

# Ambulances' by philip larkin essay



Philip Larkin's 'Ambulances' is a poem that describes the literal journey of an ambulance that also takes on an increasingly sinister metaphorical value. The ambulance weaves through the busy afternoon streets, demanding the attention of passers-by while forcing the reader to acknowledge the ambulance's symbolic significance as a reminder of our own mortality. By close examination of the ambulance and its literal movement it is possible to gain a greater understanding of how the ambulance serves as a metaphor of death and the idea that it is ubiquitous; it is indiscriminate; it is inevitable.

In the first stanza, Larkin immediately makes clear the ambulance's symbolic substance with the description of the ambulance and its literal movement through the city. The alliterative simile, 'Closed like confessionals' suggests the ambulance, like a confessional is a small, confined, claustrophobic place of a secretive nature where people seek forgiveness with the fear of death. This comparison helps the reader understand that death is something that we all face alone.

The randomness of death is suggested by the way the ambulance comes 'to rest at any kerb' while the inevitability of death is expressed by how 'All streets in time are visited' by the ambulance. These last two lines are particularly ominous with the suggestion that death will come to us all at any time; the only uncertainty is when. This opening stanza introduces the literally cramped ambulance and its movement through a city, however it is already clear that this ambulance serves as a metaphor.

Larkin develops the evocation of the ambulance's movement through the description of the patient and the use of stark contrast between polar

opposites while continuing the sinister symbolic aspect of the ambulance. The ordinariness of an everyday scene: ' children strewn on steps' and ' women coming from the shops' is juxtaposed with the horror of it's opposite – death – as a ' wild white face... is carried in and stowed'. Emphasis is applied to the opinion that we are rarely prepared for the arrival of death, just as the children playing and the women shopping were not prepared for the arrival of the ambulance.

Again, the reader is reminded that death (like the ambulance) can come at any time to anyone, even in the middle of an ordinary day, whole with the zest and energy of life. The person being put into the ambulance is void of any identity; he or she is dehumanised and simply labelled as a ' wild white face'. The patient is only a face, lacking any identity, because death is common to everyone: we will all, in time, become that ' wild white face'. Larkin makes the reader aware of the ambulance's deeper significance as a symbol for death while he describes the patient and contrasts this with the normality of the bystanders.

In stanza three, the poem enters a reflective stage following the vivid details of the first two stanzas, moving to a more specifically symbolic reading of the journey. After observing the patient and the ambulance in the first two stanzas, the passers-by, " sense the solving emptiness / That lies just under all [they] do". Larkin is implying that the spectators sense for a moment the solution to the emptiness that they feel inside; death is the answer that fixes their worries and problems by replacing everything (not only the emptiness) with nothing.

The poet is moved to believe that death is our common fate and has the power to render life meaningless. All our busy concerns, all our cooking, all our playing is just a way of filling in the time until death takes us away to an empty nothingness. Nothing is more powerful or greater than death; death is the ultimate truth. When the doors close and the ambulance continues its journey, the onlookers whisper, “ Poor soul, / at their own distress”. This expression of sympathy at the patient’s plight is also an expression of the by-passers’ common vulnerability to death while they are reminded that their own lives could end at any moment.

Returning to the comments of spectators, Larkin continues to reveal the symbolic importance of the ambulance in the reflective third stanza.

Furthermore, Larkin blends the movement toward oblivion with the specific departure of the ambulance in stanza four into five. The patient is described as a ‘ unique random blend / Of families and fashions’ that ‘ At last begin to loosen. ’ Larkin is stating that everything that defined the patient as an individual is slipping away as death approaches and the ambulance starts towards its destination.

That which makes the patient ‘ unique’ is vanishing and has no consequence because in the face of death, we are all alike – families and fashions (all that really matters to us as people) mean nothing now. The fourth into the fifth stanza describes the ambulance and patient inside, making clear the ambulance’s metaphorical prominence. In addition, the physical departure of the ambulance away from the scene and the onlookers is described by Larkin in the final stanza, making clear the deeper significance of the ambulance as

a metaphor. With the departure of the ambulance the patient is ' Far / From the exchange of love' and ' Unreachable inside'.

The patient's ties to their very earthly existence are dwindling while they suffer in tremendous isolation – alone inside. Whoever they were in life no longer matters, all that is left for the patient is death. The effective final lines of the poem define how the ambulance leaves the witnesses and, " Brings closer what is left to come, / And dulls to distance all we are. " Larkin suggests in these lines that not only is the ambulance a blatant reminder of our own unavoidable approaching demise but how death itself overshadows us, leaving us isolated by its presence and feeling detached from ourselves.

The poem closes with Larkin's cynical final two lines after the ambulance is stated to have left the scene, forcing the reader to be aware of its figurative worth. In conclusion, the poem ' Ambulances' by Philip Larkin describes the ambulance and its literal journey through the busy afternoon streets, making the reader aware of its deeper significance as a metaphor of death. Larkin effectively describes the journey through his exceptional use of metaphor, alliteration, simile, vivid imagery, and contrast between the trivia of daily life and the profound act of dying.

This is a classic Larkin poem in which he, as with most of his work, takes an everyday experience and is able to find a general truth in it by exploring what it really means to us on a subconscious level. A truth brought to our attention by the event of witnessing an ambulance at work. The suffering of the patient in the ambulance becomes a model for all live lived and all death experienced. The model is bleak. Larkin suggests that living is just waiting

for the arrival of death. The hollowness of life is exemplified in the face of death. Death being the only thing we can truly count on in life.