

"wild oats" by philip larkin essay sample

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The title of this poem is derived from the expression ' To sow your wild oats'. It was culturally accepted by men at the time, that before marriage, men would be allowed to indulge in many sexual relationships with many women. The reasoning behind this is that if a man is not able to sow his wild oats, he will become anxious during his married years and begin to cheat on his wife. This story is told by Larkin aged 40, when he is still unmarried, and in this poem, he looks back to his younger days when he was around 20 years old. The poem describes one of his relationships in which he failed miserably. 20 years on from this event, he still has photos from it, but not of the girl he had a relationship with, but of her prettier friend.

This prettier friend is immediately described as " A bosomy English rose". This hints at how extremely beautiful she is and how Larkin considers her at the height of beauty. Larkin calls her " beautiful" and that is what he defines her as in his mind. He also remembers her very precisely even after 20 years, " I believe/ I met beautiful twice" and the fact that he remembers her so precisely shows how strong an impression she made on him. He also thinks that no one ever had any woman as beautiful as her, " I doubt/ If ever one had like hers". It is suggested that she knew she was superior (looks wise) to him, " She was trying/ Both times (so I thought) not to laugh"; this shows how she perhaps found it comical that Larkin was trying to charm her. But perhaps, Larkin is just being paranoid here, and in fact she was just behaving normally.

We find out at the end of verse 1 that even though he was much more attracted to " beautiful" he chose her less attractive friend to go out with, " But it was the friend I took out". Perhaps, he was intimidated by " beautiful"

and her looks; and her friend was someone he found easier to relate to " her friend ... I could talk to". This suggests that he was at ease and felt more confident around ' beautiful's' friend. His girlfriend is described as " her friend in specs" and this suggests that she is very bookish because she wears spectacles. Also he seems very dismissive about her: she is secondary to " beautiful" as she is " beautiful's" friend, rather than " beautiful" as her friend. His dismissive attitude is also seen in the dramatic contrast between the description of " beautiful" and his girlfriend; he suggests that his girlfriend is intelligent but also slightly ugly. The last line of verse one is developed into a punch line anticlimax: " But it was the friend I took out" - he spends the whole of the stanza describing beautiful and her beauty, but ends up with " her friend in specs".

Larkin says he wrote " over four hundred letters" in their relationship of " seven years". He even bought his girlfriend a " ten-guinea ring" for engagement. This shows how committed he was to their relationship and how serious their relationship was (it lasted for seven years). But even though he seems so committed, the relationship still fails. He says they " met/ At numerous cathedral cities/ Unknown to the clergy". This is a romantic and ' naughty' intense idea that Larkin and his girlfriend were able to indulge in sexual intercourse when they were in a holy city, knowing that clergymen would disapprove; this again suggests that the relationship was successful. But in Verse 3 he gives the reader his reasons for his failure in the relationship.

Larkin thinks that the failure of the relationship is due to his lack of final commitment. He says he is "easily bored to love" which tells us that, in reality, he did not love his girlfriend but simply *liked* her, and that his mind was always occupied by 'beautiful'. He suggests that he knew the relationship was doomed, but he put up with it hoping that he will eventually fall in love with the girl "in specs" and that everything would work itself out. He also tells us that he was indecisive on whether or not he should have committed to the relationship, and the reader gets a feeling that this poem is Larkin's confession of his weaknesses when it comes to commitment. Here the reader admires his honesty, as he is very harsh on himself and publicly announces 3 problems with his personality: "I was too selfish, withdrawn, / And easily bored to love." The poem becomes a confession of what is wrong with his personality.

His bluntness and honesty creates sympathy in the reader's mind for Larkin, but also the reader sees this as slightly pathetic and we can see cowardice in him; so the reader is ambivalent towards Larkin. He accepts that he is shallow and superficial because he bases his love on physical attraction and we admire him for his honesty but again feel ambivalent towards him as we feel detached from him because we think that his shallowness is pathetic. The poem is passive and we get the feeling that he was not directly involved in the relationship and that the relationship *happened* to him; he was "withdrawn" and the girl "in specs" was not able to connect with him because he was detached from her and the relationship, all the time fantasizing about 'beautiful'.

He also says he is "easily bored to love" which tells us that he lost interest in his girlfriend. This is very typical of men to get bored in a relationship and to long for a more attractive woman, and this makes it easier for the reader to relate and sympathise with Larkin. He is bitter about his personal shortcomings in his personality, "Well, useful to get that learnt", he is bitter about his personality because he knows he will not be able to change himself, and he will always have it on his conscience that he has a defective personality.

The last image in the poem bring us back to the present tense,

"In my wallet are still two snaps

Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on.

Unlucky charms perhaps."

The word "still" effectively brings the reader to Larkin's present. The images of 'beautiful' hidden away in his wallet suggest that he is voyeuristic and seedy; and this is another confession of his shallowness. At first, the reader does not take his references to "Unlucky charms" seriously because Larkin does not sound superstitious, but more intelligent, sarcastic and bitter. But by saying the pictures of beautiful are "Unlucky charms", he is playfully thinking that these pictures and memories of beautiful are the reasons why he has not been able to succeed with another woman and sow his "Wild Oats".

' Beautiful' is essentially an idealistic image of female beauty. The reason this image is so powerful is because she is not unattainable like a celebrity is unattainable, but she is real and Larkin has met her and he might have thought that his fame as a poet might have given him a chance to woo her even though his appearance was not his strong point. But now his problem is that no woman will live up to beautiful: he will always have the superficial and idealistic image of beautiful in his mind and he will always compare the woman to beautiful and concentrate on how the woman is not nearly as good as his idealistic image of beautiful in any aspect of life.

It is important that Larkin does not know fully of beautiful's personality as this gives her a mystery he needs in a woman to not get bored, and also it gives his mind freedom to create beautiful into the idealistic, perfect, unattainable female he looks for in every woman he meets. Larkin knows this is adolescent and superficial and this makes him bitter knowing he won't change. The title suggests the poem is about carefree love, but it is about the experiences of youth and love he has missed out on, and Larkin is still able to make the poem light and playful.