An Arundel Tomb

SUMMARY

The effigies of the earl and countess lie next to each other, their stone faces faded with time. Their medieval clothes have been rendered in stone as well: the man wears armor, while the woman is depicted as dressed in stiff cloth. The two small stone dogs at the couple's feet make the scene feel a little less serious.

The tomb is plain-looking, which makes sense given that it was sculpted before the 1600s before the Baroque period of art and architecture. There really isn't much to note about the tomb until you see that the earl is holding his empty left-hand glove in his right hand. And then you see, in a striking yet lovely moment of surprise, that the earl's free hand is holding that of his wife.

The earl and countess would never have imagined lying like that for such a long time. Including a detail like hand-holding in the effigy was probably just something to impress the couple's friends, something the tomb's sculptor added without too much thought, while fulfilling the broader brief to help the earl and countess's names live on (these names are inscribed in Latin on the tomb).

The couple could never have guessed how soon after being sculpted—that is, set to lie in one place, going nowhere except forward through time—the air would start to subtly damage the tomb, and how soon people would stop visiting the effigies. Indeed, it would not be long before visitors would only glance at the effigies instead of actually taking the time to thoughtfully read the inscription on the tomb.

Even so, the couple remained stiffened in stone for a very, very long time. Snow fell through the years and, each summer, light shone through the windows. Many birds sang sweetly from the graveyard surrounding the tomb. And over the centuries, an endless stream of visitors walked past the tomb, as society and the people in it changed beyond recognition. These people eroded the earl and countess's identity like waves on a shoreline.

The earl and countess are powerless now, in an age so far removed from the time of knights and armor in which they actually lived. Smoke coils above their tomb, which is the couple's tiny piece of history. All that's left of the earl and countess is an idea about life.

Time has changed the earl and countess, transforming them into something untrue—or not quite true. The sense of loyalty suggested by their stone effigies, an idea they never really intended in the first place, has become their final symbol for the world, and it nearly proves something that almost feels instinctual to people: that love continues even after we die.

THEMES

TIME AND IMPERMANENCE

Philip Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb" is a complex poem that—as the title suggests—uses observations of a tomb as its starting point. This tomb belongs to an earl and countess from the 14th century. The poem takes a close and unflinching look at the tension between what the tomb was *intended* to represent at the time of construction—the earl and countess's importance and status—and the reality of how it has been *perceived* throughout the hundreds of years that followed.

On the one hand, the tomb is an image of permanence: cast in stone, something of the earl and countess has, in a very literal way, survived the passage of time. But other than the stone itself, little else has stayed the same; the poem suggests that the intended significance of the tomb has been lost. The poem thus presents time—and the way it facilitates change—as a relentless force that overrides people's intentions (and, perhaps, even erodes meaning itself).

The poem is told from the perspective of a 20th century observer who lives in an "unarmorial age" (as opposed to the age of knights and maidens in which the earl and countess existed). The speaker engages in a kind of conversation that can only go in one direction (given that the statues themselves can't respond), and meditates on the way that time has altered the tomb's meaning.

The sense of time's awe-inspiring power is built up from the very beginning of the poem. The earl and countess's faces are "blurred," suggesting literally that the stone has worn down over the centuries, but also implying something of the couple's unknowability. And though being cast in stone has made the earl and countess, in their strange way, survive the ages, it has also preserved them as images that have become increasingly distant and less relatable as time has marched on. The speaker makes the point that the couple could have had no idea how time would alter them: "They would not guess how early in … The air would change to soundless damage." Such are the power and relentlessness of time that even "air" becomes a destructive force, eroding the stone and, as mentioned above, making the faces (and identities) of the earl and countess more remote.

And before long, imagines the speaker, the way that people engaged with the tomb changed too. Whereas in its early existence people might have visited to mourn for the earl and countess, soon enough the tomb's inscription just became

something that people would "look" at rather than "read." That is, the tomb began to lose its intended meaning as a place for people to pay their respects to two specific individuals, and instead become a more detached object, a kind of historical curiosity.

Imagining the world *around* the tomb over the ages, the speaker notes how "endless altered people" would have come to look at it (but not necessarily *know* anything about it). This phrase reveals that though the tomb has in some ways stayed the same, the world around it is in a constant state of change—and, the poem argues, this ultimately changes the tomb too, because people no longer see it in the same way. So, despite the tomb's intended function as a kind of permanent memorial, any permanence it has due to its merely being a stone object; its original meaning or significance has proven fleeting.

Indeed, such is the power of time that the earl and countess have had their identities "wash[ed]" away—and, for people of such high status, identity was a very important part of life! In fact, it's the whole reason the tomb was made in the first place: to signal the couple's societal importance. This importance, of course, could not endure, turning the tomb from an object based on identity to one that seems to speak to a more profound truth: that change is the one true constant of the world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-10
- Line 13
- Lines 16-18
- Lines 19-31
- Lines 32-36
- Line 38

EVERLASTING LOVE

"An Arundel Tomb" meditates on the stone effigies of an earl and countess, provoking a rich and complex discussion about love. Larkin was a notoriously unsentimental poet, but the way that love is presented in the poem can't be reduced to an overly simplified statement like "love is an illusion." The poem balances a skepticism about love with a kind of grudging understanding about love's importance to human beings. The poem's final line—"what will survive of us is love"—is made uncertain by what comes before: that this is an "almost-instinct" that is only "almost true." This perhaps best sums up the poem's overall attitude to love: that love is not quite the all-powerful life force that some poets might paint it as, but it's not entirely meaningless either.

Whatever the speaker's attitude towards love, it's clear that love is front and center of the poem. Indeed, that's because the object on which the poem bases its discussion—an earl and countess lying down holding hands—is a deliberate image of love. But the speaker doesn't accept this love at face value, instead probing at it and asking questions.

With the above in mind, the speaker is actually initially surprised to see what feels like a strikingly contemporary symbol of love on the tomb. Normally, "pre-baroque" tombs are "plain," but the speaker notices something that gives them a "sharp, tender shock": the earl and countess are depicted holding hands. This, of course, is something people still do six or so centuries later. In this small but important observation, love *does* seem to be a kind of powerful force, common ground between people in two very different historical periods.

But the speaker also casts doubt on whether the earl and countess would really *want* to be interpreted as a symbol of some overblown notion of love's everlasting power. "They would not think to lie so long," says the speaker, playing on the horizontal depiction of the couple and, more importantly, the idea that there is something not quite true about viewing the tomb as a comment on love. That is, "lie" speaks to dishonesty as much as it does to the actual depiction of the couple.

Yet it's hard to shake the impression that the speaker is somehow moved by the tomb. The hand-holding itself is a kind of "shock" because it seems to be incongruous with what the speaker assumes about the age in which the tomb was made—indeed, marriage for the earl and countess in their era could have been as much a business transaction as an expression of romantic love. But the hand-holding unsettles the speaker's inherited ideas about those times. Perhaps, then, it makes sense to see the poem's famous ending as exactly that—a kind of unsettling marriage of two incompatible ideas: firstly, a cynical idea of love as something of little value, perhaps just a means through which the human race multiples and spreads itself; and secondly, the complete opposite idea that love is an eternal, death-conquering force! That's why the earl and countess are a kind of paradox, an example of "stone fidelity"—deadness and coldness on the one hand, and enduring togetherness on the other.

Accordingly, the poem's final two lines seem to hold both ideas in tension: "Our almost- instinct almost true: / What will survive of us is love." The speaker, perhaps, can understand why people want to believe in love's power, but can't quite fully support that belief. Neither, however, can the speaker dismiss it out of hand.

Worth noting here is that Larkin himself had somewhat conflicted opinions about love, but never held it in particularly high regard; at the bottom of a draft of this poem he once wrote, "Love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for six hundred years." On the other hand, he later said of the poem, "I think what survives of us is love, whether in the simple biological sense or just in terms of responding to life, making it happier, even if it's only making a joke." Ultimately, the ending speaks to the complexity of life and the world of human

emotion, and works as a kind of challenge to people who wish to oversimplify such questions—or to avoid them altogether.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 8-12
- Lines 13-15
- Line 16
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 24-26
- Line 36
- Lines 37-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Side by side, ...
... under their feet.

The poem opens with a fairly (and intentionally) plain, straightforward description of the Arundel tomb. The tomb memorializes two medieval aristocrats—an "earl and countess"—whose likenesses have been carved in stone. These effigies lie next to each other their backs, dressed in typical clothing and armor of the time, and even have their two small dogs carved near their feet. This is a real tomb, which can be found in Chichester Cathedral in the south of England (that said, there *is* some debate about whether this tomb is the same as the one in Larkin's poem).

The sibilance in the first two lines imbues the poem's opening with a quiet, hushed quality—fitting for a description of a tomb:

> Side by side, their faces blurred,
> The earl and countess lie in stone,

Lines 3 and 4 then reveal further detail about how the earl and countess are depicted on the tomb. "Habits" here refers to their clothing (which is part of the stone sculpture). The "jointed armour" is the earl's outfit, while the "stiffened pleat" belongs to the countess. Harking back to the medieval age, the armour signals the sheer distance in time from the moment the tomb was created and the time in which the poem was written (and, indeed, the time in which it is read). It's also worth noting how line 4, like line 1, is separated into two parts by a caesura, subtly strengthening the image of the earl and countess as a couple—a twosome—lying "side by side."

> As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,

Lines 5 gives one more detail to the opening description of the tomb: the "little dogs under their feet." On the (probable) actual tomb, the creature at the bottom of the earl is a lion, more in keeping with the symbolism of the medieval era. But the "dogs" are a useful symbol here too, conveying modern-day suggestions of loyalty and faithfulness—which form a large poet of the poem's developing discussion.

The language is deliberately plain here, though, because the speaker doesn't really expect to feel a significant or profound reaction upon looking at the tomb at first. So far, the tomb seems pretty straightforward—like any other very old memorial to long-dead people. That said, even these opening lines hint at the poem's complex discussion of time in relation to the couple. On the one hand, they are a symbol of permanence, their memory long outliving the era in which they were born. Yet though stone is durable, it's ultimately subject to time's forces too. Indeed, the earl and countess's faces are "blurred" because the stone is slowly but surely being eroded. On a less literal level, this blurring suggests how the earl and countess's actual identities have been lost to time. And, indeed, the discussion later in the poem focuses on the way the world *around* the tomb has changed completely, the lovers no longer lying in the same context as when the tomb was first made.

LINES 7-12

Such plainness of ...
... holding her hand.

The first phrase of the second stanza is, in a way, a commentary on the first. Essentially, the speaker is making it clear just how basic and simple the tomb looks—that is, the tomb seems typical of the time in which it was created and has nothing especially remarkable about it. The "baroque" era began in the 17th century and featured very ornate artwork and architecture compared to what came before (the "pre-baroque" era or, generally speaking, the medieval period). The way in which this particular tomb—and the "plainness" of the era that it represents—"hardly involves the eye" hints at the distinction that the poem will draw later between looking and reading. That is, the poem works to show that the tomb is not really memorializing anyone or anything anymore—but is instead a kind of object of general curiosity (and minimal curiosity at that!).

But it's after the caesura of line 8 that the poem's twist arrives ("... involves the eye, until"). As the speaker's disinterested eye wanders down to the earl and countess's torso area, the speaker notices that the earl is holding one of his gloves ("gauntlet") in his other hand—and his bare hand, meanwhile, is holding the countess's hand.

This is a detail that the speaker did not expect to see, and indeed was uncommon (though not completely unprecedented) for tombs of the era. This observation gives the speaker a "sharp tender shock," an oxymoron that expresses both the element of surprise and the way in which

the image of the couple holding hands seems to convey a sense of love, humanity, and compassion at odds with the seriousness and stiffness of the stone sculpture. The "shock" here also perhaps suggests that the speaker is not usually predisposed to feelings of love and tenderness. Line 12 uses caesura to create another pair, reinforcing the image of the earl and countess as a couple (a pair). The alliteration in line 12 is prominent and significant too:

> His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

The insistence of the /h/ sound in this line suggests the stony grip between the earl and countess's hands; the line seems firmly held together by one main sound, just as the earl and countess's hands have been held together in the same position for centuries.

LINES 13-18

They would not ...
... around the base.

The third stanza begins with a kind of pun:

> They would not think to lie so long.

This partly refers to the vast amount of time between the tomb's construction and the writing of the poem in the 20th century—over 500 years have passed! The speaker is starting to build a subtle argument about the nature of love, gently questioning whether the earl and countess really would *want* to be horizontal together for such a long time. This isn't to say that they *weren't* in love—but just subtly undermines the idea of love as an eternal, all-conquering force.

"Lie" doesn't just refer to lying down, though, but also to *dishonesty*—a clever play on words that suggests the speaking is questioning the sincerity of the tomb's depiction of a loving couple. It's also worth noting that marriages during the medieval era were not always (or even usually) all that romantic—they were basically business transactions, with concerns about property and wealth being as important as any tender feelings.

Lines 14 to 18 ("Such faithfulness ... around the base.") represent the speaker's theory regarding why it is the earl and countess are depicted holding hands. The speaker suggests that the depiction of "faithfulness" was intended as a mere "detail" that "friends would see." In other words, perhaps the hand-holding was thrown in to impress friends and admirers who came to the tomb to pay their respects. The enjambment between lines 14 and 15 ("... effigy / was just ...") makes the tone here seem quite casual, backing up the idea that this was probably just a throwaway detail at the time.

Lines 16 to 17 ("A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace / Thrown off ...") go further in imagining the original commission and the sculptor who fulfilled it. These lines suggest the hand-holding is a "sweet" little detail that the sculptor just felt like adding, as such could be interpreted as suggesting that this detail is more indicative of the *sculptor's* character than some kind of profound and enduring love between the earl and the countess. Of course, part of the poem's power is that the speaker—and, indeed, the reader—can only speculate on these kinds of questions.

Also note how line 16 is full of sibilance:

> A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace

The strong, obvious presence of shared sounds makes the craftsmanship of the poem momentarily front and center—which in turn reflects the original skill and labor of the sculptor. These lines also refer to the original purpose of the tomb: to memorialize the names of the earl and countess; in other words, to preserve their identity and status, and to convey wealth and power—to "prolong" their names. The fact that their names are written in Latin is significant too because it is, put crudely, a dead language. That is, Latin is no longer used for speaking or writing in England—reminding the reader of the distance in time between the tomb's construction and the poem's present (and the distance between its original purpose and how it is currently perceived).

LINES 19-24

They would not ...
... read. Rigidly they

The fourth stanza picks up where the third left off. Put simply, it imagines what the earl and countess might have imagined as the future of their tomb, before giving the speaker's own understanding of how things *actually* turned out. The stanza also develops the tension between the seemingly contradictory ideas of permanence and impermanence that the tomb inspires. This summed up neatly in the oxymoron of line 20, in which the speaker says that the earl and countess have, over the centuries, undergone a "stationary voyage." In reality, it's the world *around* them that has changed, removing them more and more from their original context—even if the stonework itself has remained largely the same.

The enjambment between lines 19 and 21 gives the lines a sense of movement, playing on the idea of a voyage:

> ... not guess how early in
> Their supine stationary voyage
> The air would change ...

Line 21 (the last line from the above quote) is an important one, again playing on the tension between permanence and impermanence. Though the stone tomb may look solid, secure, and unchangeable, something as gentle as the air is quietly but

surely damaging it, eroding the surface and making the faces blurred. The opening word of each line conveys this delicately, "they" changing to "their" and then the similar-sounding "the air"—tiny but significant "damage[s]" to the stanza's opening word. The poem uses consonance to similar effect in "change" and "damage" in line 21 and "turn" and "tenantry" in line 22.

Lines 23 and 24 are important too, relaying how the tomb's meaning and purpose have also been eroded away over time. Whereas people might have once visited the earl and countess's tomb to "read" their names and pay tribute, now people just "look" at the tomb (and its Latin inscription) without understanding much about the earl and countess's original identities. The tomb has become an increasingly passive object as time has passed.

The stanza ends with the incomplete phrase "Rigidly they." This is enjambed, falling across to the next stanza, which is about a kind of "persistence"—accordingly, this enjambment becomes a formal representation of that persistence, the sense of the sentence extending from stanza to another.

LINES 25-31

Persisted, linked, through ...
... at their identity.

The fifth stanza completes the phrase begun after the full-stop caesura in line 24, relating how the earl and countess have maintained their pose and hand-holding "through lengths and breadths / O time." The alliteration of "linked" and "lengths" creates a pair, as does the consonance of "lengths" and "breadths"—these sound pairs are again a way in which the poem represents the centuries-long coupledom that the earl and countess have shared as effigies on the tomb.

Here, the speaker's imagination considers the passage of time since the tomb's construction. Like a time-lapse in a film, the speaker imagines the seasons changing through the year, from "undated" (as in historically non-specific) "snow" in winter to light shining through the stained glass each summer. This entire stanza is enjambed, echoing the sense of time seamlessly passing by. In lines 27 and 28, the poem uses bright-sounding consonance to convey the liveliness of bird-song:

> ... A bright
> Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
> Bone-riddled ground.

These lines are filled with repeating sounds, adding a sense of musicality that echoes the birdsong being described. At the same time, the many shared /b/, /d/, /r/, and /l/ sounds in "litter of birdcalls and "bone-riddled ground" connects these phrases both sonically and thematically, placing life—through the ephemeral birdsong—and death—through the bones in the surrounding graveyard—side-by-side. This further evokes the vast "lengths and breadths" of time that have passed, the many lifetimes that have come and gone since the tomb was built.

The speaker then refers to all the people who have passed by the tomb since it was made. These are referred to "endless altered people." The word "endless" again implies the immense amount of time that has passed, the stream of people over the years growing so long as to seem without end. "Altered," meanwhile, suggests how much these visiting people (and by extension the world around the tomb) have changed over the years. They are "altered" because, as time drew on, society changed beyond recognition.

This stanza, as with the last, ends with a line that drapes across the stanza break, the white space in between the stanzas suggesting the "washing" away of identity. Time, functioning like a tide coming in and out over millions of years, has changed everything—even the earl and countess's own identity. In a way, this is precisely the opposite of the original intention behind the tomb's construction (that is, to preserve the earl and countess by memorializing them in stone). This metaphor also relates to timescales. Whereas people might not notice the changes on a coast during their lifetime, that same coast could be entirely different from how it looked centuries earlier. The reference to water, then, suggests the insignificance of a human lifetime in the grand scale of things.

LINES 32-38

Now, helpless in ...
... Untruth.

In line 32, the poem wrenches itself back into its present moment. This stanza portrays the earl and countess as ultimately "helpless" figures, maintaining none of the power that they once had in life or perhaps had hoped to assert through the presence of their tomb. Indeed, time has cut them adrift, and now they are little more than relics. Theirs was an armorial age—a world of maidens and knights—but their time has passed; the speaker talks from "an unarmorial age."

Here, the speaker uses metaphorical language to describe the way that passage of time has "wash[ed]" away at the earl and countess's identities, and left behind only "an attitude" (which is discussed in the final stanza). The speaker imagines smoke spiraling above the couple, perhaps signifying the metaphorical burning of their original era, status, and meaning. Their tomb is just a "scrap of history," another metaphor that reinforces the couple's ultimate insignificance. There's something almost demeaning about the word "scrap," as though it is deliberately selected to be at odds with the intended importance of the Arundel Tomb.

And continuing the poem's dextrous use of stanza breaks, the colon at the end of line 36 sets up the philosophical statement that comes in lines 37 and 38:

> Time has transfigured them into
> Untruth.

These lines reveal that the "attitude" that remains isn't *entirely* true. The caesura full-stop after "Untruth" has a harshness and brutality to it, emphasizing the starkness of the speaker's point: the earl and countess mean very little to the contemporary world. The tricky notion of "untruth"—instead of, say, "falsehood" or "lie"—is a classic Larkin move, helping to build to the poem's complex conclusion. The reader has to ask what the difference is between a sort of passive "untruth" and deliberate "falsehood." Perhaps it has to do with the way that the earl and countess's tomb *was once* true to the intentions behind its construction—but has since eroded into "untruth."

LINES 38-42

The stone fidelity ...
... us is love.

After the caesura in line 38, the poem builds to its much-quoted—and much-debated—conclusion. "Stone fidelity" is a kind of metaphorical paradox, and sums up how the speaker perceives the earl and countess's relationship (in stone). Essentially, they have been loyal to one another—but without really intending to be. Their loyalty—cast in stone—is not really a human one—and was "hardly meant" in the first place. The speaker here calls this accidental display of loyalty the couple's "final blazon." A blazon relates to a coat of arms on a shield, so the speaker is essentially comparing two different symbolic worlds: the one that the earl and countess once controlled (through things like shields and the tomb itself), and the reality of what the tomb has now come to represent. They are still representative of *something*, but, so the speaker believes, it's not what they intended.

Here, the poem offers its beautifully perplexing and paradoxical final thought—that the tomb "prove[s]:"

> Our almost-instinct almost true:
> What will survive of us is love.

Like the mention of "Untruth" in line 38, this is an intentionally difficult statement to comprehend. The speaker resists ending on some easy and familiar sentiment about love, death, or a combination of the two. The repeat of "almost" is an example of diacope, reinforcing the idea that what is presented is very *close* to being instinctual and true—but, in the speaker's opinion, isn't quite there.

Ultimately, the reader has to decide for themselves what this means—as individuals have to decide what love means to them too. The reader has to consider two key questions: what is the difference between an instinct and an "almost-instinct," and what does it mean for something to be *almost* true rather than merely *false*. The final line *does* deliberately sound like an easy and familiar sentiment—but it's destabilized by the preceding line (though is often quoted on its own out of context!). "What will survive of us is love" is something that people might *want* to believe—it's reassuring and seems to add meaning to human emotion. But it's not quite true, only "almost."

Of course, that's not the same as it being simply *wrong*. These final lines reveal the speaker's conflicting sympathies. On the one hand, perhaps the speaker doesn't believe in love as an enduring, universal kind of power. But, looking at the tomb, neither can the speaker totally dismiss love out of hand. This is a large part of the conclusion's power: it can be interpreted as a cynical take-down of people's attitudes to love, or an admittance that love is actually important.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"An Arundel Tomb" uses alliteration fairly regularly throughout its seven stanzas. Oftentimes, this takes the form of sibilance. The first example comes immediately in the poem:

> Side by side, their faces blurred,

The two /s/ sounds form a pair, and the pairing of sounds is used throughout the poem ("plainness" and "pre-baroque" in line 7, "his left-hand" in line 9, etc.). Of course, sound-pairs are a way that the poem can gently hint at the poem's main pair: the earl and countess, who have been paired together for a number of centuries by this point (in life, death, and stone). The /s/ sounds are themselves "side by side."

The next key example comes in stanza 2. In fact, there are two important uses of alliteration one after another:

> ... a sharp tender shock,
> His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

The /sh/ sounds have a sort of tenderness and sharpness to them all at once, and, in being used for the first time in the poem, might come as a surprise on the reader's ear—mirroring the speaker's surprise at noticing the way in which the earl and countess are depicted holding hands. The /h/ sound—the first letter of "hand," of course—then dominates the following line, showing the permanence of the earl and countess's pose cast in stone. The /h/ grips the line, mimicking the action of holding hands.

Later, the alliteration of the /t/ sound in lines 37 to 38 underscores the thematic connection between the stone effigies, the passage of time, and truth itself:

> Time has transfigured them into
> Untruth. The stone fidelity

This connection is bolstered by the consonance of "into" and "fidelity." Altogether, the insistence on the /t/ sound here

suggests the inevitability of "truth" or intention changing over time—even for objects made of stone.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "s"
- **Line 7:** "p," "p"
- **Line 9:** "h," "h"
- **Line 11:** "sh," "sh"
- **Line 12:** "H," "h," "h," "h," "h"
- **Line 13:** "l," "l"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "l"
- **Line 18:** "L"
- **Line 20:** "s," "s"
- **Line 22:** "T," "t"
- **Line 23:** "s," "s"
- **Line 24:** "l"
- **Line 25:** "l," "l"
- **Line 26:** "L"
- **Line 27:** "b"
- **Line 28:** "L," "b," "s," "s"
- **Line 29:** "B," "p"
- **Line 30:** "p"
- **Line 32:** "h," "h"
- **Line 34:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "k"
- **Line 35:** "s," "c"
- **Line 37:** "T," "t"
- **Line 38:** "t," "t"
- **Line 41:** "a," "a"
- **Line 42:** "W," "w"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used quite regularly throughout "An Arundel Tomb," making the poem feel literary and musical throughout. A particularly striking example appears in the fifth stanza, with the intense repetition of /b/, /r/, /d/, /t/, /l/, and /n/ sounds in lines 27 to 29:

> ... A bright
> Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
> Bone-riddled ground.

These lines are overflowing with shared consonants, which, on the one hand, evokes the "birdsong" being described; the lines *sound* particularly musical and beautiful. At the same time, the consonance here sonically connects two starkly contrasting images: that of the vibrant, lively birds and that of the "bone-riddled ground"—i.e., a graveyard. The consonance links life and death, subtly suggesting how much time has passed since the tomb was built—long enough for life to turn to death many times over, for the ground to become "riddled" with bones.

Another slew of consonant sounds picks up at the end of line 29 and continues through the end of the stanza:

> And up the paths
> The endless altered people came,

The /p/ and /l/ sounds here add a sense of monotony to the line, subtly echoing the "endless" march of people walking by the tomb over the years.

The poem's famous final line is also filled with consonance, here of /w/, /v/, /l/, and /s/ sounds:

> What will survive of us is love.

Consonance can make lines feel very *poetic* and memorable, which is exactly what happens here. This line *sounds* like some wise old saying, a commonly-accepted teaching you might find in a book of aphorisms. That's why, in part, the line has become so famous and is quoted so often out of context. Read in conjunction with the line before it, it's clear that the speaker actually isn't so sure of the validity of this idea that love is some everlasting force. The speaker says it's only *almost* true. The consonance here feels kind of like an ironic allusion to vapid truisms. Like the tomb itself, the line has lost its intended significance over time.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "d," "s," "d," "c," "d"
- **Line 2:** "n," "ss," "n," "s," "n"
- **Line 3:** "n"
- **Line 4:** "n," "t," "t," "n," "t"
- **Line 5:** "t," "nt," "nt," "d"
- **Line 6:** "tt," "d," "n," "d"
- **Line 7:** "p," "l," "p"
- **Line 8:** "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 9:** "h," "l," "t," "h," "n," "n," "l," "t," "ll"
- **Line 10:** "l," "p," "p," "th," "th"
- **Line 11:** "sh," "p," "sh"
- **Line 12:** "H," "h," "d," "h," "d," "h," "h," "d"
- **Line 13:** "l," "l"
- **Line 14:** "f," "f," "ff"
- **Line 16:** "s," "c," "t," "s," "s," "t," "c," "c"
- **Line 17:** "n," "n," "n," "g," "n," "g"
- **Line 18:** "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 19:** "ss"
- **Line 20:** "s," "s," "g"
- **Line 21:** "d," "g," "s," "d," "ss," "d," "g"
- **Line 22:** "T," "n," "t," "n," "n," "t," "w"
- **Line 23:** "w," "s," "s," "cc," "s"
- **Line 24:** "r," "R"
- **Line 25:** "r," "l," "l," "ths," "ths"
- **Line 27:** "br," "t"
- **Line 28:** "L," "tt," "r," "b," "rd," "ll," "r," "d," "s"

- **Line 29:** “B,” “n,” “r,” “dd,” “l,” “d,” “n,” “d,” “p,” “p”
- **Line 30:** “l,” “l,” “p,” “p,” “l”
- **Line 32:** “h,” “l,” “l,” “h,” “ll”
- **Line 34:** “s,” “k,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “n,” “s,” “k,” “n,” “s”
- **Line 35:** “sc”
- **Line 37:** “T,” “t,” “f,” “t”
- **Line 38:** “t,” “t,” “f,” “d,” “l,” “t”
- **Line 39:** “h,” “dl,” “m,” “h,” “m”
- **Line 40:** “f,” “l,” “l”
- **Line 41:** “lm,” “s,” “t,” “s,” “t,” “t,” “lm,” “s,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 42:** “Wh,” “w,” “s,” “v,” “v,” “f,” “s,” “v”

CAESURA

Caesura is an important device in "An Arundel Tomb," often working closely with the poem's enjambment. The first caesura appears in the poem's opening line: "Side by side, their faces blurred." This comma divides the line into two parts, making it a pair of clauses. This pairing-off is one way in which the poem represents its main subject: the earl and countess—themselves a pair. Line 4 does the exact same thing, dividing the line into the clothing worn (and depicted in stone) by the earl and then the countess: "As jointed armour, stiffened pleat."

The caesuras in the second stanza work differently. In lines 8, 9 and 10, a caesura comes before each line's final word:

> ... the eye, until
> ... gauntlet, still
> ... the other; and

These caesuras contribute to the stanza's sense of building anticipation, creating little pauses as new details are added about the tomb. The pause right before "sharp tender shock" creates one final moment of tension before the speaker finally reveals that the stony couple is depicted holding hands.

Later, note the full stop caesura in line 24 (in fact, there are two caesuras in this line!):

> To look, not read. Rigidly they

The period here adds a sense of emphasis and finality to one of the poem's main ideas: that time has turned the tomb into something that is only "looked" at rather than "read." That is, the tomb was once a place where people came to pay their respects to the deceased couple, whose names are inscribed in Latin at the tomb's base, but now it's something that onlookers don't really understand (or don't bother to try to understand). There's another full-stop caesura in the poem's final stanza, after the word "Untruth" in line 38. Again, the period here imbues the phrase with a sense of finality, and forces the reader to meaningfully pause to consider what the speaker's saying here: that all that's left of the couple is the "attitude" represented by the stone tomb, but this "attitude" itself isn't even true.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “side, their”
- **Line 4:** “armour, stiffened”
- **Line 8:** “eye, until”
- **Line 9:** “gauntlet, still”
- **Line 10:** “other; and”
- **Line 11:** “sees, with”
- **Line 12:** “withdrawn, holding”
- **Line 24:** “look, not read. Rigidly”
- **Line 25:** “Persisted, linked, through”
- **Line 26:** “time. Snow fell, undated. Light”
- **Line 27:** “glass. A”
- **Line 29:** “ground. And”
- **Line 32:** “Now, helpless”
- **Line 33:** “age, a”
- **Line 38:** “Untruth. The”
- **Line 40:** “blazon, and”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used frequently in "An Arundel Tomb. Indeed, there isn't a single stanza that *doesn't* use it at some point! Though the poem does have an overarching structure (we talk about this more in the "Form" section of this guide), the speaker doesn't worry about making phrases or sentences perfectly align with all the line breaks, or even stanza breaks. Instead, the speaker's thoughts regularly spill over from one line to the next right in the middle of a phrase, suggesting a sense of thoughtful, almost stream-of-consciousness contemplation. Readers get the sense that the speaker is right now actively considering the tomb and what it means.

It's in the second stanza that enjambment becomes particularly important to the poem's meaning. Here, the poem sets up its surprise twist (which is a surprise for the speaker too). The sudden unpredictability of the phrase lengths—working against the line lengths—creates a space for the speaker's surprise at noticing that the earl and countess are holding hands. This again makes it feel like the speaker is actively considering the tomb right now, at the same time that the reader is reading the poem; the reader is right there with the speaker.

In the third stanza, the speaker tries to imagine why the earl and countess are depicted as holding hands in the first place. The speaker reasons that it was "just a detail friends would see," and perhaps no grand decision despite how much it has personally affected the speaker. In turn, the use of enjambment in this stanza creates a laidback and easy flow between the lines, hinting at the way in which the hands were probably not considered that important a feature of the stonework.

In the following stanza, the enjambments create a sense of

space and air at the end of each line, hinting at the way "the air would change to soundless damage" over the centuries—in other words, the way that air would gradually alter the appearance of the tomb. And again, it feels like the speaker is simply following thoughts where they lead, adding to the poem's sense of immediacy. The enjambment at the end of the stanza, meanwhile, echoes the lines' content: the phrase "persists" right over the stanza break, just as the stone earl and countess have "Rigidly ... Persisted" throughout the centuries.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "shown / As"
- **Lines 7-8:** "pre-baroque / Hardly"
- **Lines 8-9:** "until / It"
- **Lines 9-10:** "still / Clasped"
- **Lines 10-11:** "and / One"
- **Lines 14-15:** "effigy / Was"
- **Lines 16-17:** "grace / Thrown"
- **Lines 17-18:** "prolong / The"
- **Lines 19-20:** "in / Their"
- **Lines 20-21:** "voyage / The"
- **Lines 23-24:** "begin / To"
- **Lines 25-26:** "breadths / Of"
- **Lines 26-27:** "Light / Each"
- **Lines 27-28:** "bright / Litter"
- **Lines 28-29:** "same / Bone-riddled"
- **Lines 29-30:** "paths / The"
- **Lines 32-33:** "of / An"
- **Lines 33-34:** "trough / Of"
- **Lines 34-35:** "skeins / Above"
- **Lines 37-38:** "into / Untruth"
- **Lines 39-40:** "be / Their"
- **Lines 40-41:** "prove / Our"

METAPHOR

"An Arundel Tomb" is a poem that is generally pretty grounded in reality, using carefully made observations of the tomb as its way into the discussion of time and love. That said, the poem does introduce some metaphorical language roughly halfway through—perhaps reflecting the way that the speaker is drawn more deeply into the subject matter. The first metaphor appears in line 20:

> Their supine stationary voyage

This moment takes a word associated with travel—"voyage"—and uses it in a way that is deliberately paradoxical. The earl and countess have, of course, not travelled anywhere since they died (though perhaps the tomb has been moved occasionally). So, this voyage is one not through space but through time. Indeed, that's how they can both voyage *and* be stationary.

The next metaphor comes up at the beginning of the penultimate stanza, quoted with some of the preceding lines for context:

> And up the paths
> The endless altered people came,
> Washing at their identity.

This section discusses the way that the world has changed beyond recognition around the central figures of the earl and countess. Indeed, as other people have changed, the earl and countess have become less and less relevant to the world around them. Now, they are mainly just an object of curiosity. The metaphor here is in the word "washing," which likely relates to coastal erosion and suggests that time is a kind of sea that gradually—but undeniably—alters the meaning of everything.

The rest of the stanza uses metaphor too, describing spirals of smoke floating above the tomb. It's one of the poem's less clear moments, and mixes metaphors with the mention of the couple's "scrap of history." Most likely, it relates to the way that the original meaning of the tomb has been destroyed over time; it has been metaphorically set alight by time, and left else behind than "an attitude."

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "Their supine stationary voyage"
- **Lines 29-31:** "And up the paths / The endless altered people came, / Washing at their identity."
- **Lines 33-36:** "a trough / Of smoke in slow suspended skeins / Above their scrap of history, / Only an attitude remains:"

PARADOX

Larkin often uses paradox in his poems, and "An Arundel Tomb" is no exception. The entire poem basically hinges on the paradox that the tomb has immortalized the couple while also erasing the pair's actual identity. The stone effigies have allowed the couple to "live on" in a way, yet the passage of time has also eroded the tomb's intended meaning—to the point that the tomb's initial "purpose," as it were, has been lost. This tension between permanence and impermanence is the crux of the poem's meditation on time. It's also possible to interpret this tension less as a paradox and more as sheer irony—that an object created to preserve respect for a couple throughout the ages has resulted in that couple becoming an object of mere curiosity, and a symbol (or "attitude") for something "They hardly meant" in the first place (that is, a symbol for everlasting love and fidelity).

This idea feels especially prominent in the final stanza, when the speaker sums up what "remains" of the earl and countess. "Time," says the speaker, "has transfigured them into / Untruth."

It's the last word that is key here—the reader has to consider what "untruth" means, as opposed to mere *falsehood*. Perhaps it relates to the way that the tomb did once give a truthful account of its intentions—to pay tribute to, memorialize, and demonstrate the high status of the earl and countess—but now, the tomb can only offer a comment on the passage of time. In a way, then, the tomb and what it signals is neither permanent nor impermanent, neither true nor false, but rather all of these things at once.

Line 41 then picks up on this paradox, stating that the final line which follows is "almost true." That line, famously, is "What will survive of us is love." The reader has to decide if something being "almost true" is different from it being simply *wrong*—and if so, how? Being "almost true" could mean that, though it's not *quite* true as a general rule, it is still relevant to the human experience. In other words, the idea that "what will survive of us is love" might be a false but nevertheless useful notion that does actively play a role in people's lives. Conversely, perhaps this idea is really just an illusion—and is entirely untrue. The speaker seems conflicted between a down-to-earth cynicism and a kind of accidental sympathy with grander ideas about love and faithfulness. The entire poem, really, is about confronting this paradox.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 24-26:** "Rigidly they / Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths / Of time."
- **Lines 36-38:** "Only an attitude remains: / Time has transfigured them into / Untruth."
- **Lines 40-42:** "and to prove / Our almost-instinct almost true: / What will survive of us is love."

OXYMORON

Oxymoron is used twice in "An Arundel Tomb," though there are other moments that come close (these are covered in the paradox section of this guide). The first oxymoron appears in line 11:

> One sees, with a sharp tender shock,

This moment describes the speaker's feeling upon noticing the stone tomb's strangest feature—that the earl and countess are holding hands. The concepts of sharpness and shock make sense together, but they are placed on either side of a word that is completely at odds with them both: "tender." The point here is that it is precisely the image of tenderness—the hand-holding—that gives the speaker this "sharp ... shock." That's because such features of affection are relatively uncommon (though not unprecedented) in medieval tombs. (It's also worth noting that the hand-holding could be more a sign of official union that genuine love and togetherness).

Another arguable oxymoron appears with the phrase "stationary voyage" in line 20 (which we also discuss in relation to the poem's use of metaphor). A voyage involves going somewhere, so it seems impossible for a voyage to be "stationary," which means to remain in one place. The speaker here is instead referring to the couple's *metaphorical* "voyage" through *time*. The use of oxymoron emphasizes the dual nature of the tomb as a symbol of permanence and impermanence, in the sense that the tomb hasn't gone anywhere for hundreds of years, but its original significance has also been lost over time.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "sharp tender shock"

DIACOPE

Diacope is used three times in "An Arundel Tomb." The first example is in line 1, with the repetition of "side." This creates a sense of a pairing—the earl is one "side" and the countess the other. The diacope that comes later in line 12 serves a similar function: "His hand withdrawn, holding her hand." Appropriately enough, this means that the line has two "hands"—which is exactly what the speaker is describing! Just as the earl and countess are hand in hand, so too is the line that first notices this.

The other example of diacope appears in line 41, the poem's penultimate line. This radically modifies the final line—"What will survive of us is love"—by characterizing it as an "almost-instinct" that is "almost true." The repetition of "almost" through diacope has an interesting effect. On the one hand, repeating the word emphasizes the *nearness* of the final line's sentiment (that love is everlasting) to "instinct" and truth. On the other hand, the repetition of "almost" makes crystal clear the distance between that final thought about the power of love and those two qualities (truth and instinct). It's an unsettling moment, but the power of the poem's conclusion comes from the fact that, ultimately, it's difficult to say if the last two lines represent a kind of victory for cynicism (in rejecting the idea of love's power) or if, conversely, the speaker is making allowances for love (even if the speaker might not entirely buy into the concept).

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Side," "side"
- **Line 12:** "hand," "hand"
- **Line 41:** "almost," "almost"

VOCABULARY

Earl (Line 2) - A rank of male aristocrat or nobleman in Britain.

Countess (Line 2) - The official title of a wife of an earl.

Habits (Line 3) - The earl and countess's clothes.

Jointed Armour (Line 4) - What the earl is depicted as wearing—think of a medieval knight and that will be pretty close!

Stiffened Pleat (Line 4) - The countess's clothes (depicted in stone). They would have been a stiff kind of cloth.

Pre-baroque (Line 7) - The historical period in which the earl and countess's tomb was built. The art and architecture of the Baroque period, which lasted from around the 17th to 18th centuries, was known for its excessive ornamentation and decoration; by contrast the medieval—"pre-baroque"—period during which the tomb was built was much simpler and plainer.

Gauntlet (Line 9) - A strong armoured glove.

Effigy (Line 14) - A model representation of a person.

Latin Names (Line 18) - Latin would have been used for writing the names of the couple on the tomb (likely as a way of conveying their social status and power).

Supine (Line 20) - Lying down on your back, face upwards.

Tenantry (Line 22) - This term probably relates to the people who would have rented and/or worked on land owned by the earl—the tenants of his property.

Thronged (Line 27) - Crowded around.

Litter (Line 28) - The ground was filled with birdcalls.

Strewed (Line 28) - This term relates to the way that bones are scattered around the graveyard.

Bone-riddled (Line 29) - Full of bones.

Unarmorial Age (Line 33) - The poem's contemporary perspective, which contrasts with the time that the tomb was made. The speaker's world no longer has need for body armor in the same way that the earl's did.

Trough (Line 33) - A trough usually refers to a rectangular container used for feeding animals, or to a sort of channel or long ditch in the ground. In the poem, "trough" probably relates to a row/rectangular shape of smoke above the tomb.

Skeins (Line 34) - The spiral shape of the imagined smoke above the tomb. A skin is a coil of thread or yarn.

Transfigured (Line 37) - Changed beyond recognition.

Fidelity (Line 38) - Loyalty or faithfulness.

Blazon (Line 40) - Medieval symbols of the kind found on coats of arms and shields.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"An Arundel Tomb" is a 42-line poem, made up of seven stanzas with six lines apiece (making each a sestet). The regularity of the form suggests a certain kind of deliberate craftsmanship, which seems in keeping with the craftsmanship that went into making the tomb itself.

That said, the speaker frequently allows phrases to extend across lines or even stretch across stanzas (enjambment), only to then come to rest in the middle of a line with a caesura. In other words, though the poem's form feels broadly regular, the speaker's actual language is itself more fluid and immediate, seemingly unconcerned with perfectly aligning with the poem's established form. The reader might feel like they're right there alongside the speaker, considering the tomb in real time.

The poem is also technically an example of ekphrasis—a piece of writing that contemplates a particular object. At first, the speaker doesn't seem to expect much of the tomb, anticipating only its "plainness." But it's the sight of the hand-holding that sets the poem off on its trajectory. The tomb, then, serves as a jumping off point for a deep and complex meditation on the nature of time and love.

METER

As with most Larkin poems, "An Arundel Tomb" follows a regular meter. Generally speaking, the poem is written in iambic tetrameter: four metrical feet in each line following an unstressed-stressed (da DUM) syllable pattern. Take lines 2 and 3, for example:

> The earl | and coun- | tess lie | in stone,
> Their prop- | er hab- | its vague- | ly shown

Most lines follow the meter closely, creating a steady rhythm that reflects something of the craftsmanship involved in making the tomb in the first place—it isn't easy to make a metrical poem flow and read well!

Of course, there are a few variations to the meter throughout the poem. The first line, for instance, opens with a stressed syllable:

> Side by side, their faces blurred,

This could be scanned in a couple different ways. We could say that the first foot here is "catalectic," for instance, which just means its first foot is missing a syllable (technically, this line would be called "headless iambic tetrameter"). More important, though, is noticing how the poem is introduced with forcefulness, via the stress on "side." Later, in line 6, the third foot is actually a trochee (stressed-unstressed, DUM da). This has a playful sound, gently conveying the "hint of the absurd" that the speaker detects in the figures of the dogs at the couple's feet:

> The lit- | tle dogs | under | their feet.

Line 31 also breaks with the meter, as the speaker describes the way that an "endless" sea of people has "wash[ed]" away the earl and countess's identity. The phrase extends over a stanza break, and the trochaic first foot of line 31 makes the word "Washing" more active and dramatic:

The end- | less alt- | ered peo- | ple came,

Washing | at their | iden- | tity.

RHYME SCHEME

Each six-line stanza of "An Arundel Tomb" has a regular rhyme scheme. This is:

ABBCAC

Many of the rhymes are perfect rhymes—stone/shown or pleat/feet in the first stanza, for instance. Others are more like slant rhymes (baroque/shock in the second stanza). Overall, though, the effect of this fairly elaborate scheme is to create a sense of craftsmanship and skill. The poet's technique, in other words, is a kind of analogy of the sculptor's work that made the stone effigies of the earl and countess. Over seven stanzas, it's no mean feat to achieve.

The other thing to notice about the rhyme scheme is the way in which it revolves around pairs. Each A, B, and C rhyme has a partner elsewhere in the stanza. As this is a poem very much about what it means to be in a couple, and about love more generally, the rhyme scheme is a neat and tidy way of representing this idea of pairing-off.

SPEAKER

On its face, "An Arundel Tomb" doesn't seem to be about its speaker as much as it's about what that speaker is *looking* at (i.e., the tomb of the title). As such, the speaker remains pretty vague throughout. As with many of Larkin's poems, there is no use of the first-person pronoun at all. Instead, the discussion has the appearance of relative objectivity—though the "sharp tender shock" referred to in line 11 can only really relate to the speaker's own, personal experience. That said, the use of the "one" pronoun in the same line indicates that the speaker feels their reaction to be something fairly universal. This helps the poem feel more immediate to the reader, like they're right there with the speaker looking at the tomb.

But even though the speaker never uses "I," it's hard not to feel some sense of personality coming through. Essentially, the poem is the speaker's personal meditation on the thoughts and feelings that the effigies provoke. Most readings of the poem also tend to equate the speaker with Larkin himself. Indeed, the reticent attitude towards love and the rejection of easy sentiments is typical of Larkin's poetry more generally. Larkin also wrote the poem after visiting the tomb of the poem's title, meaning it's fair to assume the thoughts presented here are close to Larkin's own.

SETTING

Though the poem never says this explicitly, the tomb of its title is a reference to a real tomb located in a cathedral in Britain. As such, readers with some context can assume that this cathedral is the setting of the poem. Because the speaker points out how much time has passed since the tomb was constructed and that it now exists in an "unarmorial" age (that is, an age without things like knights and suits of armor), it's also safe to assume that the poem takes place in the present day.

That said, "An Arundel Tomb" is also an example of ekphrasis, which means it takes one particular object and uses it as the basis for its discussion. In that sense, then, the poem is essentially set in, on, and around the stone tomb itself—though filtered through the speaker's perceptions and words. At first, the tomb seems to be "plain" and a little uninspiring. But the speaker is shocked to see that the earl and countess are holding hands—which is the moment that really sets off the poem's general discussion of love and time. The setting is, then, also partly in the speaker's mind. Indeed, the speaker's imagination goes on a kind of voyage of its own, with the speaker casting their mind back to the time when the tomb was made, and how the hands came to be depicted in this way.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Philip Larkin is one of England's best-known 20th century poets. He was born in Coventry but famously lived half of his life in Hull, where he was the university's librarian. This particular poem comes from one of Larkin's most celebrated collections, *The Whitsun Weddings*. Indeed, it is the last poem in the collection and encapsulates two of the main themes that appear throughout: love and time (the title poem from that collection makes for useful comparison with this one). From that same book, "Talking in Bed" also seems particularly relevant. More broadly, Larkin's formative influences included poets such as W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas ("Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night"), and W.B. Yeats—whose poem "The Wild Swans at Coole" also takes a thoughtful look at the passage of time.

Generally speaking, Larkin's poems are known for being witty, well-crafted, and uncompromising when it comes to the rejection of life's easy sentiments and clichés. Partly for these reasons, perhaps, Larkin's poetry has a reputation for being somewhat moody and dour. Particularly when considered out of context, poems like "This Be the Verse" can seem like wholesale rejections of what it means to be human. And at the

bottom of one of his drafts for "An Arundel Tomb," Larkin wrote that "Love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for six hundred years." This perhaps supports the more cynical reading of the poem—that the speaker thinks love is nothing more than a false illusion. On the other hand, Larkin later made the following comment, which perhaps supports a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of love: "I think what survives of us is love, whether in the simple biological sense or just in terms of responding to life, making it happier, even if it's only making a joke."

Larkin is sometimes considered to be part of a loosely connected group of writers known as The Movement—a term coined by a magazine editor in 1954—which included poets Donald Davie and Thom Gunn. Generally speaking, the Movement is rooted in a certain idea of "Englishness" that is not easy to pin down. It is best expressed, perhaps, by Larkin's keenness to ground his poems in a kind of English reality, in terms of location, objects, names, and sentiment.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Philip Larkin was born in 1922 and died in 1985. For most of his life, then, Larkin lived under the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. Though old enough to fight in World War II, Larkin was excused from service because of bad eyesight. After the publication of *The Whitsun Weddings*—which was received well critically and sold in large numbers—Larkin was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

Though the poem doesn't precisely specify the time in which it is set, there's enough evidence to presume that it's written from a contemporary vantage point—contemporary to the time of writing, that is. The speaker notes how the age that they live in—as opposed to that of the earl and countess—is "unarmorial." In other words, it's no longer a time of knights in shining armor and damsels in distress. Furthermore, it's known that Larkin wrote the poem after paying a visit to Chichester cathedral and seeing the real-life Arundel Tomb.

The actual tomb is most likely that of Richard FitzAlan (Earl of Arundel) and his wife Eleanor of Lancaster, who lived during the 14th century. In fact, this tomb is more of a memorial—because in reality it doesn't hold the couple's remains (these are buried in Lewes Priory). This is one of a number of discrepancies between the poem and the supposed actual tomb, but historical inaccuracy doesn't really have an effect on the reader's experience of the poem. Other differences are that the real tomb has no "Latin names around the base," and one of the "little dogs" is in fact a lion (a common medieval symbol).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Larkin's Letters — An article that reviews a publication of Larkin's correspondence with his mother. (https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/10/a-little-of-philip-larkins-letters-goes-a-long-way/)
- Larkin and Music — Larkin—a jazz aficionado—chooses his favorite pieces of music. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009n0l8)
- A Reading by Larkin Himself — "An Arundel Tomb" read by its author. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c67gztw7fqQ)
- More Poems and Larkin's Biography — Further resources on Larkin from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)
- Larkin's Life and Work — A short radio documentary about Larkin produced by the BBC. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01k9q6v)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- The Whitsun Weddings

HOW TO CITE

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