

“At Grass” By Philip Larkin

Lecture: 12

Date: 8/4/2020

The poem belongs to Larkin's second collection of verse: *The Less Deceived* published in 1955. "At Grass" embodies Larkin's reaction to a documentary he watched about a retired race horse. He was touched by the film which documents the life of a famous race horse after it no longer races. Larkin was then an emerging poet and novelist who published one book of verse, *The North Ship*, and his career as a novelist rested on two novels, the second of which *A Girl in Winter* achieved a considerable success. Watching the documentary, Larkin reflects on the unstable nature of success and fame. Life is never fair and one does not know when the world would turn its back on us so there is neither security nor guarantee of the permanence of success, fame, wealth, health, etc. As human beings, we have to accept and adjust to the instability of the world and changeable nature of existence. These were the reflections that Larkin was occupied with as he was writing "At Grass".

The title of the poem "At Grass" indicates a static rather than dynamic situation. And the speaker in the poem moves slowly, tenderly and delicately as he captures snapshot-like images of two retired horses grazing in the middle of a big green pasture, sheltering in the shade far away from the noise of the London tracks which they left behind for good after they retired.

The poem begins by an outside observer straining his eyes to see the horses from a distance. They are far way, grazing in the vast pasture and the speaker does not have fieldglasses to look at the horses with. In the races, most people observe the racing horses closely using magnifying glasses. Hence, the poet drives home the irony intended to contrast the present with the past.

In the past when these horses were famous, every movement they make is watched and captured by cameras. In the present and off the limelight, these horses live in complete neglect. Their names and their winnings are forgotten and they live now in anonymity, in other words, they are now nameless. So these horses live in peace in this pasture and they choose to

At Grass

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and main;
Then one crops grass, and moves about
- The other seeming to look on -
And stands anonymous again

stay in the cold shade away from the shining sun. One of them is cropping grass and moving about freely while the other seems like it was thinking or probably remembering its glorious past. This is the moment which the poet seizes upon to visit the glamorous past of the horses. The next stanza offers many flashbacks that take the reader into the memories of the ex-race horses.

“At Grass”

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Lecture 13

Date: 12/4/2020

In the SECOND STANZA, the poet visits the glorious past of the horses. They were sought after by fans and reporters; they were bothered by cameras which try to capture their big moments at the races. They were blinded by the flashlight of cameras. But now after retirements, nothing distresses them or disturbs their quiet except the wind which blows their hair against their faces. Yet 15 years ago, these horses were treated like living legends. They were fables of winning and success. When they were seen, people would readily think of the afternoon races in June. One would think excitingly of the championships, the cups and the bets (stakes) placed by fans. In short, the past is full of the glory of winning and the names of the winning horses were engraved as headlines of newspapers reported the winners of the races. The names of the horses were very well-known and people would talk about them as if they were fables of success and glory. The summer races were an event that sent thrill in the fans who remember these days tenderly.

In the THIRD STANZA, the poet tells the readers more about these June afternoons when the races were held. 15 years ago, people would dress up for the occasion to match the glamour of the races. Women would appear in silk garments and shelter from the sun under their parasols (small

At Grass

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
Two dozen distances sufficed
To fable them : faint afternoons
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,
Whereby their names were artficed
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 unushed till it subside
To stop–press columns on the street.

umbrellas). It was an activity in which the rich and sophisticated people were interested. Therefore, people would make sure they look as glamorous and enchanting as the races themselves.

Outside, the park was packed with empty cars whose owners were watching the races, betting or even participating in the races. Outside, the heat and the litter on the lawn tell of people who were there. The car parks were completely empty of people as every one hurried inside to see the beginning of the races. At first, the races would burst with noise until the moment of the beginning of the race. Then, waiting for the race to begin, all noise subsides and the silence is timed to the press-watch that timed the beginning and end of the race. Outside in the streets, people are also gathered waiting for any news of the racing horses and finally when it is announced, the name of the winner is chanted by the crowds.

Larkin is talking about a past that is different from the present though the races are not really something of the past as they continue to be organized up to the present. However, Larkin longs in this poem for the long lost past of imperial Britain. When Britain was an empire stretching east, west and south, the races seemed to have a different favour. The poem is filled with nostalgia not for the races, but for these times when the races meant more than a competition. The races at that time represented a cultural event. They symbolized the English culture in its entirety and therefore, they had a special value and meaning. As imperial Britain is gone for ever, Larkin seems to argue, the glamour, magic and glory of the races are likewise gone.

“At Grass”

By Philip Larkin

Lecture: 14 Date:

15/4/2020

In the 4th stanza, the poet-observer dives deep into the past of the retired horses asking a direct yes/no question about whether these horses are like human beings and the can recall memories of the past. So personifying the horses, the poet asks whether memories bother

At Grass

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 crowd and cries –

All but the unmolested meadows.

Almanacked, their names live; they

these horses the way flies (insects) are bothering them as he watches them from a distance. Metaphorically speaking, the poet wonders whether they shake their heads because memories disturb them and they try to shake the memories off like they shake off flies around their heads.

Obviously, the horses fail to shake off memories, therefore, the memories of their glorious past surface from the line that begins with “summer by summer...”. Remember that the races are organized in June, that is, summer. The poet supposes that the horses are thinking of the summers of the races which went by very quickly. Happy times fly and all of sudden they are gone. In these beautiful summers, they can still hear the cries of the crowds. The fans and spectators would cheer for the competing horses as the gates open to let the horses run at the beginning of the race.

But now, the crowds have gone for ever and so are the cheering and the noises of fans. Nothing is there to remind them of those days except the meadows (green fields) that shelter them now and keep them unbothered. As they no longer race, their names are filed (almanacked) and stored in the archives of the races.

In the fifth and last

stanza, the poet continues the idea with which he ended the 4th stanza. That is, the names of the horses are archived and stored away to be forgotten. As the horses’ names are almanacked and archived, so it seems like these retired horses have lost their names. They become nameless, anonymous and in the long run, they become free or “at ease”. Forgetfulness liberates the horses from the burdens of being in the spotlights and famous. The poet talks about the horses as if they were humans and by retiring from the track, they are no longer stressing and no longer worrying. They don’t have races to win or lose, and therefore, they are at ease and live comfortably. As such, retirement is not all negative. It has some positive sides to it as retirement means no stress, no worry and plenty of rest. Enjoying

At Grass

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 grooms, and the grooms
boy,
With bridles in the evening come.

their times as retired horses, they now run leisurely (gallop) and joyfully if they choose since no one is watching them; no one is forcing them to go faster and faster and no one is recording how fast they run. In the past, fans watched the racing horses closely using field glasses (binoculars). People even watched them as they went to the stables to sleep. People always calculated their speed and even predicted how fast they would run using stop-watches to count even the fractions of seconds. But nowadays, no one watches them and no one cares about whether they run fast or slowly. Only the man who takes care of them and his assistant who is only a boy would guide the horses back to the stable at nightfall.

The poet, in fact, is using the retired horses as a metaphor for human beings when they lose fame and become unknown after they had been famous and popular. As a poet, Larkin imagines how to live off the limelight. At the time of writing the poem, Larkin was in the process of becoming famous as both novelist and poet. He seems to reflect on what would happen if he lost that fame and people no longer knew his name. His conclusion is built around a stoic notion according to which Larkin tries to explore the positive sides of being unknown. He thinks it is not all bad; on the contrary, retirement can be a time of comfort, ease and no stress.