MCMXIV

SUMMARY

There are men lined up in long, uneven rows, standing as patiently as if they were waiting to get inside a cricket or soccer stadium. Their hats are like crowns on their heads, and the sun beats down on their mustachioed, old-fashioned faces. They're smiling widely as though all this were just some summer holiday fun.

The shops are closed. They've been around for a long time, their names written on awnings that have faded in the sunlight. People still pay for things with farthings and sovereigns, and children dressed in dark clothing are playing. They're named after members of the royal family. Tin signs advertise chocolate and tobacco and the bars stay open the whole day.

The countryside is oblivious. Its village signs have been blurred by all the blooming grasses. Fields are still divided up much as they were in the Domesday Book (a 1,000-year-old British land survey), and they're covered with a layer of silently swaying wheat. Servants wear their uniforms and live in small rooms within great countryside manors. Limousines kick up dust behind them.

Nothing was ever as innocent, neither before nor after the war, as this world that disappeared into the past so quickly and silently. Men left their gardens well-trimmed, and countless marriages would end very soon. There would never be innocence like this again.

THEMES

WORLD WAR I'S DESTRUCTIVE EFFECT ON ENGLISH SOCIETY

Philip Larkin's "MCMXIV" ("1914" in Roman numerals, the year World War I began) portrays the First World War as a truly cataclysmic event that changed the world—but particularly, in this poem, England—forever. The poem depicts English life in a state of cheerful "innocence" just *before* the horrors of the long, bloody, futile war begin. Soon, the speaker observes, the old way of English life will be lost: this England will have "changed itself to past." World War I, this poem suggests, didn't just kill millions of people: it also destroyed a whole country's way of life—especially its trust in stability, tradition, and authority.

"MCMXIV" draws its power not from depicting the violence of war directly, but by painting a vivid portrait of pre-war life in which no one knows what's about to happen. As the poem begins, young men line up to enlist in the army, oblivious to what awaits them. They act as if they are going to watch sports at "The Oval or Villa Park" (cricket and football stadiums, respectively), rather than signing up to kill and be killed.

These mustachioed men "grin[]" as if this is all a "lark"—that is, a bit of fun—on a summer holiday. (This reflects the reality that many men *were* excited to join the army, having been sold a lie that being a soldier would just mean taking an exciting trip abroad.) They also feel like they are performing an important duty for their country, referring to a sense of patriotism that will also be altered—or even lost—through the war.

The wider society around these soldiers, the speaker observes, shares this same tragic naivete. There is *no sign* of the violence and massacre about to come; no one can predict that a whole way of life is about to come to an end. In this pre-war moment, the pubs are all still open (they'd face limited hours later in the war) and children are still at play. The "established names" on the shop signs speak to long-running traditions, businesses passed down from one generation to another—in other words, to a kind of continuity, tradition, and comfort that the war will soon shatter.

Similarly, "servants" work in "tiny rooms in huge houses"—that is, old-fashioned country houses—and the people cheerfully name their children "after kings and queens," suggesting a comfortable belief in the reliable old order of things. This England—in this poem's vision, at least—is completely at ease in its old ways, ironically unaware that such trust and stability will soon be destroyed by a bloody and pointless war. Even this class system will be disrupted by the coming devastation; for now, the "limousines" wait patiently in the driveways of country mansions.

After painting this picture of a naïve, enthusiastic, deeply traditional country that has no idea what's about to hit it, the poem gestures to the coming destruction. These people and their world are about to be changed forever. There was "never such innocence," says the speaker, as there was just at the beginning of the war: not since, because of the war's devastating consequences, and not before, because society had never been so close to such earthshaking destruction (and still trusted in its traditions and its rulers).

As the men go off to war, England's gardens are still "tidy," and "thousands of marriages" are still intact—but only for a "little while longer." Soon, thousands of wives will become widows, with many of their cheerful, smiling husbands doomed never to return home. Entire communities of men will be lost in mere seconds.

But the war didn't just kill millions of people, the poem implies: it also broke their faith in the world that they lived in. The poem suggests that an entire way of life failed to re-emerge after the

war, such were the devastating effects of the conflict on people's confidence in nationhood, institutions, politics, and even civilization itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Those long uneven ...
... or Villa Park,

"MCMXIV" paints a picture of a very particular time and place: England in 1914, right at the start of World War I, before the true horrors of that conflict changed the world forever. The poem seeks to depict the calm before the storm and a society that has no idea what is about to happen. There is thus a painful dramatic irony at work throughout "MCMXIV": readers know what's coming, but the characters in the poem don't.

A quick note about the title: "MCMXIV" translates from the Roman numerals as 1914, the year in which the poem is set. The war began on July 28 of that year with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand; England joined the conflict soon after. Roman numerals are commonly used on monuments (including war memorials).

The first stanza focuses on young men signing up to fight in the war, presumably outside of a recruitment office (as in this picture). They form "long uneven lines," engaging in that most British of pastimes: queuing. They seem to be doing so voluntarily (conscription didn't happen until January of 1916).

The details of the scene snake down the page, the poem's enjambment evoking the length of those "uneven lines." The reference to "lines" might subtly call to mind the network of trenches that stretched across Europe during the war (e.g., the front line). There's a distinct lack of rush or panic here, however, which fits with the pervading mood among young men at the time. Most are happy, even excited, to sign up for war, and have no inkling of the horror that awaits them.

Using a simile, the speaker compares these lines to the kind found outside of sports stadiums: "The Oval" and "Villa Park," a cricket ground in London and a soccer stadium in the Midlands, respectively. This comparison suggests that the men think that the war will be fun, like a game. These lines, then, establish a relaxed, carefree atmosphere painfully at odds with the knowledge of WWI the reader brings to the poem.

LINES 5-8

The crowns of ...
... Bank Holiday lark;

The speaker continues to describe the lines of men waiting to enlist in the British army.

They're dressed in characteristically Edwardian fashion (even though King Edward VII died in 1910, the style and atmosphere of the era survived a little longer). They wear hats that remind the speaker of "crowns," though these men, of course, are not royal; they are common folk. Describing their hats as "crowns" hints at both the rigid class system and the more central role of the monarchy in English society at the time.

The sun is beating down, and the men's "moustached archaic faces" smile away as if they don't have a care in the world. In short, everyone seems *happy*. The fact these faces are "archaic," meanwhile, isn't just a statement about the fashion for facial hair: they possess a certain grinning innocence that, post-war, could never reappear. Indeed, the men act "as if it were all / An august Bank Holiday lark"—that is, leisure time on a summer's day. This simile, as with the one in lines 3 and 4, develops the poem's dramatic irony: it might *feel* like a holiday, but soon the world will become an all-too-real nightmare.

LINES 9-11

And the shut ...
... farthings and sovereigns,

The second stanza shifts away from the image of men lined up to enlist. It introduces a number of images meant to evoke pre-war England, a place it presents as quaint and familiar.

First, there are the various storefronts. The shops are presumably shut due to the bank holiday mentioned in the previous stanza. Note the way the alliteration of "shut shops" has a curt, closing-off effect.

The names displayed on the shops' awnings are already "established," implying that these shops have been around for a long time. In fact, those names have been "bleached" because they've been around for so many years, gradually fading over time from the rays of the sun.

Because the reader knows what looms on the horizon for this society, each object likely feels like a poignant message from a lost world. Think about how this all foreshadows what's to come: many shops will soon be shut not because it's a holiday, but because their staff has gone off to war, many never to return. Many family businesses will close forever.

In line 11, the speaker refers to "farthings and sovereigns." These coins were no longer in use by the time the poem was written, further emphasizing the stark disconnect between pre- and post-war England. Both coins were also emblematic of the British Empire: the farthing bore an image of Britannia (the personified figure of the Empire), while the sovereign displayed Saint George (the patron saint of England).

LINES 12-16

And dark-clothed children ...
... open all day;

The speaker continues to describe a quaint scene without any sense of urgency or looming danger. Quite the opposite, in fact: everyone and everything seems happy and calm. These images and details seem disarmingly innocuous, yet the sense of dramatic irony remains strong because readers know that much of this world will soon be destroyed.

First, the speaker describes children playing:

- The children are dressed in the "dark-clothed" style of the era, but this dark clothing might suggest the clothes they will wear at future funerals.
- They're also named after "kings and queens," hinting at the importance of the British monarchy at the time.
- These lines suggest a somewhat innocent, and perhaps naive, working-class appreciation and respect for the upper classes/royalty; (naive because royals were also the power-brokers of Europe and partly to blame for the complex network of events that led to the First World War).

Next, the speaker mentions tin advertisements offer "cocoa and twist [tobacco]":

- The "tin advertisements" also seem like an innocent enough detail. (For a better understanding of what the speaker is referring to, check out some retro tin signs here.)
- Yet the mention of "tin" might foreshadow the soldiers' wartime experience: Princess Mary organized gift tins, containing both chocolate and tobacco, to be sent to British soldiers for Christmas 1914.

Finally, the speaker says that the pubs are "Wide open all day":

- The speaker is referencing the fact that, before the war, pubs were allowed to stay open whenever they wanted.
- During the war, however, new laws were passed in an effort to curb alcohol consumption. It was thought that drunkenness was making people less productive (e.g., in factories making supplies for the conflict). Pub hours were dramatically reduced, with most allowed to open only from noon to 2:30 p.m. and then again from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m.

Subtly, then, the poem suggests that this 1914 world is in many ways a freer world than the one that replaced it.

LINES 17-21

And the countryside ...
... wheat's restless silence;

The poem zooms out from the urban setting of the first two stanzas to describe what's happening in the countryside. As in the city, there's no sense of the nightmare that is coming.

Indeed, the countryside is described as "not caring." This is an example of metonymy, the word "countryside" standing in for the people living in more rural areas, for whom the war perhaps seems a less pressing concern (at first at least). The war is something distant, taking place *elsewhere*.

As with the previous stanza, the speaker fills the scene with details that subtly foreshadow the horror of WWI. First, the speaker says that the "place-names," meaning signs for villages, towns, roads, etc., "are all hazed over/ With flowering grasses":

- In other words, the signs have been obscured by plant growth.
- Much of the war took place in the fields of Europe, and the "flowering grasses" here also hint at the way nature will try and reclaim its lands, swallowing the bodies of thousands of men with it.
- This image also echoes the sunbleached shop names from earlier in the poem. Both images foreshadow the fact that the world depicted in the poem will soon fade away.

The speaker then says that England's fields still generally map along "Domesday lines": the land borders drawn up long ago and recorded in the "Domesday Book" in 1085. This gestures toward England's deep history; the region has looked a certain way for a very, very long time. And 1,000 years of tradition, the poem implies, are about to be upended.

These fields, the speaker continues, rest beneath wheat swaying quietly. Sibilance evokes the rustling of the wheat: "Under wheat's restless silence."

LINES 22-24

The differently-dressed servants ...
... dust behind limousines;

The last three lines of the stanza take a look at the homes of the upper classes. The "differently-dressed servants" remind the reader that this is a society divided clearly along class lines. It's an unequal world, the servants living in tiny rooms despite working in "huge houses" (note how the alliteration makes these seem *extra* large). The poem doesn't make a moral judgment here, merely making observations of how things are before the war.

The reference to "differently-dressed servants" might also make readers think of the uniforms donned during war. The war was, in some ways, an equalizer; the battlefield wouldn't

don't discriminate between servants and those they served. Post-war England also saw a breakdown in rigid social hierarchies as well as the mobilization of the working class.

The speaker then ends the stanza with the ambiguous image of "dust behind limousines." These limousines might be on the move down dirt roads, kicking up dust as they cruise along. Dust itself generally symbolizes death (as in the phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust"), so its mention here hints that this lifestyle would soon come to an end.

LINES 25-28

Never such innocence, ...
... Without a word—

In the final stanza, the speaker makes the poem's first real judgment about the scenes described so far. From line 25 to the caesura in line 28 (the dash after "word"), the speaker neatly sums up the poem's main thematic idea: that this pre-war world is an *innocent* one that no longer exists.

The anaphora of "Never" builds rhetorical power, making the speaker sound more emphatic, while the phrase "before or since" calls attention to this very specific moment in time:

> Never such innocence,
> Never before or since,

It's easy to understand why the world has *never* been this innocent *since* the war: the scale of death and suffering was immense and unprecedented. Why it was never so innocent *before* is a slightly more complicated idea. The poem suggests that this English innocence depends on the country's *proximity* to the war. That is, the people in the poem have no idea what's coming despite being so close to it. Their innocence, the poem implies, is proportionate to the scale of devastation soon heading their way.

This world, the speaker continues, has "changed itself to past / Without a word." That is, it seems to have vanished without a trace. All of a sudden, the world described throughout the poem—with its tin signs, quaint shop fronts, and country estates—has become a place that *was* rather than still *is*.

LINES 28-32

the men ...
... such innocence again.

Instead of gesturing directly at the horrors of the war, this poem's final section focuses on the men leaving to join the fight.

They tidy their gardens before heading off to war, undertaking a mundane domestic task without realizing they're doing so for the last time. Making a garden neat and presentable perhaps seems like a ridiculous waste of time in light of the horrors of war. Of course, these men don't know that they may never return. The fact that they leave the "gardens tidy" implies they think they'll be back soon enough. It also again conveys the innocence of the world they're leaving behind.

These men are also leaving their families. There are "thousands of marriages," the speaker says, that will last "a little while longer"—that is, until the husbands die on the battlefield and make their wives widows. Notice how the gentle alliteration of "Lasting," "little," and " longer" is delicate and fragile, evoking the vulnerability of these young lives sent to slaughter.

The poem then repeats line 25 with an added word:

> Never such innocence again.

The world, then, is about to change forever, consigning this type of innocence into the past for good. The war undermined any fantasy that humankind had transgressed its tendency towards violence. If anything, the war showed that humanity was more able, more adept, and more eager, to wreak havoc upon itself, using new technology to cause death and destruction on an unprecedented scale.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"MCMXIV" is filled with alliteration, which makes its images all the more vivid for the reader. For example, listen to the appropriately drawn-out /l/ sounds of "long uneven lines" or the hushed /sh/ of "shut shops" (echoed in the consonance of "Established" in the next line). These sounds evoke the actual scenes being described.

Crisp /k/ sounds then elevate the language of lines 12-13, subtly conveying the supposed importance of those "kings and queens" mentioned:

> And dark-clothed children at play
> Called after kings and queens,

That same sound appears alliteratively at the top of the following stanza, where the sharpness of the phrase "countryside not caring" makes the countryside seem harsh and dismissive.

Later, the thudding /d/ sounds of "differently-dressed" emphasize the visual separation between servants and their employers (which would begin to disappear soon enough as rigid class hierarchies crumbled). And the breathy /h/ of "huge house" evokes just how massive those houses are.

In the final stanza, the quiet /w/ of "Without a word" conveys the swift silence with which this world "changed itself to past." And in the penultimate line, gentle /l/ sounds suggest the fragility of all those "thousands of marriages" destined only to "Last[] a little while longer." (Once again, consonance adds to

the effect: "Lasting a little while longer.")

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "long," "lines"
- **Line 9:** "shut shops"
- **Line 12:** "clothed"
- **Line 13:** "Called," "kings," "queens"
- **Line 14:** "tin"
- **Line 15:** "cocoa," "twist"
- **Line 17:** "countryside," "caring"
- **Line 19:** "flowering," "fields"
- **Line 22:** "differently-dressed"
- **Line 23:** "huge houses"
- **Line 28:** "Without," "word"
- **Line 31:** "Lasting," "little," "longer"

ENJAMBMENT

Nearly every line in "MCMXIV" is enjambed. The poem consists of a single long, multi-clause sentence that never really reaches a conclusion.

All this enjambment creates a thoughtful, meditative tone. It also creates a sense of time slipping away. The poem moves languidly yet *continuously* down the page, pulling the reader into its world even as they know that this world is soon about to disappear forever.

Some enjambments are particularly evocative. Take lines 9-10:

> And the shut shops, the bleached
> Established names on the sunblinds,

Breaking the line after "bleached" draws the reader's attention to the blank, "bleached" white space of the page.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "lines / Standing"
- **Lines 2-3:** "patiently / As"
- **Lines 3-4:** "outside / The"
- **Lines 5-6:** "sun / On"
- **Lines 6-7:** "faces / Grinning"
- **Lines 7-8:** "all / An"
- **Lines 9-10:** "bleached / Established"
- **Lines 12-13:** "play / Called"
- **Lines 14-15:** "advertisements / For"
- **Lines 15-16:** "pubs / Wide"
- **Lines 18-19:** "over / With"
- **Lines 19-20:** "fields / Shadowing"
- **Lines 20-21:** "lines / Under"
- **Lines 22-23:** "servants / With"
- **Lines 27-28:** "past / Without"
- **Lines 28-29:** "men / Leaving"

IRONY

Dramatic irony is an essential part of what makes "MCMXIV" such a powerful poem. None of the characters in the poem know how horrific the war is going to be, nor how many people are going to die. The poem's readers, by contrast, know full well that near-total devastation looms on the horizon. In a way, even the shops and the landscape are part of this state of tragic ignorance.

This irony is most acute in the first stanza, where the poem uses two similes to capture the carefree, happy mood of the young men waiting to sign up. The men are:

> Standing as patiently
> As if they were stretched outside
> The Oval or Villa Park,
> [...]
> Grinning as if it were all
> An August Bank Holiday lark;

In other words, the men look like they're lining up to watch a sports game and smiling like they're on a fun holiday adventure. The poem is drawing from real life: people really *were* excited about the war in the beginning; it was sold to young men as little more than a fun trip abroad with their friends.

The men's glee and nonchalance create dramatic irony because the reader knows the horror that awaits them. This irony continues throughout the next two stanzas, where life is moving along as usual. Kids are playing, the bars are open, the grass is growing, and servants are going about their business. No one is aware that their world is about to be torn apart.

The poem squeezes this irony for every last drop of tragedy in the last stanza:

> [...] the men
> Leaving the gardens tidy,
> The thousands of marriages,
> Lasting a little while longer:

The men are so ignorant of what's about to happen that they take the time to mow the lawn and trim the hedges before heading off to war. Such actions seem meaningless and frivolous to the reader, who knows that many of these men will never come back. The men are still married, too, but not for long: once slain on the battlefield, their wives will turn into widows. Once again, they don't expect this to happen—but the reader does.

This moment is made doubly powerful by the understated way in which the speaker presents all this information. The poem doesn't mention any of the violence of war because it doesn't need to. *Not* referring to the horrors of the actual fighting, ironically, makes this ending all the *more* gut-wrenching. The

reader knows what's coming, while the men expect to be home by Christmas.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** "Those long uneven lines / Standing as patiently / As if they were stretched outside / The Oval or Villa Park, / The crowns of hats, the sun / On moustached archaic faces / Grinning as if it were all / An August Bank Holiday lark;"
- **Lines 28-31:** "the men / Leaving the gardens tidy, / The thousands of marriages, / Lasting a little while longer:"

REPETITION

"MCMXIV" is one long sentence with multiple clauses. It has no main verb, instead behaving more like a list of observations. This list-like quality is created, and sustained, through repetition.

Most clauses in this long, meandering sentence begin with "The," "And," or a combination of the two. Here is the second stanza as an example:

> And the shut shops, the bleached
> Established names on the sunblinds,
> The farthings and sovereigns,
> And dark-clothed children at play
> [...]
> The tin advertisements
> For cocoa and twist, and the pubs

This subtle anaphora creates a sense of connection between all the different things being described in the poem. The queuing men, the "shut shops," the playing children, the countryside, and so on, collectively make up England in 1914.

The anaphora in the last stanza is more obvious and coincides with the first time that the speaker really *comments* on this world, as opposed to just *describing* it:

> Never such innocence,
> Never before or since,
> [...]
> Never such innocence again.

The repetition of "never" emphasizes that this is a world that is truly gone. Given what took place in the following years, this innocent England is never coming back; it can never truly move on from the death and destruction of the war. Repeating the whole phrase—"Never such innocence"—builds even more rhetorical power, making this ending sound like an elegy, and closing the poem with a profound sense of loss.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "As if"
- **Line 5:** "The," "the"
- **Line 7:** "as if"
- **Line 9:** "And," " the," "the"
- **Line 11:** "The"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "The"
- **Line 15:** "and the"
- **Line 17:** "And"
- **Line 18:** "The"
- **Line 19:** "and"
- **Line 22:** "The"
- **Line 24:** "The"
- **Line 25:** "Never," " such innocence,"
- **Line 26:** "Never"
- **Line 28:** "the"
- **Line 30:** "The"
- **Line 32:** "Never such innocence again."

CONSONANCE

The poem is rich with consonance, which amplifies its frequent use of alliteration and makes the language even more lyrical and, at times, emphatic. Take the bold /bl/ consonance in lines 9-10, which suggest just how firmly "established" those shop names really are:

> And the shut shops, the **bl**eached
> Esta**bl**ished names on the sun**bl**inds,

Sibilance, a specific kind of consonance, fills the poem as well. Take phrases like "wheat's restless silence," where all the /s/ sounds help readers envision fields of wheat swaying gently, silently. The poem's final stanza is particularly sibilant. Listen to lines 25-27:

> Never such innocence,
> Never before or since,
> As changed itself to past

The poem is whispery and hushed in its final moments, which feels appropriate for a description of a world that has disappeared.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "long," "lines"
- **Line 9:** "shut shops"
- **Lines 9-10:** "bleached / Established"
- **Line 10:** "sunblinds"
- **Line 12:** "dark-clothed children," "play"
- **Line 13:** "Called," "kings," "queens"
- **Line 14:** "tin advertisements"

- **Line 15:** “cocoa,” “twist”
- **Line 17:** “countryside,” “caring”
- **Line 19:** “flowering,” “fields”
- **Line 21:** “wheat's restless silence”
- **Line 22:** “differently-dressed servants”
- **Line 23:** “huge houses”
- **Line 24:** “dust”
- **Line 25:** “such innocence”
- **Line 26:** “since”
- **Line 27:** “itself,” “past”
- **Line 28:** “Without,” “word”
- **Line 31:** “Lasting,” “little while longer”
- **Line 32:** “such innocence”

VOCABULARY

MCMXIV () - 1914 in Roman numerals.

Villa Park (Lines 2-4, Line 4) - An English soccer stadium.

The Oval (Lines 2-4, Line 4) - A cricket ground in London.

Lark (Lines 7-8, Line 8) - A playful, frivolous activity.

Bank Holiday (Line 8) - A national public holiday in Britain.

Sunblinds (Lines 9-10) - Awnings designed to block out direct sunlight.

Bleached (Lines 9-10) - The speaker means that the signs have faded in the sunlight.

Farthing and sovereigns (Line 11) - Old British coins no longer in use.

Called after (Lines 12-13) - Named after.

Tin advertisements (Lines 14-15) - Old-fashioned metal signs.

Cocoa and twist (Lines 14-15) - Chocolate and tobacco.

Domesday lines (Lines 19-21) - A reference to the Domesday Book, a public record of land ownership/division in Britain produced in 1086.

Limousines (Line 24) - Long, chauffeur-driven cars.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"MCMXIV" has 32 lines broken into four octets (eight-line stanzas). Each stanza on a different aspect of pre-war English society. The stanzas feel like snapshots of a lost world or clips from old footage edited together.

The four stanzas form one long, meandering sentence with multiple clauses. Frequent enjambment creates a relaxed tone while also pulling the reader down the page, subtly evoking the way this world would soon, inevitably, come to an end.

METER

"MCMXIV" doesn't have a strict meter. That said, the lines are generally of similar length. Most contain six to eight syllables and have three strong beats (i.e., "Those long uneven lines"). This approach gives the poem a balance between order and unpredictability; indeed, everything is written in "uneven lines," just like the men enlisting at the poem's start.

It's worth noting that Larkin was a master technician of meter. The choice to keep this loose is perhaps meant to disarm the reader. It's as though the poem takes on the same carefree spirit of the society it describes.

RHYME SCHEME

"MCMXIV" is mostly unrhymed, but there is one important caveat: the fourth and eighth lines in each stanza *do* rhyme.

Think of these rhymes as a little playful twist that aids the poem's dramatic irony. The young men in the poem think the war is going to be over quickly and have no idea of the scale of bloodshed that is to come. To them, at this stage, it's all a bit of a "lark" (mischievous fun). And this word itself is one half of the first rhyming pair: "Park/lark." This rhyme has a jolly, frivolous sound, as does "play/day" in the next stanza.

SPEAKER

For the most part, the speaker stays out of the way of the poem. Instead, the poem focuses on building an evocative portrait of pre-war England through very specific details (e.g., "moustached archaic faces" or "tin advertisements").

There's a notable shift in the last stanza, however. Here, rather than describing objects or scenes from pre-war life, the speaker actually makes a judgment about what's come before:

> Never such innocence,
> Never before or since,
> As changed itself to past
> Without a word [...]

This is a reminder that the poem was written many decades after the way, placing the speaker and reader at a distance from this pre-war vision of England.

SETTING

"MCMXIV" is set in England at a very specific moment in time. It's 1914, and the First World War has only recently begun. No one, least of all those signing up to fight, is aware of the horror to come.

The poem paints a vivid picture of pre-war Edwardian society, offering a range of characteristic details. It begins with men

lining up to enlist on a sunny day, dressed in the fashion of the time. The poem zooms out to scan the shopfronts, shuttered for the "bank holiday," with awnings that have faded in the sun.

Next, the poem moves into the English countryside. The grasses are overgrown, obscuring local signs. Fields of wheat sway quietly, their borders falling along the same dividing lines established 1,000 years ago. Servants in huge manor houses go back to their "tiny rooms," and limousines kick up the dust on unpaved roads.

All these details give the reader a powerful sense of a lost and, in the speaker's mind, more innocent world. The reference to well-established shop names and field borders also reflects a society that has been around, unchanged in many ways, for a very, very long time.

The poem then closes at a moment in time as close to the devastation of the war as possible, *just* before the horrors of the conflict really begin. Men are about to be shipped off to fight; they've tidied their gardens, many for the last time, and "thousands of marriages" are about to come to an end (because so many men will soon be dead). The poem thus stands on the precipice of history, dangling over the edge, looking down into an abyss.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

From the publication of his second collection, *The Less Deceived* (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, 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 published "MCMXIV" in his 1964 collection *The Whitsun Weddings*. This slim volume contains many of Larkin's best-loved poems and, by poetry's standards, was a huge success. Poems like "Mr Bleaney," "An Arundel Tomb," "Talking in Bed," and the title poem reflect a sense of disenchantment with various aspects of mid-century English life, including nationhood, work, sex, love, and religion. That mood perhaps informs the somewhat nostalgic, almost mythological take on Edwardian England presented here.

While "MCMXIV" focuses on *civilian* rather than military life and draws its power from the horrors it leaves out, it can still be considered a war poem. In a way, it builds on the legacies of poets like Wilfried Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Both men wrote vividly about their personal experiences in World War I, creating some of the most haunting and enduring war poems in the English language.

Owen and Sassoon were both responding in part to the intensely patriotic and idealistic work of writers like Rupert Brooke and Jessie Pope, as well as to media that more broadly treated the war as a kind of game. Indeed, Pope published "Who's for the Game?" early on in the war as a direct appeal to the British public, encouraging young men to enlist in the army out of love for their country and a thirst for adventure.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Philip Larkin was born in 1922 and died in 1985. This particular poem was published in the 1960s, a time of widespread social upheaval. Over the course of the decade, counterculture movements rose to prominence and championed equality, love, peace, and freedom. By 1964, the Beatles were on their sixth number-one record in a row, and the "teenage" years had become recognized (not always positively) as a distinct life stage between childhood and adulthood. Larkin's poems, however, are invariably written from an outsider's perspective and share little of the youthful enthusiasm in the air at the time.

The First World War, of course, is also a vital part of the poem's context. As described in the poem, there was a sense of enthusiasm about the war early on. Many young men were excited to sign up, having been sold the lie that the conflict would be like an exciting holiday with their buddies.

But life in the trenches of Europe during the war was terrifying and deadly, and the poor conditions caused frequent sickness and disease. Soldiers were often delirious from sleep deprivation and the nature of combat was chaotic and confusing. The First World War would soon enough be described as "the war to end all wars"—a phrase that turned out to be tragically inaccurate with the onset of World War II. Around 16 million people died directly in WWI, with many more perishing in the great flu outbreaks and conflicts that followed.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to Larkin read "MCMXIV" himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4YyZTMfDOk)
- Larkin's Life and Work — Further resources on Larkin from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)
- World War I — Learn more about the war that looms in the background of "MCMXIV." (https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/world-war-i-history)
- An Interview With the Poet — Watch poet John Betjeman interview Philip Larkin in 1964, the year he published The

Whitsun Weddings. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Coe11pgoj8E)

- England at War — Take a look at some photographs that capture life during the war. (https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/20-incredible-photos-from-the-first-world-war-home-front)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- Afternoons
- 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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