

# Literature review on introducing literary criticism

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



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I chose to look at Philip Larkin's *Ambulances*. My initial response to the poem was to be soberly reminded of my own fate but in an uneasy way, like the uneasiness of juxtaposition between the common image presented alongside its unusual interpretation since ambulances are usually seen as symbols of care and rescue, rather than death.

## **Worksheet 1**

1. Title: What image, sound, or theme does the title convey?

'Ambulances' is a short, commonly used word which lures the reader into feeling like the poem could be quite simple and inoffensive.

2. Dramatic Situation: Who is the Speaker, the "narrator" of the poem? Who are they addressing? What is the occasion that frames the poem?

Larkin is the speaker and narrates the poem - he is addressing nobody directly but his message applies to everyone who is alive. The poem is framed by the potentially fatal incident of an ambulance collecting a patient.

3. Subject: What is the subject of the poem? A brief summary?

The poem addresses the futility of our existence and how we will all eventually die - the ambulance is a metaphor for when our time comes, like the arrival of the ambulance.

4. Images, Figures of Speech, Literary Devices: Give specifics of these using the language of the poem, and your interpretation of them, as well as the poem's meaning.

The entire poem is a thinly veiled metaphor where ambulances represent our deaths - Larkin personifies the ambulance in the first stanza, "giving back none of the glances they absorb" which helps to present ambulances as a sort of 'grim reaper' style character.

5. Tone: What is the mood or emotion conveyed in the various parts of the poem? The poem overall?

The entire poem has a very dark mood - it is dealing with the futility of life as it always ends in death and so the overall poem is very black.

6. Structure: What format does the poem take? What is its meter?

The poem's format is iambic tetrameter and is constructed of four stanzas, each with six lines.

7. Rhyme Scheme: What rhyme scheme of the poem? Does it follow a pattern, or is it irregular?

It has an irregular rhyme scheme so it does not follow a pattern at all.

8. Meaning: What is the message or theme the poem conveys to you? Is this the same meaning you think the author intended to convey? Why did you create the same/different meaning?

The message of the poem is clearly that life is fragile and that ambulances are a subtle reminder that all of us will require one someday, when we die. I think that Larkin did intend this to be the message as it is obviously implied.

9. Diction: Describe the specific words used throughout the poem. What role do they play in adding meaning, tone, and structure?

The poem uses words and phrases which give a cold, clinical tone such as “white face”, “plaque” and “blank” which lends itself to the medical frankness of the poem’s subject.

## Worksheet 2

1. What is the time period of the work?

The poem is clearly written in modern times as ambulances are a relatively recent development and for the image to work as well as it does, the audience would need to be heavily familiar with what they are.

2. Is this work part of any particular literary ‘movement’? If so, which one?

It is not part of a literary movement although it reflects the changing face of Britain in the 1960s.

3. Indicate one social, cultural, or historical factor that might have had an impact on the creation of this work.

It is clear that it was not recent very recently as it refers to “women coming from the shops” and this was a far more acceptable statement in the 1960s, before the feminist movement had a major effect on the lives of women in Britain.

4. Indicate three ways that same factors might have had an influence on how readers of the work would have received it.

The poem is designed to make the reader consider their own fragile existence and by setting the scene on what could be any street with women walking back from the shop and children playing, this would cause the

reader to identify with the characters, recognise their own fate and possible re-assess their existence.

5. Indicate another social, cultural, or historical factor that might have had an impact on the reception of this work.

In the 1960s, people were less desensitised to death and graphic images than we are today and so, the poem's subject has a harder impact on the reader.

6. Indicate three ways that same factors might have had an influence on the creation of that work.

Being less desensitised to death would mean that readers in the 1960s would have felt the message of this poem more acutely and perhaps Larkin was keen to highlight the futility of life, even in an everyday setting – by doing so, it makes the poem even more chilling.

My response to the poem has remained the same as I correctly interpreted it to begin with. However, my understanding of the poem has deepened and I find its message to be even more deeply chilling than I did originally, largely due to its setting and characters.

## Reference

Larkin, P. (1964). *The Whitsun Weddings*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.