

This be the verse
essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This Be the Verse is a lyric poem in three verses of four iambic tetrameter on an alternating rhyme scheme, by the English poet Philip Larkin (1922–1985). It was written around April 1971, first published in the August 1971 issue of *New Humanist*, and appeared in the 1974 collection *High Windows*. The title also ironically recalls the recurring phrase in the Old Testament threatening the sins of the father against his sons: “ for I the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” [Exodus 20: 5].

Larkin parodies the divine threat by rewriting the deliberate retribution of an angry vengeful God as the tragic shortcomings of “ your mum and dad” (l. 1). This biblical allusion injects a homiletic quality into the unabashedly profane poem and hints at a certain awareness on Larkin’s part that, of all his poems, this one will be the poem his readers will remember. One of Philip Larkin’s most famous and controversial poems, “ This Be The Verse” has become a fixture in poetry anthologies, and the minds of many people who don’t ordinarily read poetry.

Whilst it is probably famous for its inflammatory, and very quotable, first line, the poem is far more subtle than a first glance might suggest. The title “ This Be The Verse” is obviously ironic: the archaic phrasing and grandeur mockingly demands that the reader pay attention to what will be a statement of great weight and wisdom. There is also a play on the word “ verse”, used to refer to poetry in general, as well as specific stanzas, and lines from the Bible. There is an ironic echo here of phrases like “ This is the word of the Lord” from the Anglican liturgy.

These archaic tones are picked up by the last stanza's opening line "Man hands on misery to man", with its general, gnomic tone. The famous first line "They f*** you up, your mum and dad" is typically Larkin. He uses obscenity at the beginning of several other of his famous poems, as if to set the poem's tone, or jolt the reader into paying attention. "Love Again" and "High Windows" both contain a defiant obscenity in the early lines, and both poems (like "The Old Fools" and "This Be The Verse") move from this opening violence to a more thoughtful tone in the final images.

Larkin's control in this line is masterly: the words flow perfectly naturally, but also fit the requirements of the metre, an iambic tetrameter, with the use of "you" and "mum" provides a casual, colloquial impression. The inversion of the sentence (which would ordinarily be "Your mum and dad f*** you up") makes the metre and rhyme possible, but also enhance the chatty, unforced tone of the poem. The image of a coastal shelf is an unexpectedly expansive one after the previous stanzas strewn with "fools", "f***", "at each other's throats".

It has been criticised for sounding forced, but it fits with Larkin's poetic technique in "High Windows" and "Love Again", with their images of windows and trees in the final stanzas. The image simply marks the move from a direct style of address to a more oblique one. It is also quite resonant, with its implications of inevitability and collapse, of time only making problems worse. The poem's end is purposefully glib and puzzling. Having enumerated the problems with family life, Larkin (or the poem's speaker) appears to be suggesting that the only way of solving the issue is to abandon one's family and not reproduce.

If taken to its logical conclusion this would mean the end of the human race – it is surely a deliberately impractical suggestion, made to emphasize both the poet's depth of feeling, and the apparent insolubility of the problem. It's not unlike the ending of "A Study of Reading Habits", where the speaker declares "books are a load of crap" – a line which has troubled some readers as being simply inconsistent with Larkin's lifelong involvement with books and literature.

The impractical practical solution offered at the end of "This Be The Verse" mocks the poem's ironic pretension to containing wisdom, and sends away readers who want poetry to provide simple answers to life's problems. This Be the Verse by Philip Larkin They *censored* you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do. They fill you with the faults they had And add some extra, just for you. But they were *censored*ed up in their turn By fools in old-style hats and coats, Who half the time were sloppy-stern And half at one another's throats. Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf. Get out as early as you can, And don't have any kids yourself. Lately, I have read a good deal of poems by Philip Larkin, and one unifying factor that I have noticed is that Larkin never seems to use a filler. Every word in every one of his poems seems to be carefully crafted and placed, to the point where the flow and rhythm of the poem seem almost an accident. One poem I read that really stayed with me is the above poem, This be the Verse. I will now show you how this poem, which at first glance seems to be written only to amuse, really has a much deeper meaning.

I will examine the poem in several parts. First, I would like to examine the use of curse words in the poem, or why other words that would be considered more acceptable to the general public were not used. Then, I will discuss the three stanzas of the poem and what they were meant to do for the audience. Lastly, I will explore why Larkin would write such a poem, and what he was trying to get across to his audience by writing it. The second line in this poem contains the word *censored*, a word that is usually not considered acceptable for the general public.

Yet Larkin incorporates it almost immediately into his poem. I can think of four possible reasons why. Firstly, words such as *censored* quickly and easily grab the audiences attention. This is similar to yelling sex in a crowded marketplace, everyone wants to know what is being discussed. Also, words like *censored* prepare the audience for a humorous bit of poetry, and this perks the audience's attention, and lets them know off the bat that this will not be another long and boring verse.

Secondly, words such as *censored* produce an atmosphere for adults, or mature people. One term that is used quite extensively lately is adult language. This term branches off of the common idea that children should and would not use such words until they are older and have a more concrete knowledge of what they are really saying. Thus, by using a word such as *censored*, Larkin creates a poem that will most likely not be read to children. Also, such a poem would not be read at certain social gatherings (i. e. church meetings) where such words are considered unacceptable, further narrowing the audience for this poem. That brings me to my third point: that the people who read such a poem know, whether consciously or not, that

they are in a distinct group, and that this poem was written for them. This allows Larkin to establish a closeness with his readers, now that they know that he is writing for them. This also implies to the reader that Larkin is one of them, that he knows the reader well, because he is in the same social class.

To sum it up, by using a word considered to be socially incorrect, Larkin has managed to establish more credibility with the reader, which inherently forces the reader listen up, and pay attention to what Larkin has to say. Lately, modern art and poetry are showing more and more unacceptable words. This is because such words have become synonymous with truth. In other words, the general public seems to feel that if an artist is using curse words, then he must be telling it like it is. Thus, using such words helps Larkin's credibility as a man who has seen and will now tell.

Larkin's poem is divided into three stanzas, each with its own meaning and objectives. The first stanza is the introduction. As discussed above, the first stanza singles out a select group of people and builds Larkin's credibility with them. But beyond that, the first stanza also inspires several other feeling in the reader, just from the actual words it uses. The very first line, in fact, insults your own parents. Larkin did this in order to provoke a slight feeling of anger, one which he will dispense soon afterward.

By the second line, Larkin has already started to divert the initial blow to your parents, saying that it is not their fault for what they did to you. By the third and fourth line, the insult has been successfully shifted from your parents to you, the reader. However, Larkin manages to shift not only the

insult, but that same feeling of anger toward the author, except that now the anger is there because the author insulted you. In the second stanza, Larkin again justifies why it is not your parents fault for what they did to you. Instead, he shifts the blame to your grandparents.

However, if this poem were read by your parents, then the blame would be shifted back another generation. And so on, until it is clear that the corruption of children has been going on for ever, back to the first humans. On the other hand, should this poem be read by your children, then it would once again be your parents fault. And so on, into infinity, it is everyone's fault, for somewhere there will be someone to blame their faults on you. The last two lines of the second stanza describe how the readers grandparents (or whomever the blame is being shifted on) went about *censored*ing you up.

However, the description that Larkin uses is a very typical description of what is considered a modern household, again implying that nothing is anyone's fault, but that we are all contributing to *censored*ing up of the world. The third stanza presents the problem in it's simplest form, and then provides the solution to the problem. The problem is stated on the first line, and the second line emphasizes the fact that this is a growing problem that seemingly can't be stopped. The last two lines of the poem then provide the solution: to stop reproducing.

This is where Larkin says to the world that there is no way out of this problem. That the human race will either have to cease to exist, or simply live with all of it's problems. Like all of his poems, Larkin wrote This be the

Verse with very careful planning and word placement. And even though this is a funny poem, it has a very deep message to share with the world.

Everyone knows that the world is full of problems, and that hundreds of organizations are trying hard to fix all of the problems in order to make our lives better.

However, as demonstrated in the poem, we can never absolve all our problems because we keep handing all of our flaws on to posterity. Thus, the human race will forever have problems, and although we work hard to decrease some, we will always have new problems, and there will never be a completely happy world. And this lesson can be applied to a smaller environment as well. All the way through a country's internal problems, a city's problems, a family's problems and the problems one has with oneself. No one can ever lead a perfectly happy life. There will always be problems to overcome.