

The Whitsun Weddings

BY PHILIP LARKIN

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, smelt 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 gout 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.

"The Whitsun Weddings" was written by British poet Philip Larkin and first published in his collection *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1963. The poem recounts the speaker's train journey from the east of England to London and his observations along the way. At first the speaker focuses on the view out of the window of the countryside and passing towns. Soon, though, his journey is interrupted by the loud commotion of numerous wedding parties; a number of young couples have gotten married on that weekend (because of the long bank holiday weekend and a tax break). As the speaker observes all these newlyweds, he reflects—rather ambivalently—on what it means to be in love and all the ceremony tied up with getting married. Soon enough, the train arrives in London and this "frail travelling coincidence" is over.

- **“The Whitsun Weddings” Summary**

- It was Whitsun Saturday and I left late. It was a sunny day and my train departed around 1:20, almost completely empty. The windows were open due to the stifling heat, even the seat cushions were hot, and everything felt very slow. Out of the window I saw the backs of houses, the glare of windshields, and I could smell the fish-dock. We rode beside the wide, flat, slow river, zooming through the Lincolnshire countryside.

The train kept its steady course all through the hot afternoon, as we traveled south and inland. We passed big farms with cows whose shadows were small under the high sun, and canals full of industrial waste. I saw a greenhouse, and hedges rising and falling. The carriage had a pretty bad smell from the cloth, but sometimes the smell of grass overpowered it. Towns seemed to repeat themselves as we went past, each one signaled by a scrapyard.

At the beginning of the journey, I didn't notice the weddings whose noise could be heard from each station. The sun was too bright for me to see what was happening in the shade of the platform, and though I could hear a commotion I thought it was porters mucking around with the mail. I kept reading, but as the train pulled away I noticed a large group of young female wedding guests. They were smiling, had elaborate hair, and were dressed as if in a caricature of contemporary styles, with heels and veils. They were poised uncertainly on the platform watching us leave.

It was as though they were witnessing the end of something that we on the train had survived. Now I was intrigued, so I took greater notice at the next station and comprehended the scene more clearly. I saw fat fathers with sweaty heads, loud overweight mothers, and uncles being rude. Then I noticed the girls again, with their perms, nylon gloves, and fake jewelry, and the yellows, pinks, and brown-greens.

These fashion elements separated the girls visually from the other guests, almost as if they were an illusion. These numerous weddings—which took place in small halls and cafes near the train yards, with rooms covered in streamers and full of coach-loads of guests—were nearly over. At every station, newly-weds boarded the train while the guests gave last bits of advice and threw confetti. When we left each station, I read the faces of those still on the platform, each of which seem to say something about the wedding. The children seemed bored.

For the fathers, this was the biggest success of their lives, though something about it felt like a joke. The older women looked like they knew a terrible secret, while the girls seemed perplexed, holding their purses tighter—perhaps even intimidated by what they saw, as though they'd witnessed something of fearful religious importance. Pretty soon we left the guests behind—though we had internalized all their perspectives—and raced towards London, the train blowing fits of steam. The environment grew more urbanized, fields giving way to plots of land being developed, and I noticed poplar trees casting shadows over the roads.

In that fifty minutes or so, which was just long enough to get comfortable and reflect on the wedding, all of these new marriages got started. The newly-weds gazed out of the window, crammed into the carriage. A cinema, a cooling tower, and a cricket game were all visible from the window. I don't think any of the different couples thought about the people they would never meet now that they were married, or how they all were sharing this first hour of their respective marriages together. As we approached sunny London, our final destination, I thought of the different areas packed together like squares of wheat.

We were headed straight for the capital, racing past glinting rail and stationary train carriages. The sooty, mossy walls of the city started to surround us and the shared

experience was nearly over. The collective power of these newly-weds was ready to be unleashed. We slowed and braked, feeling the gravity as though we were falling like a shower of arrows sent beyond view, raining down somewhere else.

- “The Whitsun Weddings” Themes

Time, Death, and Impermanence

“The Whitsun Weddings” describes the speaker’s train journey into London on Whitsun Saturday (a date in summer that was once a popular choice for weddings due to certain tax breaks). As it does so, the poem takes an unsentimental look at what it means to be human in light of the unstoppable forward march of time. Even though weddings might be thought of as new beginnings, the speaker draws out the way that all this celebration is ultimately cast in the light (or shadow) of its impermanence—that is, in the face of inevitable death.

Before the wedding parties even show up in the poem, the speaker builds an atmosphere of decay. Looking out upon the shifting English landscape that passes by the train's windows, the speaker sees “industrial froth” on the canals. This evokes the vast shifts in the fabric of society due to modern industrialization, which was happening at the time of Larkin's writing. It also suggests the way that human activity wears down and muddies the world around it. Likewise, the carriage-cloth of the train, which was ostensibly once pristine and new, now “reeks” with a bad odor, subtly suggesting rot and overuse. Later, the speaker sees “acres of dismantled cars”—objects made defunct by time. All of these images suggest that the human world cannot stay fresh for long—an idea that, in turn, comes to affect the later description of the newlyweds themselves as “Fresh.” That is, in creating this atmosphere of decay, the poem implies that even these bright young faces will eventually become worn out and stale.

At first, however, the wedding parties are vibrant. Marriage is traditionally one of life’s major events, and the newlyweds and their guests behave with all the pomp and ceremony of a momentous occasion. Their enthusiasm reflects the idea of marriage as a stamp of permanence—of pledging to be together forever and so on. At the same time, however, the way the train passes by the wedding parties seems to highlight that this permanence is just a kind of trick played by the magnitude of the occasion. That is, however momentous these

events may *feel* to the participants, they are little more than fleeting visions that pass by almost as soon as they appear.

This idea is supported by the description of the wedding parties initially posed on the platforms “as if out on the end of an event / Waving goodbye / To something that survived it.” The young couples’ new beginnings, in their way, signify their *endings*—another step away from their youth and freedom. The poem sums this up in the phrase “happy funeral”—this is a happy day for many, but this happiness all too brief.

The speaker then focuses on the balding fathers, the “mothers loud and fat,” and the “smut[ty]” uncles of the newly-weds—hinting at the way that the “Fresh” young couples will age and turn into similar figures. Likewise, the focus on the gaudiness of the girls’ appearances (their “jewellery-substitutes” and so on) shows that the pomp of the big day is a kind of temporary illusion. Indeed, the supposed importance of the wedding day is undermined by the way that this importance can never last. That’s why the “success” of these wedding days is, though “huge,” also “wholly farcical.” Time will continue to move forward, and, the poem suggests, this happy moment will soon end; death lurks behind every smile and under every wedding hat.

Love and Marriage

Larkin’s poetry often takes an unsentimental look at love, frequently presenting it as little more than an biological mechanism to ensure the human race’s reproduction. “The Whitsun Weddings” takes slightly satirical aim at the artificiality, conformity, and farcical nature of weddings to undermine the notion of love as some sort of grand, magical, and everlasting endeavor. In reality, the poem implies, marriage and love are kind of commonplace and mundane. The poem thus contrasts the supposed meaningfulness of getting married—e.g. *the big day*—with a kind of hollowness at its core.

The wedding parties don’t appear until the poem’s third stanza. At first the speaker doesn’t even realize that all the commotion he can hear is caused by wedding guests, thinking it to be something else entirely (showing that, to him at least, these weddings are not especially important). When he *does* take notice, he is taken aback by the sheer number weddings that seem to be taking place. This makes them feel less special and unique, best summed up by

the speaker's approximate counting of the weddings as adding up to a "dozen" (a word usually associated, at least in England at the time, with eggs—something decidedly less than romantic).

It's also worth considering *why* the speaker encounters so many wedding parties on his train journey to London. The U.K. government used to offer a tax break to those married by a certain deadline—which coincided with the long Whitsun weekend (long because it included a bank holiday, a.k.a. an extra day off). It was thus a popular time to get married for economic and practical reasons—but not really for romantic ones. This gently undermines the romanticized clichés about love as something special, magic, and eternal.

The speaker then observes the wedding parties more intently, critiquing the guests' appearances as gaudy and fake. The girls are dressed not fashionably, but in "parodies of fashion" adorned with "jewellery-substitutes"; the fathers have "seamy" foreheads; the mothers are "loud and fat." Perhaps this is what leads the speaker to describe the "success" of the weddings as both "huge" and "wholly farcical"—these *are* momentous occasions, but they also seem vacuous and pretentious.

It's worth noting that critics are particularly divided about this section of the poem. Some see it as an unfair and snobbish take down of the working classes, and others view it as a set of honest observations that reflect the reality that, given this particularly wedding date was popular for primarily *financial* reasons, it did tend to be the poorer in society getting wed. "[J]ewellery-substitutes," then, need not necessarily carry negative connotations. It's possible to read the poem as primarily concerned with making fine-tuned observations about the rituals and social practices of marriage—and how those relate to the idealism that is usually associated with love.

Indeed, this ambiguity about the speaker's position towards the weddings is important. On the one hand, the speaker's observations certainly do highlight something fake and throwaway. But the ending of the poem seems to take a view that incorporates these weddings as both meaningful *and* meaningless. When the train comes to its stop at the end and the speaker remarks on "this frail / traveling coincidence," it at once seems both significant and kind of hollow. The train is about to unleash a kind of "power" by emptying

out its newly-weds—who will in turn reproduce and create the next generation of couples—but it's not necessarily a power with any real sense of wonder or magic.

Instead, it's as common as rain in England—which is how the poem ends, by subverting the mythology of Cupid's arrows (which usually make their targets fall in love) and imagining them somewhere "out of sight" becoming rain. These arrows, then, don't follow through with their special purpose (thus undermining the idea of love as a kind of destiny).

That said, rain *is* also associated with fertility, and the fact that all the couples are married also means that, in their way, they are a community with a shared experience that they will always have in common whether they know it or not—a community that will in turn impact the world.

Themes

Alienation and Community

The speaker is clearly alienated from the wedding parties he encounters on the train, but there is also a sense running throughout "The Whitsun Weddings" that, ultimately, everyone else is alone too. The wedding parties create a sense of community from which the speaker is excluded, yet even this feeling of togetherness may only be temporary. In the end, the guests and newlyweds all go their separate ways, the "frail ... coincidence" of this shared train ride over as quickly as it began.

A sense of isolation is present from the start of the poem. For one thing, the speaker's train is initially empty as it heads back to London. And though the countryside seen through the train window *is* full of a certain kind of life, or at least the *evidence* of life (through buildings and so on), there aren't any other people in the first two stanzas of the poem. This marks the speaker out as a somewhat lonely figure.

Indeed, when the speaker encounters the bustle and commotion of the wedding parties, he feels very much like a detached observer. At first, he doesn't even *notice* that these weddings are the source of the "whoops and skirls" he can hear from the platform. There is

a total disconnect between the speaker and the crowds—and between the importance that the crowds place on the wedding day and the speaker's indifference.

Each of the guests, in turn, seem to have their own private thoughts about the wedding, which the speaker, as a kind of spy in their midst, can interpret: the children are bored; the fathers are overwhelmed; the women are sharing "the secret like a happy funeral" (that marriage can be a disappointment, perhaps); the girls are "gripping their handbags tighter" out of some kind of instinctive fear. All of these different figures are sectioned off from each other, held together only loosely and precariously by the weddings themselves (which, of course, are pretty much over at this point in the day).

And though these *individual* wedding parties are brought together by a sense of celebration and occasion, the parties, too, are isolated from one another. That is, each wedding is its own distinct group, failing (or choosing not) to recognize that there are numerous other parties doing exactly the same thing. Their *own* sense of community somewhat ironically cuts them off from *other* communities. The newlyweds never think, for instance, "of the others they would never meet," nor about the fact that "their lives would all contain this hour"—that is, how all these newlyweds will have forever shared this train ride.

That's why the speaker views this shared experience as a kind of "coincidence," one which *seems* significant but perhaps in reality actually isn't. That said, he can't really relate to the newlyweds because he isn't one of them; he might simply be projecting all this, in turn misreading the situation and contributing to his own and social separation. Overall, though, it's not as if the newlyweds even seem that happy. There is a kind of disquiet in the carriages, allow the reader to wonder whether the ultimate act of communion—marriage—really does bring people closer together, or just cuts two people off from the rest of the world.

Explanation

That Whitsun, I ...

... a hurry gone.

The poem opens by establishing its disarmingly casual [tone](#), pitching somewhere between a [narrative](#) and dramatic [monologue](#). Though the whole poem is tightly—and

virtuosically—controlled in terms of its [form](#), the language is intentionally down-to-earth and even prosaic (as is Larkin's work more generally).

Like a story or diary entry, the poem starts by setting the scene. The poem is set on Whitsun Saturday in mid-1950s United Kingdom. This isn't an arbitrary detail, but a key part of the poem's setup. Because of tax and marriage laws in the U.K. at the time, the Whitsun weekend in May was an advantageous time to get married. It afforded certain tax breaks, and also coincided with a long weekend due the Whitsun bank holiday (Monday). That's why the speaker encounters so many wedding parties on his train journey from the East of England to London. Of course, the wedding parties themselves aren't introduced until the third stanza, making them a kind of chance encounter (and subtly undermining the idea of the wedding day as something special and unique).

The stanza form used throughout is Larkin's own, but is loosely based on the [odes](#) of John Keats. This aspect of the poem is analyzed in more detail in the form section of this guide, but here it's worth acknowledging the way that the second line in each stanza is considerably shorter than the rest (two [metrical feet](#) as opposed to five), which helps evoke the push-pull rhythm of a train alternating between acceleration and coming to a stop.

Initially, the train carriage is mostly empty. This helps the poem set up a contrast between the quiet isolation of the speaker and the boisterousness of the wedding—and this contrast provides the poem's vantage point, with the speaker able to comment on the weddings in a detached and observant way. And though there is no "sense / Of being in a hurry," the mention of the date and hour does [foreshadow](#) one of the poem's main themes—the relentless passing of time. The [diacope](#) (close [repetition](#)) in line 5—"all windows down, all cushions hot, all sense"—gives the reader a sense of the uniformity of the train carriages, which again anticipates something the poem develops later: the uniformity of the wedding parties.