A Study of Reading Habits

SUMMARY

Getting lost in a book used to solve most of my problems, except for school. I didn't mind wrecking my eyes in order to remind myself that I *could* be the cool guy and knock out bad guys twice as big as I was.

When I was a bit older and wearing thick glasses, evil was my idea of fun. I'd picture myself dressed as a vampire, causing trouble in the shadows. I imagined being attractive to women, overpowering them sexually, and leaving them behind like discarded desserts.

These days, I don't read a lot. The male character who disappoints the girl before the hero finally turns up, or the one who's cowardly and looks after the shop, seem too much like me. Get drunk instead! Reading is a waste of time.

THEMES

LITERATURE, ESCAPISM, AND DISENCHANTMENT

Philip Larkin's "A Study of Reading Habits" is a darkly comic poem that traces the speaker's changing relationship with literature as he ages. At first, the speaker celebrates the way books can unlock the young imagination, leading readers into different worlds where they can become someone else. Over time, though, as the speaker becomes disillusioned with his life, he finds that reading no longer offers that same magic. Literary escapism, the poem implies, is something best enjoyed by the young; it can't compete with the drudgery of adult life.

The speaker wasn't the coolest kid at school, but books helped him feel better about himself. Reading, back then, "Cured most things short of school" (nothing, apparently, is wondrous enough to cure the drudgery of school completely!). Damaging his eyes by reading too much was a price worth paying because books allowed the speaker to live out a fantasy. Lost in their pages, he could "keep cool" and beat up "dirty dogs" (villains) "twice my size" (as in an old-fashioned adventure novel, perhaps). Reading conjured up alternative realities in which he could feel strong enough to tackle anyone who picked on him.

The precise terms of this escapism changed as the speaker grew older, but he could still become someone else through reading. By then, he was wearing "inch-thick specs," a sign that he kept reading voraciously at the expense of his eyesight because the trade-off was worth it. In the alternative universe of a good book, the speaker felt transformed. Reading horror stories, for example, he could be "evil" and live as a vampire. He could imagine himself as seductive and sexually powerful, "club[bing]" women "with sex" and discarding them without consequence.

But that was then, and this is now. The speaker no longer likes to read because he recognizes himself in lesser literary characters: "the dude / Who lets the girl down before / The hero arrives" and the "yellow" (cowardly) "chap." These weaker figures hit a little too close to home. Books used to let the speaker become someone new, but now they just remind him of his own shortcomings. They no longer offer fantasy but another version of worn-out reality. The speaker thus concludes that "books are a load of crap." Reading never turned him into the exciting characters he imagined himself to be; it never truly let him escape himself.

By the end of the poem, the speaker rejects books entirely, finding solace only in the mind-numbing effects of alcohol. The poem thus depicts a kind of loss of faith, in which life fails to live up to the imaginative excitement of literature—and literature, in turn, loses its power to make life more exciting.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

YOUTHFUL NAIVETÉ AND ADULT DISAPPOINTMENT

Though the poem specifically discusses "reading habits," it also tells a more general story about how life's disappointing realities can turn youthful hope into disillusionment.

Growing up, the speaker can imagine himself as the hero in the books he reads. He might not be the toughest kid around, but he's young and naive enough to *pretend*. Whether in childhood or adolescence, he can imagine a different and—in his opinion—better life. In his school days, he pictures himself getting his own back on the bullies of this world, dealing "the old right hook" (a punch) to brutish men. When he gets a bit older and those hormones start raging, he imagines "clubbing" women "with sex." In other words, he indulges in a macho fantasy that has little to do with his actual day-to-day existence; he's still capable of dreaming.

But with aging comes experience, and at some point, the speaker stops believing in his own fantasies. As an adult, the poem implies, he can no longer imagine his way into his books, because he knows too much about how life works. Experience has tamped down his youthful naiveté; he's learned that he isn't going to become some macho hero (or vampire!). In fact, he realizes he's more like one of the lesser characters in any book

he picks up.

So while hopeful dreaming once offered him a respite from reality, he now knows there's no true escape from being who he is. He turns to drink as a way of *dulling* this reality—but it's not going anywhere.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When getting my ...
... still keep cool,

"A Study of Reading Habits" tells the story of the speaker's relationship with books—and his own imagination—as it changes over time. The poem unfolds chronologically; this first stanza discusses his early school days, followed by adolescence and adulthood in stanzas two and three. Each stanza has six lines (is a sestet) and an ABCBAC rhyme scheme. Most lines are written in trimeter (have three strong stresses), but the pattern of stresses varies.

The speaker begins by recalling his early passion for reading. Books sparked his imagination, offering him an escape from the headaches of reality—a kind of awakening in which other lives suddenly seemed possible. In lines 1-2, he metaphorically describes reading as a medicine that improved his life:

> When getting my nose in a book
> Cured most things short of school,

The speaker doesn't yet say what these "things" (problems) were, though he alludes to them later. In childhood, he was so enraptured by his books that his nose would practically touch the page, as if at any moment he could just dive into its alternative universe. The real world existed on the periphery, beyond the margins. Of course, he couldn't escape reality entirely; as he says, not even books can fully alleviate the drudgery "of school"! But the pleasures of books were "worth ruining [his] eyes" for (because he read so much—possibly at night, which would increase eyestrain).

Books convinced the speaker that he "could still keep cool" (line 4). Here, the poem introduces a layer of irony. The young speaker was a bookworm, which, the poem implies, wasn't a cool thing to be. But books allowed to him to *imagine* being "cool," even if he wasn't the popular kid at "school." More specifically, "keep cool" means "stay calm under pressure," perhaps hinting that the speaker would get riled up by his treatment at the hands of others. Reading allowed him to dream of becoming an action hero, even as he encountered his physical limitations by "ruining [his] eyes." (Symbolically, this detail could also suggest that his dream was shortsighted.)

LINES 5-6

And deal out ...
... twice my size.

Lines 5-6 build on the fantasy introduced in line 4. Though he was only a kid, the speaker's reading helped him imagine knocking out some hulking bully or villain. (Bullying might have been a factor in the speaker's hatred of school.) He probably wasn't physically tough at the time—but thanks to books, he could imagine otherwise.

Specifically, he imagined he could "deal out the old right hook / To dirty dogs twice my size." Both "old right hook" and "dirty dog" sound like phrases gleaned from adventure novels or comic books—presumably, the kind of stuff the speaker read at the time. This vivid vocabulary underscores the irony of the lines: the speaker's mundane reality was very different than the colorful fictional worlds he explored. (Also, this vocabulary was already corny and old-fashioned when Larkin wrote the poem, so he's poking fun at its quaintness as he looks back on childhood.) "Hook" rhymes satisfyingly with "book" (line 1), like a well-connected punch, but also hints at how this punch belongs to the world of fiction rather than the speaker's real life.

It's implied, too, that the speaker had a romanticized view of what it means to be a man. These lines describe a macho fantasy of doling out justice through physical violence. If the speaker *was* bullied at school, books may have offered a kind of revenge fantasy. In this context, the alliteration of "deal" and "dirty dogs" seems cartoonish, like old comic-book text bubbles reading *Biff! Bam! Boom!*

LINES 7-12

Later, with inch-thick ...
... up like meringues.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes the role books played during his adolescence. The poem thus moves on from his early school days to a "Later" time in his youth—when the hormones were raging!

The "ruining" of the speaker's eyes in line 3 leads to the "inch-thick specs" he wears later. As a symbol, these glasses depict the speaker as nerdy and intellectual, while suggesting his withdrawal from the visible, real world around him. Notice how the emphatic assonance in "inch-thick" sounds cumbersome, conveying the sheer size of the lenses.

Lines 8-10 show how the speaker's taste in books changed with age. Whereas he seems to have started with adventure novels or comic books, he clearly got into the horror genre as a teen. "Evil was just [his] lark"—and "lark" is another one of those old-fashioned words that seem to gesture to the world of books.

(It's a possible pun on "Larkin," too!) Reading continued to offer an escape from reality; the speaker imagined himself as a Dracula-like figure:

> Me and my cloak and fangs
> Had ripping times in the dark.

The ungrammatical "Me" (rather than "I") gestures back to the slangy, casual world of adolescence. "Ripping" is slang for excellent, but it also has violent, perhaps even sexual, connotations that fit the speaker's teenage fantasy. In his imaginative life, the speaker became a mysterious, shadowy figure—while ironically being nothing of the kind in reality. In books, he could picture doing things—like hunting human beings or sporting a "cloak and fangs"—that would be impossible in the cold light of day.

In lines 11-12, this irony becomes even more obvious and excruciating. The speaker exclaims: "The women I clubbed with sex!" He imagined himself as a brooding, powerful ladies' man, yet it's clear that he wasn't. His choice of metaphor here is revealing—"clubbing" (hitting) women is clearly not mature behavior. The speaker didn't really know how to interact sexually, so this violent word smacks of desperation and misunderstanding. He applies the same crude logic of "the old right hook" (line 5) to sexual fantasies, imaginatively acquiring status through brute force. Perhaps the word is meant to evoke the image of a caveman, implying the speaker's lack of sexual evolution.

Line 12 takes this irony and violent imagery further. The speaker says of the women in his fantasies, "I broke them up like meringues." This simile is both unsettling and outlandish (there's a hint of self-mockery in the speaker's tone). "Meringues" are sugary desserts, as indulgent and fragile as the speaker's book-fueled fantasies. The speaker imagined seducing women, sexually overpowering them, and discarding them—but this was just a habit he read about in cheesy vampire novels, not something he ever did in real life. The rhyme between "fangs" and "meringues" is comically unexpected, further casting the speaker as a slightly ridiculous figure.

LINES 13-17

> *Don't read much ...*
> *... far too familiar.*

The third stanza shifts into the present tense. As an adult (possibly in middle age), books no longer enchant the speaker. They offer no imaginative escape, because he can no longer picture himself as the heroes. In fact, he's come to see himself in the weaker characters—so reading is a painful reminder of reality, not a portal to some other, preferred universe.

The speaker dismisses books with a casual tone, as if still trying to seem cool: "Don't read much now." He feels he's outgrown reading, and implicitly looks down on his younger self for spending so much time on it. And while he once felt transformed by—or *into*—the main characters he used to read about, he now finds the sadder secondary characters "far too familiar." That is, they remind him of his own failings. (The alliterative phrase "far too familiar" seems to emphasize his frustration.)

He describes two such failed characters. The first is "the dude / Who lets the girl down before / The hero arrives." The word "dude" is likely a reference to the Western genre; in American frontier slang, it once meant a city slicker, a pampered guy who couldn't hack it out West. The "dude" the speaker relates to disappoints "the girl" rather than winning her in the end. The other character is "the chap / Who's yellow" (meaning cowardly) and leads a quiet life as a shopkeeper.

Both figures are a far cry from macho heroes—and that's what upsets the speaker. When he reads now, if he does at all, these characters hold up an unflattering mirror to his own mediocrity. He no longer believes that he'll one day *become* the hero, either. He sees through literary fantasy too clearly for it to work any magic. This sense of disillusionment is typical of Larkin's poetry.

LINES 17-18

> *Get stewed: ...*
> *... load of crap.*

After the full-stop caesura in line 17 (following "familiar"), the speaker comes to his emphatic conclusion.

He exclaims, "Get stewed," an idiom meaning, "Get drunk." Apparently, he's replaced one form of escapism with another: the imaginative freedom of literature has given way to the comforting, dulling, and damaging effects of alcohol. If the speaker can't become someone else in his imagination, he can at least numb the pain of *being* himself with booze. "Stewed" may be a metaphor, as well, for the acidic effects of drinking on the mind and body (think of the liver stewing in the juices of alcohol). Finally, it evokes another common idiom: "stewing in anger." This speaker seems to have given up; he's become bitter and disillusioned with age.

The imperative phrasing of "Get stewed" means it can be read as an instruction. Perhaps the speaker, as an *ex*-reader, is advising any hypothetical reader of the poem to put down the book and get drunk instead. The tone also sounds aggressive, as though the speaker's saying, "Get lost; leave me alone."

The poem's famous last line bluntly sums up the speaker's attitude: "Books are a load of crap." Here, the point seems to be that books can't really change all that much. This speaker's life seemed primed for disappointment right from the very first lines, and reading offered only a false, temporary hope. It's an ironic and provocative line, too, considering that the poem appears in a book! (Also, Larkin was a published author and professional librarian; his whole life was devoted to books. The speaker may express some of the poet's feelings, but he's not

exactly the same as the poet.)

In the end, the poem negates all the magic that it ascribed to reading in the first two stanzas. It leaves the sense that life is, ultimately, rather sad—and that, for all the glamorous or tawdry fantasies literature offers, reality is inescapable.

SYMBOLS

POOR VISION / GLASSES

The speaker's "specs" and bad eyesight are a multi-layered symbol. First, they're a sign of his outsider status as a kid, since glasses are conventionally—and unfairly, of course—associated with nerdiness. The speaker might imagine himself "keep[ing] cool," beating up bad guys, and so on, but his glasses suggest a tame and bookish life.

Second, the "ruining" of his eyesight—the main faculty through which he can perceive reality—symbolizes his youthful determination to escape daily life through the medium of literature. The more he reads, the less aware of reality he is. The phrase "inch-thick specs" plays up this symbolism, as the increasing thickness of the lenses suggests his increasing withdrawal from real life.

Again, these symbolic details contrast with the macho fantasies in the first two stanzas, creating a sense of irony. While the speaker describes a set of events happening in his mind, the glasses reflect his actual experience.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "It was worth ruining my eyes / To know I could still keep cool,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Later, with inch-thick specs, / Evil was just my lark:"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem's playful alliteration adds to its comic tone, which adds a layer of irony or self-parody to the speaker's narrative. The first example comes in lines 5-6. When the speaker was a kid, books offered him an escape from reality through the imagination. In this imagined world, he could:

> [...] deal out the old right hook
> To dirty dogs twice my size.

The /d/ sounds are plosive, meaning they require the expulsion of air when spoken. Poets often use plosives when they want to convey something physically powerful or violent, and that effect is definitely going on here (the lines are describing a fistfight). But there's also something cartoonish and child-like about the phrasing here; it's the kind of vocabulary that the speaker might have encountered in an adventure novel or a comic book.

Lines 13-14 use the same sound, only now it describes how the speaker has given up on the escapism of books:

> Don't read much now: the dude
> Who lets the girl down before [...]

Here, the /d/s awkwardly echo the more enthusiastic lines 5-6, as though those early books still reverberate in the speaker's speech patterns. The insistent consonants—which link a series of negative words ("Don't," the mocking "dude," and "down")—sound deflated, like a litany of failure.

In lines 16-17, the speaker says that the "dude" and the coward who:

> [...] keeps the store
> Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:

These /s/, /st/, and /f/ sounds have a spitting, almost venomous quality. The alliteration thus captures the speaker's self-loathing, and his resentful belief that "Books are a load of crap."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "deal"
- **Line 6:** "dirty dogs"
- **Line 13:** "Don't," "dude"
- **Line 14:** "down"
- **Line 16:** "store"
- **Line 17:** "Seem," "far," "familiar," "stewed"

IRONY

The first two stanzas are steeped in irony. That is, the speaker says one thing while effectively revealing another. The speaker seems aware of the irony, but also seems as if he may be using it because the subject is too painful to spell out explicitly.

On the one hand, the speaker makes it clear that, as a kid, he was a total bookworm. "Getting [his] nose in a book" dulled the pain of "most things" except for "school," to the extent that it was worth ruining his eyes in order to read more. On the other hand, he describes himself as if he were the heroes *in* the books. Thanks to books, he claims, he could fight back against bad guys—"dirty dogs"—far bigger than he was. Later, in adolescence, his conquests became sexual; as a brooding vampire-type character, he overpowered women "with sex" (line 11).

Of course, the reader isn't actually meant to believe any of this. Though presented as events that really happened, the context

makes it clear that these were just the imaginings of an active, book-loving mind. The irony, then, is that the speaker isn't, and never has been, the kind of macho hero that captivated him when he was younger.

There's also a kind of situational irony here, in that events don't work out as the speaker expected. The speaker never used to identify with the lesser characters in the books he read. Now, from the vantage point of older age, he knows he's more like the "dude / Who lets the girl down" (lines 13-14) than the hero.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 13-17

METAPHOR

The poem uses three metaphors, all of which tell the reader something about the speaker. The first characterizes the speaker's relationship with reading when he was young:

> When getting my nose in a book
> Cured most things short of school,

Here, then, books are a kind of medicine. A strong dose of literature can alleviate the main symptoms of reality. (Though nothing can completely cure school, which the speaker implicitly compares to a terrible disease!) This metaphor shows that books played a vital, life-giving role to the speaker's younger self—indeed, they allowed him to imagine other lives for himself, making the one that he had more tolerable.

In the second stanza, his relationship with books is much the same. They still offer him a way of fulfilling otherwise unfulfillable desires. In line 11, he describes "The women I clubbed with sex!" To club someone is to hit them with a blunt instrument, so this verb isn't meant literally here. As a metaphor, it's meant to convey brute, masculine force—what the speaker really saw as his *opposite*. The mention of a club might also evoke early humankind (cavemen), cartoonishly suggesting the speaker's stunted sexual development.

In his adult life, the speaker concludes that "Books are a load of crap" (line 17). It's better to "get stewed" (line 17), a colloquial metaphor for getting drunk. "Stewing" oneself implies drinking consistently over time—that is, being an alcoholic. It might also imply an inner, physical transformation resulting from excessive drinking (e.g., liver disease).

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "When getting my nose in a book / Cured most things short of school,"
- **Line 11:** "The women I clubbed with sex!"
- **Line 17:** "Get stewed:"

SIMILE

"A Study of Reading Habits" uses only one simile, but it's a memorable one. In the second stanza, the speaker outlines how reading offered an imaginative escape during his adolescent years. With hormones raging, he imagined:

> The women I clubbed with sex!
> I broke them up like meringues.

This image is so exaggerated and unsettling that, ironically, it makes clear the speaker did no such thing! The strangeness of the simile conveys that these incidents took place entirely in the speaker's fantasies.

The notion of "breaking" women seems to suggest violence or physical domination, which parallels the speaker's earlier dream of "deal[ing] out the old right hook" to hulking villains. At the very least, it suggests an ability to *discard* women with little consequence (think James Bond). Either way, this is not exactly the language of a lover: it's the fantasy of an immature boy.

The choice of "meringues" is telling, too. Meringues are flimsy and indulgent desserts that crumble apart easily. In these ways, they're analogous to the speaker's fantasies. He might have liked *indulging* in these visions of himself, but they soon fell apart (as described in the final stanza).

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "I broke them up like meringues."

VOCABULARY

Short of (Lines 1-2) - Except for.

Right hook (Line 5) - A powerful punch with the right hand.

Dirty Dogs (Line 6) - Bad guys.

Specs (Line 7) - Glasses.

Lark (Line 8) - Idea of fun.

Fangs (Line 9) - Long, pointed teeth (e.g., Dracula's!).

Ripping (Lines 9-10) - Fun and exciting.

Clubbed (Line 11) - Beat with a blunt instrument.

Meringues (Line 12) - A crumbly desert made out of egg white and sugar.

Dude (Lines 13-15) - Guy. (In Westerns, "dude" can more specifically mean "city slicker," or a coddled guy from the city visiting the rough-and-tough frontier.)

Yellow (Lines 15-16) - Cowardly.

Chap (Lines 15-16) - Man.

Store (Lines 15-16) - Most likely a general shop, but could also mean "weapons supply."

Stewed (Line 17) - Drunk.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like most Larkin poems, "A Study of Reading Habits" uses a regular stanza pattern. It consists of three sestets: stanzas of six lines each. The stanzas work like chapters in a book, unfolding chronologically from childhood to adolescence to adult life. Each follows a three-beat accentual meter and an ABCBAC rhyme scheme.

It's also worth noting the title, which claims to define the poem's genre. A *study* is an academic undertaking, usually subject to rigorous standards (e.g., peer review in the sciences). The speaker's tone, however, is casual and conversational. This mismatch reflects the tension between the speaker's earlier bookishness and his later rejection of literature. Calling this personal anecdote a "Study" is a salty, ironic gesture—one that reflects the speaker's eventual dismissive attitude toward books. (Whether or not the reader believes the *poet* feels that way is another matter!)

METER

"A Study of Reading Habits" uses a loose accentual meter. Most of the lines have three strong stresses, but the arrangement of those stresses varies. The roughness of this pattern feels appropriate to the poem's narrative and tone. The language never quite settles into an easy rhythm, just as the speaker's life never quite became what he thought it would.

Listen to the stresses in lines 3-6, for example:

> It was worth ruining my eyes
> To know I could still keep cool,
> And deal out the old right hook
> To dirty dogs twice my size.

The rhythm shifts around a bit; in fact, there are a few possible ways to hear it. The slight awkwardness of the lines hints at the speaker's difficulties during those early years (when he wasn't lost in a book).

The poem's most emphatic moment uses an attention-grabbing spondee. In line 17, the speaker exclaims, "Get stewed." This powerful, surprising double stress seems to convey all his repressed resentment.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a regular rhyme scheme: ABCBAC DEFEDF, etc. It uses rhymes to comic effect, heightening the tension between the speaker's imaginative world and his mundane reality. For example, the pairing of "book" with "right hook" in lines 1 and 5 underscores the fact that this punch was a book-inspired fantasy.

In the second stanza, "specs" rhymes with "sex" (lines 7 and 11), wittily summing up the speaker's adolescent experience. He was a lonely bookworm daydreaming a completely different life as a sex symbol. "Fangs"/"meringues" (lines 9 and 12) is another inventive pairing; its cartoonish weirdness dials up the absurdity of the simile in line 12.

Rhyme can also add emphasis, as it does in the final stanza:

> [...] the chap
> Who's yellow and keeps the store
> Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:
> Books are a load of crap.

The closing rhyme accentuates an already emphatic, vulgar word ("crap"), making that famous last line all the more cutting and dismissive.

SPEAKER

The poem has a first-person speaker: a man who once loved getting lost in books. Between his complaints about school and his "inch-thick specs," it's fair to say he was never the cool kid. In his reading, however, he could be anyone, and for a while literature offered a true sense of escape. Now that he's older, a sense of disillusion and disenchantment has set in (as it so often does in Larkin poems). These days, the speaker sees himself in the *lesser* characters—not the heroes—of stories, and he numbs his bleak reality with drink ("Get stewed").

The speaker also once held a rather old-fashioned idea of what it means to be a man. As he read, he fantasized about being physically powerful and beating up his enemies; in his adolescence, he dreamed of exerting power over women through sex.

Some of the speaker's vocabulary seems drawn from the books he used to read. For example, "old right hook" and "dirty dogs" (lines 5 and 6) could be lifted straight from an adventure novel or comic book, while "dude" and "yellow" (lines 13 and 16), meaning *city slicker* and *cowardly* in older American slang, could be references to the Western genre.

The speaker's final sentiment—"Books are a load of crap"—stands in sharp contrast to the poet's career. Philip Larkin was not only an author but a librarian; clearly he saw *some* value in books! The speaker's sense of disillusionment is a common feature of Larkin's poems (and Larkin really did wear thick glasses), but that doesn't mean the speaker is literally Larkin.

SETTING

The poem is a recollection of the speaker's reading habits throughout his life. The story unfolds chronologically from his younger years (stanza 1) through his adolescence (stanza 2) and adult life (stanza 3), charting a passage from eager bookishness to disenchantment. The final stanza reflects this shift, as it switches to present tense and the speaker declares his total break with the world of literature.

The only real-world setting the speaker mentions is "school" (line 2), which he clearly hated and wanted to escape. (He compares it to a disease.) Otherwise, the worlds he reconstructs come from the books he once loved. Lines 5 and 6 ("And deal [...] twice my size") conjure up the atmosphere of an adventure novel; lines 7-10 ("Later [...] in the dark") riff on the horror genre; lines 13-16 ("Don't read [...] the store") allude to Westerns. The speaker may have turned his back on books, but the poem, it seems, would still rather focus on literary worlds than on the real one.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

From the publication of his second collection, *The Less Deceived* (1955), until his death in 1985, Philip Larkin was one of the UK's most popular poets. The editor-critic J. D. Scott grouped Larkin, along with a number of other post-World War II English writers (including Larkin's close friend Kingsley Amis), into a school he called "The Movement." The Movement poets rejected many of the formal and stylistic experiments of the previous, Modernist generation. They gravitated toward a plainer style along with characteristically English settings and themes.

Larkin published "A Study of Reading Habits" in his 1964 collection *The Whitsun Weddings*. This slim volume contains many of Larkin's best-loved poems and, by poetry's standards, was a huge success. Poems like "Mr Bleaney," "An Arundel Tomb," "Talking in Bed," and the title poem reflect a sense of disenchantment with various aspects of mid-century English life, including nationhood, work, sex, love, and religion. This attitude became strongly associated with Larkin, who once claimed that "Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for [William] Wordsworth." In other words, the kind of disillusion found in "A Study of Reading Habits" runs throughout his poetry.

Of course, there's a delicious irony at play in this poem. The famous last line ("Books are a load of crap") clashes with Larkin's livelihood: he was not only a published poet, novelist, and critic but also a librarian at the University of Hull. He even oversaw the compilation of the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*. Books were his life! Yet this is the power of Larkin: to say two things at once, neither of them entirely true or false. This poem arguably does everything a good poem should, while disavowing the ability of literature to improve anything.

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 due to poor eyesight. After the publication of *The Whitsun Weddings*—which was received well critically and sold in large numbers—Larkin received the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. Later in life, he turned down the position of UK Poet Laureate.

The poem was published in the 1960s, a time of widespread social upheaval. Over the course of the decade, counterculture movements rose to prominence and championed equality, love, peace, and freedom. By 1964, the Beatles were on their sixth number-one record in a row, and the "teenage" years had become recognized (though not always positively!) as a distinct life stage between childhood and adulthood. Larkin's poems, however, are invariably written from an outsider's perspective and share little of the youthful enthusiasm in the air at the time. When his speakers reflect on their own youth, as in "A Study of Reading Habits," the memories are either grim or a setup for later disillusionment.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — "A Study of Reading Habits" read by Larkin himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYs4ClHnRqg)
- Larkin's Life and Work — A short radio documentary about Larkin produced by the BBC. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01k9q6v)
- The Paris Review Interview — Check out Philip Larkin's interview with The Paris Review, which was published in 1982 as part of the magazine's "The Art of Poetry" series. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3153/the-art-of-poetry-no-30-philip-larkin)
- Interview with the Poet — Watch poet John Betjeman interview Philip Larkin in 1964. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Coe11pgoj8E)
- More Poems and a Biography — Further resources on Larkin from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)
- Portrait of the Artist — Browse the six portraits of Philip

Larkin collected in the National Portrait Gallery's online archive. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp05491/philip-arthur-larkin)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- Afternoons
- An Arundel Tomb
- Church Going
- Coming
- Mr Bleaney
- The Trees
- The Whitsun Weddings
- This Be The Verse
- Water

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