Philip Larkin speaks intimately to the reader about love and loss through visual images, metaphors and sound effects.’ Do you agree with this assessment of his poetry? Your answer should focus on his themes and the way he expresses them. Support the points you make with suitable reference to the poems by Larkin on your course.

2. ‘A dark ironic wit energises Larkin’s realistic reflections on mortality and immortality.’ Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the poetry by Larkin on your course.

3. ‘Larkin’s poems explore the lives of ordinary people in a poetic style that is elegant and understated.’ Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Philip Larkin on your course.

Sample Essay Plan (Q1)

‘Philip Larkin speaks intimately to the reader about love and loss through visual images, metaphors and sound effects.’ Do you agree with this assessment of his poetry? Your answer should focus on his themes and the way he expresses them. Support the points you make with suitable reference to the poems by Larkin on your course.

• Intro: Identify the elements of the question to be addressed (‘intimately’, themes of mortality and love, using the techniques of ‘visual images, metaphors and sound effects’). The observant eyes of Larkin compassionately view relevant and recurring themes of transience, death and love. He faces up to universal fears honestly while maintaining compassion for the ordinary individual.

• Point 1: ‘Wedding Wind’ – by adopting the persona of a young bride, Larkin celebrates the joy of passionate love and also its everyday irritants through vivid imagery (‘All’s ravelled under the sun’) and powerful similes (‘like a thread/Carrying beads’).
Point 2: ‘Cut Grass’ – quiet exploration of the fragility and brevity of life through the predominance of the colour white (‘hedges snowlike strewn’), explosive sound effects (‘Brief is the breath’) and effective personification (‘Mown stalks exhale’).


Point 4: ‘The Trees’ – celebration of human resilience and courage in the face of certain death. Use of present continuous tense, sibilance and an even rhyme scheme gently give a positive outlook.

Point 5: ‘Ambulances’ – indiscriminate nature of disaster in human affairs graphically described through evocative imagery (‘Closed like confessionals’) and sound effects (‘A wild white face’).

Conclusion: Larkin speaks quietly about the terrifying aspects of life, transience, disaster and death, sometimes offering comfort, sometimes accepting what cannot be changed. He celebrates love by showing ordinary people doing ordinary things.

Sample Essay Plan (Q1)
Develop one of the above points into a paragraph.

Sample Paragraph: Point 2
In the calm elegy ‘Cut Grass’, Larkin conjures up an idealised image of rural England that was fast disappearing: ‘White lilac bowed,/Lost lanes of Queen Anne’s lace’. The long vowel sounds ‘a’ and ‘o’ convey the reluctance of letting go of something precious. The poet does not offer comfort in this lyrical exploration of the finality of death, starkly stating ‘Brief is the breath’. The explosive ‘b’ sounds mimic the in-and-out motion of inhaling and exhaling, a true sign of life. Through personification, ‘Cut grass lies frail’, ‘Mown stalks exhale’, the finality of death is presented. Here the reader comes face to face with the tenuous hold on life and the finality of death. The full stop emphasises the reality from which there is no escape while the run-on line stresses limitless death: ‘Long, long the death / It dies’. The dignified tone of the poem brought home clearly to me the chilling message that time cuts down all living things. In the regular rhyme scheme (‘frail’, ‘exhale’; ‘breath’, ‘death’), Larkin effortlessly captures the unavoidable fact that we all disappear into the inevitable unknown after death. Confidentially, as if speaking to a child, this poet allows us to look at the reality of his human existence and experience the still, sad music of humanity.

Examiner’s Comment
This engaging personal response focuses on the poet’s techniques used to recall the secluded English countryside: sound effects, use of metaphor, personification, vivid verbs and tactile imagery.
In the regular rhyme scheme ("frail", "exhale"; "breath", "death"), Larkin effortlessly captures the unavoidable fact that we all disappear into the inevitable unknown after death. Expressive language raises this paragraph to the top grade.

LAST WORDS

‘Larkin’s poems are melancholy, melodious, disenchanted, bewitching, perfectly written and perfectly approachable.’

*Seamus Heaney*

‘People marvelled that a poet they had never met could have spoken to them so intimately.’

*Andrew Motion*

‘I want readers to feel yes, I’ve never thought of it that way, but that’s how it is.’

*Philip Larkin*
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