

AMBULANCES Philip Larkin

A meditation on the closeness of death, its randomness and its inevitability. These three ideas are captured for Larkin in the action of ambulances in the city. Today young people might see ambulances as a sign of hope, a positive intervention sustaining life rather than heralding death. When the poem was written in the fifties, to be carried away in an ambulance was a sign of worse to come.

Stanza 1

The ambulances symbolise death. They are closed and inscrutable "giving back none of the glances they absorb"; like a corpse. They are private, secretive, silent like confessionals. They cause agitation in people who glance nervously at them hoping that their time has not come. The randomness of death is suggested by

"They come to rest at any kerb"

Its inevitability is expressed in,

"all streets in time are visited"

Stanza 2

Note Larkin's superb eye for significant detail as he points out the contrast between the zest and energy of living

"children strewn on roads"

"women....past smells of different dinners..."

and the horror of its opposite

"A wild white face.."

as the patient is carried away from the flow of normality to be "stowed" like some dead thing in the ambulance. The red of the blankets, the white of the face are colours of distress.

Stanza 3

A reflective stanza after the vivid details of the first two. The poet is moved to think that death is our common fate that has the power to render life meaningless. All our busy concerns, all our cooking, our play is just a way of filling time until death takes us away to empty nothingness;

"And sense the solving emptiness

"That lies just under all we do".

This thought which we put out of our minds comes to us without any softening theology

"And for a second (we) get it whole

So permanent and blank and true"

As the ambulance pulls away, Larkin suggests that peoples' expression of sympathy at the patient's plight is also an expression of our common vulnerability to sickness and death.

Stanza 4 and 5

Now Larkin thinks of the dying patient and the sadness in her heart as she experiences

“the sudden shut of loss

Round something nearly at an end.”

He sympathises with her fear. He reflects on the loss that death will bring; how it will destroy this unique person

“the unique random blend of families and fashions...”

and “loosens” her from her family and identity - all that really matters to us as people.

The tremendous isolation of being in an ambulance as she faces death

“Far from the exchange of love to lie

Unreachable inside a room “(i.e. the ambulance)

brings out Larkin’s deep sympathy for the victim. This sympathy is for a real person.

But as with most poems by Larkin, he is able to take a particular experience, a particular circumstance and find a general truth in it. Here, the suffering of the victim become the model for all life lived, all death experienced. The model is bleak, however. Living according to this model is just the rush towards death,

“brings closer what is left to come”

and the effect of this realisation is to make life seem a lonely and bleak experience robbed of its joyful immediacy its pleasant physicality,

“And dulls to distance all we are.”

We are left isolated by the experience, distanced from ourselves.