

The loss of an idyllic world in "mcmxiv"



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Larkin's idealised image of nostalgia of 1914 is reiterated through the use of the roman numerals, 'MCMXIV' to represent the Roman Empire. The title gives the overriding impression that although Larkin was not born until 1922 – subsequent to the war – he still appears to lament this idyllic time he was not even present in. Despite this historical disjunction, Larkin tries to draw attention to the everyday life that preceded the worst of World War I, and does so in a manner that reveals a peaceful world that is quickly falling into the past.

The opening line of the first stanza elucidates that a myriad of eager men volunteered for the war through the adjective 'long'. The use of personification in this first stanza specifically evokes emotion to be experienced by the reader. I think that this technique is used to engross readers and present Larkin's admiration toward what life was like during World War I. The use of the simile 'as if they were stretched outside the Oval or Villa Park' is operative in that these volunteers correlate with crowds of fans waiting for a major sporting event and thus, oblivious to the serious nature and impending calamity of the war itself. 'The crowns of hats' represent these men as figures worthy of respect and the royal language is utilised to elevate their manner. The volunteering men had 'moustached archaic faces' which was, given the time, prevalent in War-stricken Britain. 'Grinning' implies a sense of the men's credulity and therefore augments their scepticism of what will happen. The fact the end of the stanza presents an 'August Bank Holiday' this would have been, coincidentally, weeks before the start of the War – July 1914. The impression that this was merely a great escapade, which would not last long or even be particularly detrimental, was

one that was current among large numbers of people in 1914. It was truly an "age of innocence", which is an integral theme of Larkin's poem.

The second stanza directly flows on from the first with 'the shut shops, the bleached established names...' Suggests these shops have been present for many years – maintained and passed on from father to son – until the imminent change from the War. Likewise, the 'shut shops' suggest the women and children of that particular area have been evacuated and the town is therefore desolate. Larkin evinces that there was profound change at this time which ultimately altered people's lives for a long time. The representation of the obsolete currency 'farthings and sovereigns' shows how distant this age seems from our own, almost as remote as Ancient Greece or Rome. Furthermore, the Persona's use of the ominous description 'dark-clothed children' shows how modest and conservative these times were, along with 'black' acting as the catalyst, foreshadowing the deaths to come. And, the fact these children are 'at play' suggest anything such as this are imperative in temporarily reassuring the kids into thinking all is well – they are at ease and content. 'For cocoa and twist' are articles associated with home and comfort that are the every-day essentials for a British person. This and 'Pubs wide open all day' enthrall readers into thinking this is what Larkin reveres and truly laments.

Furthermore, the third stanza of this poem sees Larkin discard from the pivotal setting of a town, allowing the audience to empathise with a wider picture of how England, presently, was standardised. The countryside is "not caring" about the forthcoming conflict, but evidently it could not escape the consequences. Just as the war would put an end to gold sovereigns and all-

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day pub opening, so would it have a significant impact on the countryside, because food production had to be inflated. And yet, despite imminent war change, people of the countryside are carefree and abstracted. The diversity of this stanza is that it is set pastorally – antithetical to Larkin's description of industrialised locations. ' With flowering grasses and fields' could reflect the wretched events of Flanders and Ypres. Larkin's use of ' Domesday lines' shows he is nostalgic for the social hierarchy of master and servant – again, augmenting the idea of a standardised and aristocratic Britain. ' Limousines' is archaic language for a car – it adds to the grandeur of these people – and justifies how it is different to the mass-produced cars of the contemporary world.

The final stanza of the poem is deeply embedded with the adverb ' never'. It is repeated several times in order to reaffirm the unprecedented outcome, that this war changed the world and that no matter what happened in the future, men would never again view war with such innocence. We are referred back to the men of the opening stanza who, in their innocence of what was to happen, left their neat, ordered lives and went off to fight. The innocent way of life embodied by the pre-war world, and outlined earlier in ' MCMXIV', has gone for eternity. The stanza shows the irrevocability of the war – an inability to regain what was once an image of perfection. Larkin utilises alliteration through ' Lasting a little while longer' this mimics the sound of a fading age. The letter sound drags but ultimately fades. People were not prepared for WWI and the poem conveys the difficulty that the families of the soldiers might face in accepting the loss of normality they had previously relished. The poem includes sentencing which allows it to move

from detail to detail like a photograph. It ends on a full stop, marking the definitive end to this idyllic way of life.