

Afternoons



SUMMARY

Summertime is ending. Autumn leaves fall, one by one or two by two, from trees around the new playground. During gaps of free time in the afternoons, young moms gather by the swing set and sandbox, letting their kids run free.

At various points behind them stand their husbands who work as tradesmen, a housing complex full of laundry to be done, and their wedding albums (titled *Our Wedding*), placed near TV sets. Ahead of them, the wind is damaging the places where they used to go on dates.

Young lovers still go on dates there, but they're all currently in school. The moms' kids, who are determined to gather more green acorns, expect their moms to bring them home. The moms' youthful beauty has lost its shape. Some force seems to be driving them to the margins of their own existence.



THEMES



MOTHERHOOD, MATURITY, AND SACRIFICE

"Afternoons" describes a series of autumn afternoons on the playground of a housing estate. It focuses especially on the "Young mothers" who watch their kids play, while their husbands linger behind them and laundry waits back inside. Having left behind the romance and independence of their youth, these mothers now face years of marriage, childrearing, and adult responsibility. As if mourning this transition from youth to maturity, the speaker comments that "Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives." The poem implies that settling down into a conventional family life is a mixed blessing at best, especially for women: though it's part of a natural generational cycle, it forces them to sacrifice their youth, selfhood, and freedom for the needs of others.

The speaker portrays the "Young mothers" as past their prime. Their "beauty has thickened," the speaker says, harshly implying that their good looks, like the summer itself, "is fading." Meanwhile, the "wind / Is ruining" their old "courting-places" (the places they used to go on dates). Their wedding albums are stored somewhere "Near the television," an image that captures how the excitement of young love has given way to mundane domestic drudgery. The poem thus links growing up and settling down with the loss of passion and romance.

Now, the mothers' lives revolve around taking care of their families. These women "Set[] free their children" on the playground, but they aren't free themselves. Rather than

enjoying their own "recreation," they have to watch their kids, who "Expect to be taken home" afterward. And there, "An estateful of washing" waits; that is, their housing complex is full of laundry they'll be expected to do.

Clearly, the mothers must devote their time and energy to fulfilling others' needs and expectations. They're no longer able to enjoy beautiful "Afternoons" for their own sake. "Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives," the speaker continues, implying that the women haven't simply sacrificed the thrills of youth but their very independent existence.

Though jarring, the poem also treats this sacrifice as part of a somewhat inevitable cycle. The "courting places" the women used to go to still exist, the speaker says, but they now belong to the next generation (still young enough that they're "all in school"). One generation's "court[ship]" soon yields to the next. Similarly, the women's children search for "unripe acorns" that seem to [symbolize](#) the new generations to come, which will take root and grow up as naturally as trees. And one day, these generations will also experience the painful loss of youth that the poem treats as part of settling down.

Ultimately, then, the poem expresses deep ambivalence, if not skepticism, about traditional family life. While implying that the women's transition into motherhood is, in part, a natural part of the circle of life, the speaker clearly doubts whether it's worth the sacrifice it requires.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*Summer is fading: ...
... new recreation ground.*

Lines 1-4 establish the poem's [setting](#): a freshly built playground, or "new recreation ground." The time of year is early autumn, as "Summer is fading" (line 1) and "leaves" are "fall[ing]"—not thickly, just "in ones and twos"—from surrounding "trees" (lines 2-3).

Along with the title, "Afternoons," the autumn [imagery](#) is [symbolic](#). Afternoon is when the sun is past its high point; autumn is when the year is past its midpoint and its warmest season. Accordingly, afternoon and autumn are often used to represent other kinds of decline, such as the decline of youth, strength, or beauty. Note, too, how the speaker says the line "Summer is fading" rather than "Summer is ending." This might

evoke other common kinds of fading (the fading of energy or memory, for example).

Put all this together, and the poem seems to be establishing a mood of wistfulness, melancholy, or nostalgia. Though it's set on a brand-new playground, it seems a bit somber and concerned with the passage of time.

The lack of a [rhyme scheme](#) or [meter](#) establishes that the poem is written in [free verse](#). The [enjambments](#) at the ends of lines 2 and 3 make the lines seem to tumble down the page with little punctuation to slow their fall:

The leaves fall in ones and twos
From trees bordering
The new recreation ground.

This effect subtly mirrors the falling of the leaves. The repetitions of [consonance](#) and [assonance](#) (the /f/ sounds in "fading," "fall," and "From"; the /-ing/ suffix of "fading" and "bordering"; the /ee/ vowel in "trees" and "leaves") also echo the repetitive leaf-fall, giving this first stanza a hushed, gentle music.

LINES 5-8

*In the hollows ...
... free their children.*

Lines 5-8 introduce a group of "Young mothers" and their "children," who use the playground "In the hollows of afternoons." This phrasing indicates that the poem isn't set on one particular day; rather, it describes a routine, a series of days.

The [metaphor](#) "hollows," meaning holes or empty spaces, suggests that the families come here during gaps in their afternoon schedules. It might also suggest that, for the young mothers (who seem to represent the poem's main characters or primary point of view), these afternoons *feel* a bit hollow. After all, they're not having quite as much fun as their kids:

Young mothers assemble
At swing and sandpit
Setting free their children.

"Their children" are (or feel) "free" on the playground, but they aren't free themselves. They have the adult responsibility of supervising playtime. The verb "assemble" subtly evokes a sense of duty; it sounds more formal than an alternative like "gather" or "meet up." (One usually finds *assemblies* in political, professional, or military settings.) As they watch their kids running free, then, these still-"Young" moms may feel their responsibility as a burden. They may even feel some "hollow[ness]" or emptiness in their lives.

It's worth noting, however, that they aren't speaking for

themselves; the reader is seeing them through the eyes of a third-person speaker. A word like "hollows" might suggest how *they* feel about their experience, or it might represent the poem's detached commentary *on* their experience.

The soft [sibilance](#) in these lines ("assemble," "swing," "sandpit," "Setting") adds to the hushed atmosphere and wistful, autumnal mood of the opening [stanza](#).

LINES 9-14

*Behind them, at ...
... Near the television:*

Starting in line 9, the poem's perspective widens. Like a skilled cameraman, the speaker seems to zoom out from the "mothers" and "children" in order to explore the broader context of their lives.

First, the speaker shows the reader what's waiting "Behind" the mothers:

- Spaced out "at intervals," the mothers' "husbands" appear to be standing around the playground as well. Perhaps they're talking to each other, or just watching the scene from a slight distance. (They seem involved in their kids' lives, but not as closely involved as the moms; 1950s British dads were not necessarily models of hands-on parenting.)
- The speaker then takes readers inside the characters' homes, which are part of a *council housing estate*: a form of public housing common in postwar Britain. An "estateful of washing"—a whole housing complex full of laundry to do—waits for the moms inside.
- Meanwhile, wedding photo "albums," "lettered" with the title "*Our Wedding*," lie somewhere "Near the television" in each home.

Here, the poet packs a lot of rich social detail into a short [stanza](#):

- The husbands work in "skilled trades" (mechanical and technical professions); though not rich, they're able to provide a decent life for their families.
- Likewise, the housing "estate[]" isn't fancy, but it's a comfortable enough place to grow up and raise kids, as evidenced by the construction of this "new recreation ground" (line 4).
- The "washing" marks another way in which the young mothers aren't as "free" as their kids—or, arguably, their husbands. As soon as they're done supervising their kids on the playground, the poem implies, another chore awaits them. (The poem is narrated in the third person, but it generally follows the mothers' perspectives, so it's likely that the husbands, washing, etc. are the things *they're aware*

of "Behind them.")

The wedding albums and TV sets are markers of British middle-class life during the period. They're images of cozy domestic life, but possibly also, in the poet's eyes, middlebrow [clichés](#). (For a rough modern equivalent, think of jokes about "[Live, Laugh, Love](#)" decor.)

The [juxtaposition](#) of the wedding albums and the TVs—young love and adult domesticity, high romance with "low" pop culture, etc.—also seems meant to illustrate how these parents' lives have gotten more mundane since their dating days. Whereas they used to enjoy exciting real-world romance, now they plop down in front of the tube.

LINES 15-18

*Before them, the ...
... all in school),*

Lines 15-18 bridge the second and third [stanzas](#) through an image that bridges two generations:

Before them, the wind
Is ruining their courting-places

That are still courting-places
(But the lovers are all in school),

The word "courting-places" would already have had an old-fashioned flavor in 1959, when the poem was written. It refers to places where young lovers go to "court," or flirt, date, make out, etc. If a relatively mild "wind / Is ruining" these places, they're probably screened by trees—perhaps they're shaded "lovers' lanes" or something of the kind. Presumably, the autumn wind is tearing down leaves and making them less secluded.

From the young mothers' perspective, these used to be "their courting-places." They're "still" used as courting-places, but they belong to other, younger "lovers" now—lovers who "are all in school" at the moment. Again, there's the sense that the most romantic phase of these women's lives has passed, and for the moment at least, romance has deserted the scene entirely.

At the same time, the [enjambment](#) over the stanza break, along with the [repetition](#) of "courting-places" at the ends of lines 16 and 17 (making an identical rhyme), provides a sense of continuity from one generation (and stanza) to the next. Now that these young moms and dads have married and started families, one crop of youth has given way to another; but some things remain the same, or at least repeat themselves down the generations.

LINES 19-24

*And their children, ...
... their own lives.*

Lines 19-24 focus once more on the kids at the playground and, finally, their mothers. Again, the poem generally takes the moms' vantage point, but it's narrated in third person and ranges more broadly over their community and environment. These shifts in focus become part of the poem's point, because, as the ending makes clear, the moms no longer feel like the central focus of "their own lives."

One reason is that they're beholden to their kids' demands and "Expect[at]ions":

And their children, so intent on
Finding more unripe acorns,
Expect to be taken home.

Roaming free on the playground, the kids take up a seemingly pointless pastime: hunting for "unripe acorns." (These are green acorns that have fallen from the trees prematurely, during the early autumn weeks; ripe acorns fall later in the season.) These "unripe," seed-bearing pods, pursued so "intent[ly]" by the kids, seem to [symbolize](#) the rising younger generation itself. The parents have planted the seeds of the future, and the future is slowly but relentlessly growing up and sidelining them. In fact, the moms are obliged to put their kids' needs ahead of their own; the children "Expect to be taken home."

These "Young mothers" no longer look, or perhaps feel, as young and beautiful as they once did; according to the speaker, "Their beauty has thickened." (Some critics have called this line a misogynistic, or at least harshly biased, judgment of women's bodies by a male poet.) Not only are they growing older, but they also seem to be growing more marginal—again, according to the speaker. They're losing the sense (often attributed to younger people) that they occupy a central place in the world:

Something is pushing them
To the side of their own lives.

In one of his most famous poems, "[High Windows](#)" (1974), Larkin used a similar image to evoke the passage of generations and the feeling of becoming "dated" in older age. In that poem, the speaker describes how modern birth control has created a "paradise" for young people but rendered old courtship rituals obsolete:

Bonds and gestures **pushed to one side**
Like an outdated combine harvester,

For the young moms in "Afternoons," however, it's not just generational changes in sex and dating that have made them feel old. It's the sense that, as they watch their children grow up, they're no longer the heroes of their own stories. The "Summer" of their lives is past, and the world will go on without them as surely as the seasons keep changing.



SYMBOLS



DAILY AND SEASONAL CYCLES

The poem takes place during a series of "Afternoons" when "Summer is fading." Because the sun is highest in the sky at noon, and temperatures are warmest in the summertime, noon and summer often [symbolize](#) other kinds of "high points," including the prime of life. Symbolically, then, the poem deals with the "fading" of youth and the onset of mature adulthood.

In the first stanza, for example, the "Young mothers assemble" just after the image of falling autumn "leaves." Through this introduction, the poem subtly links the mothers with the end of summer and the start of fall, hinting that the prime of their lives is passing along with the season of growth.

By contrast, the final stanza shows their children hunting for "unripe acorns," or green acorns that have fallen early from the oak trees. In this way, the poem links the kids with the seeds of *future* growth. Even the early autumn "wind," which is "ruining" the parents' former "courting-places," seems to signal that a season of age and decline is replacing an earlier season of youth, romance, and possibility. (But only for the parents: for the young lovers, the courting-places "are still courting-places"!)

Broadly, all this symbolism suggests that human generational cycles keep turning just as daily and seasonal cycles do. They're inevitable and unstoppable, even if they give us the uneasy feeling that life is moving on without us.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "Summer is fading: / The leaves fall in ones and twos / From trees bordering / The new recreation ground. / In the hollows of afternoons"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Before them, the wind / Is ruining their courting-places"
- **Lines 19-20:** "And their children, so intent on / Finding more unripe acorns,"



POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem uses several [metaphors](#) to convey the mood and experience of its characters, particularly the "Young mothers" who don't feel so young anymore.

First, in line 1, the speaker announces that "Summer is **fading**." This is a bit more [figurative](#) than a phrase like "Summer is **ending**"; seasons don't literally fade away. This choice of words subtly evokes other kinds of fading, both literal and

metaphorical: for example, the fading of youth and "beauty" (see line 22), or the fading of analog films and photos with the passage of time. In short, the word "fading" helps establish a wistful, nostalgic atmosphere.

The same [stanza](#) describes young moms and their kids gathering at the playground "In the hollows of afternoons." This metaphor suggests that they head outside during gaps ("hollows" or empty spaces) in their afternoon schedules. But the word "hollows" might also have an emotional layer, suggesting that these mothers *feel* empty in the afternoons—as if something's missing from their lives.

Indeed, the poem ends up exploring their sense of wistful unease. The poem's final metaphor captures exactly that feeling:

Something is pushing them
To the side of their own lives.

That is, they've sacrificed so much for their families that they no longer feel like the central characters in their own stories. They may also feel "push[ed] [...] To the side" by time and nature, as younger generations—including the "lovers [...] in school" and their own small "children"—grow up and take over the world. But, of course, nothing's *literally* pushing them; the sidelining is entirely figurative.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Summer is fading:"
- **Line 5:** "In the hollows of afternoons"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives."

REPETITION

The poem's [repetitions](#) help illustrate the way generational cycles repeat themselves—like the daily cycle that brings "Afternoons," or the seasonal cycle that brings "Summer" and falling "leaves" (lines 1-2).

For example, the phrase "their children" appears in both line 8 and line 19. This repetition draws added attention to the younger generation, the one that is currently growing up and will eventually take their parents' place. In part, it's this natural process of generational change that seems to be "pushing [the mothers] / To the side of their own lives" (lines 23-24). The repetition also underscores how important the children are to their moms—how much their needs and "Expect[at]ions" (line 21) have come to dominate their parents' lives.

The word "courting-places" occurs twice as well; it falls at the ends of lines 16 and 17, producing an identical rhyme. This word refers to dating spots—or maybe makeout spots—for young lovers. In line 16, these spots are described as "their courting-places," meaning places where the mothers went

when they were younger. Line 17 adds that they are "still courting-places," meaning that other, younger people use them now. This shift in context again highlights the turnover in generations, adding to the poem's wistful atmosphere.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "their children"
- **Line 16:** "courting-places"
- **Line 17:** "courting-places"
- **Line 19:** "their children"

CONSONANCE

Although the poem contains no [meter](#) or [rhyme](#), it has a quietly lyrical sound, thanks in part to its use of [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#). Listen to the first three lines, for example:

Summer is fading:
The leaves fall in ones and twos
From trees bordering [...]

The /f/ sound appears at the beginning of three words ("fading"/"fall"/"From"), while the /-ing/ suffix appears at the end of both line 1 and line 3. (You can also hear the faint chime of [assonance](#) in "Summer"/"ones" and "leaves"/"trees.") These gentle, chiming sounds help establish a subdued atmosphere, appropriate to a melancholy poem about the end of summer.

Later in the [stanza](#), a cluster of soft, [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds adds to that effect:

Young mothers assemble
At swing and sandpit
Setting free their children.

Sibilance also appears in line 10, as does harder /d/ consonance. Notice how the combination of these repeating sounds adds weight and density to the line, perhaps suggesting something about the sturdiness of the men and/or the security of their "trades":

Stand husbands in skilled trades,

By contrast, the /l/ sounds in line 18 roll lightly and lyrically along:

(But the lovers are all in school),

Again, the sound of the line seems to reflect the mood it's trying to convey: in this case, wistfulness and romantic nostalgia.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "fading"
- **Line 2:** "fall"
- **Line 3:** "From," "bordering"
- **Line 6:** "assemble"
- **Line 7:** "swing," "sandpit"
- **Line 8:** "Setting"
- **Line 10:** "Stand husbands," "skilled trades"
- **Line 11:** "washing"
- **Line 12:** "lettered"
- **Line 13:** "Wedding," "lying"
- **Line 16:** "ruining," "courting-places"
- **Line 17:** "courting-places"
- **Line 18:** "lovers," "all," "school"
- **Line 21:** "Expect to," "taken"

ENJAMBMENT

"Afternoons" uses frequent [enjambment](#), in part as a way of smoothing the flow of its language. If the poem were consistently [end-stopped](#), it would have a noticeably choppy rhythm, since its lines are fairly short. But enjambment has other effects, too. For example, it can make the lines seem to tumble quickly down the page, with little or no punctuation breaking their fall. Readers can see this effect in lines 1-4:

Summer is fading:
The leaves fall in ones and twos
From trees bordering
The new recreation ground.

Thanks to the enjambment at the end of lines 2 and 3, the sentence itself seems to "fall" headlong toward that final period.

Enjambment can also emphasize key words that come just before or after the line break. Notice how it draws attention to the word "lying" in line 13, for instance:

And the albums, lettered
Our Wedding, lying
Near the television:

The emphasis might make the reader wonder if this is a play on words; that is, whether the wedding albums are "lying" in the sense of "telling a fiction" or "embodying a falsehood." Is there something false about the lives to which these couples have committed themselves? (The poem doesn't provide enough evidence to say, but it seems to raise the question.)

The poem also contains one enjambment across [stanzas](#), in lines 16-17:

[...] Is ruining their courting-places

That are still courting-places [...]

Here, the enjambment and the [repeated](#) word "courting-places"—like the courting-places themselves—seem to link one generation to the next. What were once "their" (the mothers') date spots are "still" popular among younger people in the community. The enjambment bridges the stanzas just as the courting-places bridge former and current "lovers."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "twos / From"
- **Lines 3-4:** "bordering / The"
- **Lines 5-6:** "afternoons / Young"
- **Lines 6-7:** "assemble / At"
- **Lines 7-8:** "sandpit / Setting"
- **Lines 12-13:** "lettered / Our"
- **Lines 13-14:** "lying / Near"
- **Lines 15-16:** "wind / Is"
- **Lines 16-17:** "courting-places / That"
- **Lines 19-20:** "on / Finding"
- **Lines 23-24:** "them / To"

Thickened (Line 22) - Grown heavier or less trim (according to the speaker's standards of "beauty").



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Afternoons" consists of three eight-line stanzas, or *octaves*:

- The first [stanza](#) sets the basic scene (a playground) and introduces the "mothers" and "children."
- The second stanza (as well as the beginning of the third) zooms out to provide a wider picture of the community.
- The third stanza re-focuses on the children and, finally, the moms, who feel less and less like the center of "their own lives" (line 24).

In a way, then, the poem's structure helps illustrate what the moms are feeling. Though they're ostensibly the main characters here, the poem presents them as part of a larger surrounding context—a community and generational cycle—that threatens to draw focus away from them.

The poem is written in [free verse](#), meaning that it contains no [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). Philip Larkin rarely wrote in free verse, so the lack of traditional formal elements here is worth noting. On the one hand, the poem is divided into equal-sized stanzas and lines of roughly even length (five to nine syllables apiece). On the other hand, it never falls into a consistent rhythm. These features help evoke the poem's underlying tension between freedom and limitation—namely, the "free[dom]" of the children at play (line 8) and the limitations of the moms who've made their kids the focus of their lives.

METER

"Afternoons" is written in [free verse](#), so it has no [meter](#). The line lengths are fairly consistent, ranging from five syllables (e.g., line 1) to nine syllables (line 16), but they don't follow a regular rhythm.

Avoiding meter is an unusual choice for Larkin, who was known as a master of metrical poetry. Nearly all of the poems in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), the collection in which "Afternoons" appears, use both meter and [rhyme](#). Here, the combination of free verse and roughly even line lengths helps dramatize the poem's themes of freedom and limitation, embodied by the seemingly "free" children (line 8) and the settled, routine-bound mothers.

RHYME SCHEME

"Afternoons" doesn't have a [rhyme scheme](#), as it's written in [free verse](#). Again, free verse is an unusual choice for Larkin, who favored tightly controlled [meter](#) and [rhyme](#).



VOCABULARY

Recreation ground (Line 4) - Playground.

Hollows (Line 5) - Holes or empty spaces. Here meaning [metaphorical](#) gaps in the daily routine; free time.

Sandpit (Line 7) - A sandbox or sandy area for children to play in.

Intervals (Line 9) - Spaced-out positions; locations with gaps between.

Skilled trades (Line 10) - Jobs that demand a particular skill set, usually involving manual or technical labor (e.g., plumbers, electricians, mechanics, etc.).

Estateful (Line 11) - A word coined by Larkin to mean "a housing complex full" (of washing). *Council housing estates* were affordable housing complexes built in the UK after World War II.

Albums (Lines 12-13) - Photo albums from weddings. (Physical albums, not digital—the poem was written in 1959!)

Courting-places (Lines 16-17) - Places where young lovers go on dates, kiss, etc. (Since the early autumn wind is "ruining" them, these may be "lovers' lanes" or similar areas hidden by trees.)

Unripe acorns (Line 20) - Acorns consist of an oak seed, or seeds, surrounded by a shell. Unripe acorns are green and not yet ready to sprout. They typically fall in the late summer or early autumn, unlike mature acorns, which fall in mid-to-late autumn.

There is one identical rhyme here: the [repetition](#) of "courting-places" at the ends of lines 16 and 17. This repetition helps bridge the second and third [stanzas](#) (which are further linked through [enjambment](#)). It's also a repetition with an important variation: in line 16, these are "their courting-places" (i.e., the mothers'), but in line 17, the courting-places belong to younger, still-unmarried people. Through this shift in context, the identical rhyme helps illustrate the ongoing generational cycle.



SPEAKER

"Afternoons" is narrated in the third person by a seemingly detached, objective speaker. In effect, the speaker has an omniscient perspective on the poem's scene. In addition to seeing all the "Young mothers," "husbands," and "children" at the playground, the speaker is aware of the "washing" that awaits the mothers at home, the "trades" their husbands work in, and even the "albums" and "television[s]" in their living rooms.

These kinds of details are novelistic, offering a quickly sketched but intimate portrait of a community. (Or, more broadly, of the 1950s British middle class.) Of course, it's possible that the speaker is just a passing, ordinary observer who infers or imagines these details. But because there's no first-person commentary, the poem creates the impression of a God's-eye view.

However, that doesn't mean the speaker is completely neutral and "objective." The line "Their beauty has thickened," for example, passes a value judgement, seemingly from the perspective of someone who's more attracted to certain female body types than others. Some critics have called this line misogynistic, or at least a reflection of Larkin's biases as a male poet. Certainly the attitude of the poem as a whole—with its skepticism about traditional domestic life—reflects attitudes found elsewhere in Larkin's poems and letters. (See the Context section of this guide for more.)



SETTING

The poem takes place on a "new recreation ground," or playground, located near a *council estate* or British public housing complex. (The word "estateful" in line 11 refers to a complex of this kind.) The playground, which may have been built specifically for families in the complex, contains a "swing and sandpit" where children play in the "afternoons."

As described by the speaker, the families are representative of the post-WWII British middle class. They're so-called nuclear family units, consisting of husband, wife, and kids. The mothers are "Young" (couples generally married and had children younger in that era); the husbands work in "skilled trades" requiring manual or technical labor (e.g., mechanics,

electricians, and the like). Their homes contain "television[s]"—increasingly common but hardly universal in the UK of 1959—and wedding photo "albums," tokens of middle-class life during the period. Overall, the community seems solidly prosperous, though not glamorous. The way the adults' former "courting-places" are reused by young lovers suggests that some families have stayed here for multiple generations.

Those courting-places (dating/makeout spots) may be lovers' lanes or tree-shaded areas whose leaves "the wind / Is ruining." They're located somewhere ahead of ("Before") the mothers watching their children, whereas the council estate is "Behind them." The playground is surrounded by "trees," including oaks, which are dropping "leaves" and "unripe acorns"—a sign that "Summer is fading" and autumn beginning. And since the poem is set over a series of "Afternoons," not just one, this is a scene that repeats itself.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

From the publication of his second collection, *The Less Deceived*, in 1955 until his death in 1985, Philip Larkin was one of the UK's most popular poets. The editor-critic J. D. Scott grouped Larkin, along with a number of other post-World War II English writers (including Larkin's close friend Kingsley Amis), into a school he called "The Movement." The Movement poets rejected many of the formal and stylistic experiments of the previous, Modernist generation. They gravitated toward a plainer style along with characteristically English [settings](#) and themes.

Larkin wrote "Afternoons" in 1959 and published it in his 1964 collection *The Whitsun Weddings*. Like several other well-known poems from that collection—including "[Dockery and Son](#)," "Sunny Prestatyn," and [the title poem](#)—it captures a slice of post-WWII English life, finding ominous or unsettling overtones in ordinary situations. For example, both "Afternoons" and "Dockery and Son" explore the decision to have or not have children, as well as the way people's lives often seem dictated by forces beyond their control. In the one poem, "Something is pushing" young mothers "To the side of their own lives" (lines 23-24); in the other, the speaker describes:

[...] a style

Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,
Suddenly they harden into all we've got
And how we got it [...]

These poems' general attitude is one of blunt realism bordering on bleak cynicism (though some, such as "[An Arundel Tomb](#)," contain redemptive notes as well). This attitude became strongly associated with Larkin, who once claimed that

"Deprivation is for me what [daffodils](#) were for [William] Wordsworth." In other words, the kind of melancholy found in "Afternoons" runs throughout his poetry. A lifelong bachelor, he was also famously skeptical of marriage and child-rearing; his best-known poem, "[This Be the Verse](#)," urges readers not to "have any kids yourself."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Larkin's poetry is strongly associated with the culture and atmosphere of mid-20th-century Britain. "Afternoons" is no exception. Its reference to "An estateful of washing" (line 11) suggests that the families in the poem live in a *council estate*: a type of public housing complex common in Britain from the 1920s onward.

Britain narrowly avoided bankruptcy after World War II (1939-1945) and was slow to recover economically. Prosperity returned to the country during the 1950s, however, and Larkin wrote "Afternoons" at the end of that decade. These boom years brought a nationwide increase in home ownership—buoyed by government investment in the construction of new homes—as well as an increase in quality, affordable public housing.

Larkin didn't grow up or live in a council estate himself; however, he would have seen such housing in his region. (He lived in the city of Hull for most of his adult years.) The poem's "trees," "new recreation ground," and "courting-places" (lines 3-4, 16-17) suggest a comfortable, well-kept residential environment: not a posh neighborhood, but a nice place for families to put down roots. The phrase "husbands in skilled trades" (line 10) implies that these families have secure, decently paying jobs, a reflection of their country's mid-century prosperity. Their "television[s]" (line 14) are also a sign that they're doing reasonably well; TVs were increasingly common home items in 1950s Britain, but they weren't as ubiquitous as they'd become in later decades.

All in all, the characters in the poem live a pretty good life, especially compared to the hardships of earlier generations. Whether that life satisfies them is another question.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Council Housing Estates](#) — Learn more about postwar Britain's council housing estates, the kind of complexes

referred to in this poem. (https://fet.uwe.ac.uk/conweb/house_ages/flypast/section11.htm)

- [More on Council Housing Estates](#) — Check out some more background on postwar British council housing, with pictures and examples. (<https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/in-your-area/midlands/post-war-council-housing-estates/>)
- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to Philip Larkin reading "Afternoons." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdCqMfn6pjo>)
- [The Poet's Life](#) — Read a short biography of Larkin at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin>)
- [Larkin on TV](#) — Watch a 1981 TV documentary about Larkin's work. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdeEFeYVtk>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- [An Arundel Tomb](#)
- [A Study of Reading Habits](#)
- [Church Going](#)
- [Coming](#)
- [Mr Bleaney](#)
- [The Trees](#)
- [The Whitsun Weddings](#)
- [This Be The Verse](#)
- [Water](#)



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