

PHILIP LARKIN - THE EXPLOSION

As in many of Larkin's poems, the event that occasioned the poem provokes the poet to move from an almost casual reflection on the details of the event to a final a deeper empathy with our common human destiny; suffering and death (the mining catastrophe) but also love and beauty (the vision of the wives).

Stanzas 1–5

Notice how Larkin tries to set a distance between himself and the miners. They are **shadows pointing towards the pithead** – it is to be their catastrophe. He will not become personally involved in their fate but maintain that air of detachment to be found in many of his poems. He wishes to allow the catastrophe and characters to stand independently worthy to have their suffering noted without sentimentality.

In **stanza 2** we may observe Larkin's gift for making images; **"Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke,"** These are simple, ordinary young men of their time swearing, smoking, proud of their strength and stature **"Shouldering off the freshened silence."** The sounds are almost onomatopoeic to reflect the rough humanity.

In **stanza 3** the poet leads us a little closer to the men. One is shown as innocent, playful as he chases after rabbits. But on his return from the chase another side of his nature is seen. He is gentle; does not trample on the nest of lark's eggs and returns them to where he found them. What does this action tell us about him? Is Larkin asking us to note his sensitivity? his gentleness? his unspoken respect for the mystery of procreation? Might this have been a gesture he made to his fiancé; a proposal, almost.

These men are part of a close community simply, elegantly suggested by, **"Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter"** But all this simple, homely normality is under grave threat suggested in the lines, **"Through the tall gates standing open"** These are the gates of fate, of the underworld, inescapable.

And in **stanza 5** their fate is met. The poet delivers the news without melodrama; we knew the explosion was coming from the title. The world of nature is unmoved by the catastrophe, **"cows stopped chewing for a second"**

The sun was dimmed as the dust from the explosion was blasted high into the sky.

Notice that Larkin leaves the aftermath, the rescue, the grief unmentioned.

Stanzas 6 – end.

In the second part of the poem the focus is changed. Now it is the wives who are central. It is said that the poem is based on a real event and that the wives of the dead miners had visions of their men at the moment of the explosion.

Larkin uses this knowledge to transform what would be a sad and meaningless accident into an occasion of transformation and grace. In the religious imaginations of the wives the men are seen **“for a second”** as transformed into gold, metal of purity and endurance. In this new changed appearance they will live in the memories of their wives. The poem ends with the image of the unbroken eggs. The eggs are also transformed; now they may represent the hope of resurrection or the preciousness of memory or the strength of the bonds of love.

In the face of death we have a choice; either to accept it as the slide into nothingness or we may find in it the door to renewal. In this poem Larkin offers us the renewal vision that flashed into the shocked serious hearts of the miners' wives.