Coming

SUMMARY

On nights when the sun begins to set later and later, cold, yellow light washes over the tops of calm, peaceful houses. A songbird sings from its perch in the shrubs of an otherwise empty garden, its youthful voice startling the brickwork of the nearby houses.

Spring is coming, spring is coming—and even though my childhood was forgettable and boring, I feel like a child who has walked in on two adults making up after a disagreement, and, unable to understand what's going on apart from the adults' strange laughter, begins to feel better.

THEMES

SPRING, REBIRTH, AND FALSE HOPE

"Coming" connects the arrival of spring with feelings of hope and happiness, while also suggesting that these feelings are shallower and more tenuous than they appear. Spring in the poem marks a time of renewed warmth and growth; the seasons are often linked to human life cycles in literature, and that's certainly the case here. On one level, then, the poem explores the sense of optimism that spring may bring after a long, cold winter—symbolically suggesting the cyclical nature of human life and its potential for renewed hope even after long periods of darkness.

At the same time, however, the speaker questions the depth and truthfulness of this joy. The speaker, at the start of spring, feels like a child who's walked in on two adults making up after a fight and, failing to recognize the awkwardness in the room, is too readily made happy by the adults' supposed "reconciling." This, in turn, implies that the joy of spring is superficial and insecure. Perhaps this is because the coming of spring doesn't simply signal rebirth, but also the inevitable forward march of time. What's clear is that the things people count on to make them happy, the poem rather cynically suggests, are often less meaningful than they seem.

The poem begins by playing on the fact that people imbue the coming spring with a sense of joyous rebirth. For example, the speaker says that the sound of a small songbird "astonish[es]" houses that have been sitting "serene[ly]" all winter, and also describes the lengthening days with their "yellow" light. This leads to a feeling of reawakening that seems hopeful, as if spring will rouse and uplift the speaker's otherwise dreary surroundings.

Yet despite this apparent optimism, the speaker's tone remains unenthusiastic. When the speaker says, "It will be spring soon, / It will be spring soon," the repetition of this phrase makes it sound as if the speaker is actually *dreading* spring. Or, perhaps, the speaker is trying (and seemingly failing) to stay positive—to adopt the kind of happiness and hope that spring supposedly embodies.

Except, the next stanza suggests that such hope is false. The speaker goes on to compare spring's promise of joy to a child's experience of walking in on the end of an adult argument, only to hear the grownups laughing in a fake way to cover up their dispute. Although this laughter isn't genuine, it still makes the child feel happy, since the child focuses only on the way things *seem*, not on how they actually *are*.

In the same way, the poem suggests, it's possible to get swept up in the delights of spring without understanding what it really means. Spring's promise of growth and renewal isn't as emotionally transformative as people want it to be, the poem suggests, because it hints at an underlying truth that people—like the child stumbling on "adult reconciling"—fail to understand.

While the poem never states what it actually *is* that people don't grasp about spring, it could be the fact that the changing of the seasons *also* signals the passage time and, as such, movement closer to death; or simply that its promise of growth and beauty doesn't suddenly erase people's problems. Spring may be a kind of "reconciling" after the cold and darkness of winter, but its chilly light is like that "unusual laughter" of the adults after an argument—something that lacks true warmth and comfort.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

On longer evenings, ...
... Foreheads of houses.

The opening phrase, "On longer evenings," establishes that the poem is set during the onset of spring, a time of year when the days start to grow longer as the sun sets later and later. This setting reflects poem's title, "Coming," which subtly hints at a sense of newness and change, as spring is "coming" to replace winter.

The speaker goes on to describe the quality of sunlight on these early spring evenings, calling it "chill and yellow." The fact that

the sunlight is still "chill" suggests that winter has not yet fully passed, since the light remains cold even though it's around for more hours in the day. The days may be longer, then, but they are not yet warm; there's the *appearance* of spring without the genuine *feel* of it—a setting that, in turn, foreshadows the speaker's ideas about the shallow nature of springtime hope.

All the same, the light still "bathes" the houses, which themselves are "serene." The speaker uses personification in this moment, referencing the "foreheads" of the houses and depicting them as people who are calm and subdued. The imagery of sunlight washing over "serene" houses suggests that the light will perhaps reawaken the houses, which have been sitting somberly throughout the winter. Here, at least, spring is portrayed as a source of renewal and rebirth.

Despite the seemingly uplifting subject, the speaker's overall tone is unenthusiastic. Not only are the speaker's descriptions tempered by the mention of coldness and a certain feeling of somberness, but the actual rhythm of the words has a somewhat defeated sound. This is because three of the first four lines all end on unstressed syllables. "Coming" is not written in meter, but there's no question that the last words of the first, second, and fourth lines have a stressed-unstressed pattern:

- "eve**nings**"
- "yell**ow**
- "hous**es**"

This pattern creates a falling sound that hints at a sensation of melancholy—one that doesn't align with the otherwise joyous feelings that people associate with spring. As a result, readers will perhaps pick up on a subtle kind of cynicism that will run throughout the poem, starkly contrasting the supposedly happy tidings of springtime.

LINES 5-7

A thrush sings, ...
... deep bare garden,

The speaker continues to set the scene of the poem, directing attention toward a small songbird (a "thrush") that sings in a garden. The way that this garden is described is interesting, since the speaker notes that the bird (which is in the garden) is "laurel-surrounded" but also suggests that the garden is "bare." The word "laurel" refers to a form of leafy shrub, meaning that the songbird is hidden in some kind of bush. Again, though, the speaker also notes that the garden is "bare." As such, it becomes clear that only shrubs that are resilient to the cold have survived the winter. The flowers, it seems, have all died—a fact that once more reminds readers that the surrounding environment is still feeling the effects of winter.

Laurel leaves have historically been used to fashion crowns that symbolize victory, triumph, or prosperity. Laurel also bears religious implications because it represents Christ's resurrection. This, in turn, aligns with the poem's idea of rebirth and renewal, even if such things are juxtaposed with the barren landscape of a post-winter suburban setting. In this way, the speaker presents the idea of a joyous and triumphant resurgence of spring while also illustrating that the specific scene in question isn't quite as cheerful as one might expect.

These feature subtle consonance of the /r/ sound:

A th**r**ush sings,
Laurel-su**rr**ounded
In the deep ba**r**e ga**r**den

To balance out this growling sound, the speaker also uses the sibilant /s/ alongside the /th/, /sh/, and /z/ sounds (which are also often considered to be a form of sibilance as well):

A thru**sh** sings,
Laurel **s**urrounded

These gentle sounds soften the overall effect of this section, making the lines sound pleasant and relaxed. As such, the language mimics the kind of satisfaction that people often experience when they feel the first hints of spring.

LINES 8-9

Its fresh-peeled voice ...
... Astonishing the brickwork.

The final two lines of the first stanza focus on the thrush (songbird) that is hidden in the garden. More specifically, the speaker notes that the bird sings out and that its voice is "fresh-peeled," a term that encourages readers to think of the bird as though it were a piece of ripe fruit that has just been peeled. This description is also perhaps a passing reference to the way flowers blossom, the outer leaves of a bud slowly peeling away so that the actual petals can expand. Either way, this description emphasizes the youthfulness of the bird, whose song signals the arrival of warmer weather.

The speaker also uses personification in line 9 to describe the "brickwork" of the surrounding houses, saying that the houses themselves are "astonish[ed]" by the bird's chirping. This use of personification accentuates the somewhat somber, vaguely depressing feeling of the speaker's surroundings. Although there's a songbird singing in the bushes, the speaker can't actually see it. Instead, the speaker can only look at the boring, sleepy houses and note the juxtaposition between the bird's lively tune and the "serene," unexciting nature of the immediate circumstances.

Once again, the overall sound of the speaker's language is largely defined by sibilant sounds such as /s/ and /sh/:

Its fre**sh**-peeled voice

Astonishing the brickwork.

These hushed sounds make the final lines of the stanza quiet and reflective, almost reverent.

LINES 10-13

It will be ...
... a forgotten boredom,

To begin the second stanza, the speaker repeats a single phrase twice in a row:

It will be spring soon,
It will be spring soon –

This use of epizeuxis calls attention to the fact that spring is approaching, but it also hints at the speaker's emotional state. After all, one might think that the arrival of spring would make the speaker happy, but this repetition of the phrase "It will be spring soon" sounds oddly lifeless and unenthusiastic. It seems almost mindless, in fact, as if this is something the speaker has learned to say over and over in a futile attempt to feel some kind of hope or happiness.

The speaker goes on to say, "And I, whose childhood, / Is a forgotten boredom." These lines serve as a precursor to a simile that the speaker will deliver in the final lines of the poem. They're also important in and of themselves, though, since they accentuate the underlying sense of discontent that runs throughout the poem.

Again, this is a poem about springtime (a generally happy period), but the speaker doesn't seem very happy. Rather, the speaker seems sour and cynical, remembering childhood as a "forgotten boredom." This is particularly significant because the appearance of spring in literature often represents a return to youthful exuberance and joy. The fact that the speaker sees childhood as nothing but a bore, something that has receded with time and isn't worth revisiting, fits in with the general tone of the poem.

LINES 14-19

Feel like a ...
... to be happy.

The last six lines of the poem feature an important simile that sheds light on the speaker's cynicism surrounding the arrival of spring. The speaker uses this simile to imply that a mere change in the weather won't bring happiness that is truly substantial or meaningful.

First, the speaker admits to feeling "like a child" who has walked in on a scene of "adult reconciling." The word "reconcile" refers to the act of making up or reestablishing a friendly relationship. In this context, the word suggests that this hypothetical child has walked in on two adults right after they've finished having an argument. Lacking the maturity to fully make sense of the tension still hanging in the air, though, the child only recognizes the "unusual laughter" of the adults as they try to cover up their argument. In turn, the child misinterprets the entire atmosphere of this moment, focusing only on the superficial happiness of the adults. As a result, the child "starts to be happy," but this feeling of contentment is built upon false pretenses.

Apparently the speaker thinks the joy that comes along with spring is as empty and superficial as the adults' forced laughter. Any pleasure the speaker has derived from things like the sun "bath[ing]" houses in beautiful light or a songbird singing in a garden is, it seems, not enough to lead to a sense of profound satisfaction or lasting contentment. Rather, these things only *seem* joyous, and though they might make the speaker feel a certain form of happiness, this is only because the speaker has—like the child in the simile—misinterpreted the surrounding world.

The end of the poem is fairly assonant, as the long /i/ sound repeats alongside the /ee/ and /ah/ sounds in lines 14 through 17:

Feel like a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling,
And can understand nothing

In particular, the long /i/ sound in "child" and "reconciling" knits these lines together, calling attention to the idea of a child walking in on a moment of "adult reconciling" and finding it difficult to discern what, exactly, is going on.

Like many moments in "Coming," lines 15 through 19 are also sibilant:

Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling,
And can understand nothing
But the unusual laughter,
And starts to be happy.

This section includes not just the standard sibilant /s/ sound, but also the /z/ sound in "comes" and the unique shushing sound in "unusual." Taken together, these sounds create a fluid, satisfying effect that reflects the happiness that the child in the simile feels. Of course, the speaker implies that this happiness isn't all that authentic, but this doesn't take away from the child's *experience* of feeling joy and satisfaction in this moment. As such, the speaker's language makes the poem sound pleasant in the same way that springtime seems pleasant at first. The problem, though, comes when people dig deeper and realize that their contentment isn't as meaningful or warranted as they originally thought.

SYMBOLS

THE THRUSH AND THE GARDEN

The thrush (a type of songbird) in the garden represents the happiness and merriment associated with spring. The idea of a bird singing its little heart out in a garden is undeniably joyful. Such a scene even feels celebratory, as if nature is triumphantly marking the arrival of beautiful weather.

However, the thrush is singing from a shrubby area of an otherwise empty garden, suggesting that the garden itself is dead. This could be a sign that the bird's chirping is simply the first indication of spring's arrival, but the sense of barren emptiness that surrounds the bird ultimately overshadows the joyfulness of the bird's song.

The bird thus comes to symbolize the fact that it's possible to *seem* happy and enthusiastic even when everything is, in reality, pretty grim—a dynamic the speaker is all too familiar with, since it later becomes clear that the speaker doubts spring can lead to genuine happiness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-9:** "A thrush sings, / Laurel-surrounded / In the deep bare garden, / Its fresh-peeled voice / Astonishing the brickwork."

POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

The speaker packs each line of the poem with consonance. The /l/ sound, for instance, rings out clearly in the poem's first two lines:

> On longer evenings,
> Light, chill and yellow

This repetition of the gentle, liquid /l/ sound makes these lines sound beautiful and smooth but also subdued, setting the pensive tone for the rest of the poem.

Later, the /r/ sound repeats many times in lines 6 and 7:

> Laurel-surrounded
> In the deep bare garden

The multiple /r/ sounds give this section a subtle growl that makes the language feel textured. Coupled with the many instances of sibilance ("serene," "houses," "sings," etc.), this creates a meditative, soothing effect that reflects the calm and peaceful nature of the speaker's immediate surroundings.

Another notable use of consonance comes in lines 16 and 17, when the speaker features the /d/ and /n/ sounds:

> Of adult reconciling,
> And can understand nothing

The /d/ sound in particular is quite commanding and blunt, an effect that imbues this moment with a certain feeling of impenetrability. In turn, the speaker's language reflects the child's inability to break through the adults' "unusual laughter" and grasp what is actually going on between them.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "longer"
- **Line 2:** "Light, chill," "yellow"
- **Line 4:** "Foreheads," "houses"
- **Line 5:** "thrush sings"
- **Line 6:** "Laurel-surrounded"
- **Line 7:** "deep bare garden"
- **Line 8:** "fresh-peeled voice"
- **Line 9:** "Astonishing"
- **Line 10:** "spring soon"
- **Line 11:** "spring soon"
- **Line 12:** "childhood"
- **Line 13:** "forgotten boredom"
- **Line 14:** "Feel like," "child"
- **Line 15:** "on," "scene"
- **Line 16:** "adult reconciling"
- **Line 17:** "And can understand nothing"
- **Line 18:** "unusual"
- **Line 19:** "starts to"

IMAGERY

Imagery is important to the poem's first stanza ("On longer evenings [...] Astonishing the brickwork"), as the speaker vividly describes the surrounding environment.

First, the speaker mentions the sunlight, noting that it is "chill and yellow." This imagery evokes not only the color but also the *feel* of the light, which is actually a bit at odds with its yellowness; though it carries the *color* of the sun, it does not yet carry the sun's *warmth*. Spring is on its way, but it hasn't yet fully taken hold of the speaker's surroundings.

Going on, the speaker focuses on a songbird that sings in the bushes of an otherwise bare garden. The bird's "voice" is described as "fresh-peeled," indicating that the bird itself is most likely young. The speaker also says that the bird's voice "astonish[es] the brickwork" of the surrounding houses. This makes it seem as if the houses have been startled awake by the sound. Readers will perhaps imagine the sound of the bird bouncing off the bricks in a startling way that not only

demonstrates the loudness of the chirping, but also hints at the previously uninterrupted silence of this suburban setting.

In this way, the speaker uses imagery to enhance the descriptions that appear in the poem's first stanza, setting the scene and inviting readers to consider the nuances of the speaker's surroundings.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Light, chill and yellow, / Bathes the serene / Foreheads of houses."
- **Line 5:** "A thrush sings,"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Its fresh-peeled voice / Astonishing the brickwork."

SIBILANCE

Sibilance appears throughout the poem and adds to its thoughtful, pensive tone. Take lines 3-6, where the speaker uses /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds:

> Bathes the serene
> Foreheads of houses.
> A thrush sings,
> Laurel-surrounded

Sibilance smoothes out these lines, making them feel hushed and almost reverent—reflecting the way the speaker thoughtfully considers the way the early spring light reflects across the surroundings. Adding to this effect are the soft /th/ sounds "bathes" and "thrush" and the /f/ sound in "foreheads."

Lines 8-9 are strongly sibilant as well:

> Its fresh-peeled voice
> Astonishing the brickwork.

Again, the sibilance adds a whispered quality to these lines—as though the speaker is deliberately trying not to disturb the environment. Thanks to all this sibilance, the first half of the poem feels quiet, contemplative, and still.

In lines 10-11, the phrase "spring soon" features sibilant alliteration. On the one hand, this continues the quiet tone of the first stanza. Whether the speaker is repeating this phrase as a kind of warning or hopeful prayer is up for debate, and the ambiguity is reinforced by the sibilance here—which makes the words sound both whispered and, in the snake-like hiss of that repeated /s/, vaguely threatening.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "evenings"
- **Line 3:** "Bathes," "serene"
- **Line 4:** "Foreheads," "houses"
- **Line 5:** "thrush sings"
- **Line 6:** "surrounded"
- **Line 8:** "Its fresh," "voice"
- **Line 9:** "Astonishing"
- **Line 10:** "spring soon"
- **Line 11:** "spring soon"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses personification in "Coming" to make the surrounding environment seem more vivid and real. For example, the speaker describes the nearby houses as if they were people, giving readers the sense that this seemingly suburban setting is a dynamic place that is not only alive, but also susceptible to the kind of transformative change that comes with the arrival of spring.

To that end, the speaker suggests that the evening sunlight "bathes the serene / foreheads of houses." By calling the roofs (or upper halves) of the houses "foreheads," the speaker encourages readers to see the structures as actual people. These people-like houses are "serene," a description that makes them seem sleepy. This, in turn, leads to the idea that the houses (and perhaps the entire the surrounding environment) aren't quite ready to embrace the liveliness of spring. It's as if the houses have been sleeping through a long hibernation and are now confronted by the bright light of springtime.

This aligns with the poem's second instance of personification, in which the speaker says that the chirping of a songbird in the garden "astonish[es] the brickwork" of the houses. That this sound is "astonishing" to the houses is notable because it supports the idea that they're unprepared to undergo the kind of change that spring brings on. As such, personification helps the poem convey a subtle sense of resistance to the newness of spring—a resistance that matches the speaker's own cynicism.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Light, chill and yellow, / Bathes the serene / Foreheads of houses."
- **Line 9:** "Astonishing the brickwork."

REPETITION

The speaker uses repetition at the beginning of the second stanza:

> It will be spring soon,
> It will be spring soon –

This back-to-back repetition is an example of epizeuxis, and it emphasizes the fact that it spring is on its way. How the speaker *feels* about this approach, however, is up for debate.

The repetition of this phrase ends creates a rather flat,

unenthusiastic tone that hints at the speaker's lack of excitement regarding the approach of spring. In some cases, repetition in poetry sounds musical and charming because a certain word or sound reappears in a different context and bolsters either the section's rhythm or its sense of cohesion. In this moment, though, the speaker's use of epizeuxis sounds mechanical and routine, as if the speaker has become so used to this refrain that it no longer imparts any excitement or happiness.

It seems like the speaker says "It will be spring soon" as a reminder that things are about to get better. In the end, though, the speaker is unable to truly get excited about such an idea. In turn, the repetition in this section communicates the speaker's overall cynicism.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "It will be spring soon, / It will be spring soon –"

ASSONANCE

The poem's assonance adds brief pops of color to its language. For example, note the /aw/ sound the repeats quickly in the poem's opening line:

> On longer evenings

This sound evokes a yawn, subtly reflecting the opening stanza's image of a world waking up from the darkness of winter to the "yellow" light of spring.

Another moment of assonance appears in the repetition of "It will be spring soon" in lines 10-11. The short /ih/ sound accentuates the repetitive nature of this phrase—and, in turn, makes it sound all the more like some sort of mantra or prayer that the speaker has merely *memorized* rather than actually *believes*.

The long /i/ sound then echoes in "I," "like," "childhood," "child," and "reconciling," adding a gentle rhythm and momentum to the second stanza that pulls readers forward through the poem. The consonance of the /l/ sounds in many of these words add to the effect. Also note how the word "reconciling" half rhymes with "nothing" in the next line, drawing readers' attention to both words and connecting this "reconciling"—and by implication the dawning of spring—to meaninglessness.

Finally, note how an /a/ sound also repeats three times in line 17:

> And can understand nothing

Assonance, combined with the intense consonance of the /n/ sound here, makes the line ring out strongly and forcefully, adding a sense of insistence to the idea that those who find joy in the coming spring "can understand nothing."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "On longer"
- **Line 10:** "It will," "spring"
- **Line 11:** "It will," "spring"
- **Line 12:** "I," "childhood"
- **Line 14:** "like," "child"
- **Line 16:** "reconciling"
- **Line 17:** "And can understand nothing"
- **Line 19:** "be happy"

SIMILE

The majority of the poem's deeper meaning rests upon a long simile that the speaker uses in lines 12 through 19 ("And I [...] to be happy"). In this simile, the speaker admits to feeling like a child who has just unknowingly walked in on two adults in the direct aftermath of an argument or fight of some sort. The adults laugh uncomfortably—to cover up their dispute and/or because the tension simply hasn't fully left them yet—and the child mistakes their awkwardness for genuine happiness. As such, the child "starts to be happy," unaware that this feeling of contentment is based on a false form of joy.

With this simile in mind, it becomes clear that the speaker is suspicious of any kind of happiness derived from the arrival of spring. Like the fake laughter that seems to signify actual joy to the child, the speaker believes that the various pleasures of springtime are misleading. Although the song of the thrush in the garden is pleasant and the increased sunlight of "long[]" spring evenings is pretty, the speaker remains hesitant to equate such niceties to *true* happiness. Instead, these markers of spring are like the adults' strange laughter—bringing joy only to those who "can understand nothing."

In other words, these things don't necessarily translate into lasting or meaningful forms of contentment. Rather, the many beauties of spring are little more than temporary delights, a dynamic illustrated by this simile.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-19:** "And I, whose childhood / Is a forgotten boredom, / Feel like a child / Who comes on a scene / Of adult reconciling, / And can understand nothing / But the unusual laughter, / And starts to be happy."

VOCABULARY

Bathes (Lines 3-4) - In this context, the word "bathe" describes the way the sun washes over the surrounding houses.

Thrush (Line 5) - A small songbird.

Laurel (Line 6) - A shrub with shiny green leaves.

Astonishing (Line 9) - Surprising.

Brickwork (Line 9) - A structure made of bricks. More specifically, the speaker is saying that the surrounding houses are made of brick.

Reconciling (Lines 15-16) - The act of making up with somebody after a dispute.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Coming" is a 19-line poem that doesn't adhere to any conventional poetic structure. It is made up of two uneven stanzas, the first containing 9 lines and the second containing 10. The first stanza outlines the approach of spring, setting the scene by describing the way a suburban environment seems to change with the first stirrings of warmer weather. The second stanza, on the other hand, is centered around the speaker's thoughts and feelings, making it clear that this seemingly welcome change in the weather isn't as joyous as one might expect. In this regard, the second stanza encourages readers to adopt a rather cynical attitude regarding the descriptions of spring that appear in the first stanza.

METER

"Coming" is a free verse poem and thus not written in a specific meter, though most of its lines are similar in that they're short and clipped. In particular, the speaker often achieves a somber tone by ending a line with an unstressed syllable that sounds unresolved. Consider, for instance, the first two lines:

> On longer evenings,
> Light, chill and yellow

Of course, the poem doesn't adhere to any actual meter, so trying to divide the lines into metrical feet doesn't make much sense. In these lines, though, it's quite clear that the final unstressed syllables come after stressed syllables, giving them a falling, deflated sound. This, in turn, leads to a solemn and defeated tone throughout.

The speaker also sometimes delivers especially short lines that sound terse and matter-of-fact. For instance, line 5 is made up of three monosyllabic words: "A thrush sings." Many of the poem's lines are only five syllables, including brief phrases like "It will be spring soon" in lines 10 and 11 or "Feel like a child" in line 14. These short lines create a slightly monotonous rhythm that sounds unenthusiastic, and this sheds light on the speaker's lack of excitement regarding the approach of spring. In this way, then, the unmetered rhythm of "Coming" helps convey the speaker's joyless outlook on life.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in free verse and does not follow a rhyme scheme. Readers might expect a poem about the arrival of spring—usually a happy time—to rhyme in a way that sounds musical and pleasing, but the speaker's meditations aren't actually all that joyous or celebratory. Instead, the speaker's tone is melancholic and even somewhat defeated. The lack of a rhyme scheme makes sense, since noticeable rhymes would detract from the poem's somber sound.

SPEAKER

The poem does not reveal any identifying characteristics about the speaker, so it's hard to say who, exactly, is delivering these words. All the same, readers can reasonably conclude that the speaker is in a suburban environment that is gradually beginning to show the first signs of spring. At first, this seems like something that would make the speaker happy, but the speaker later implies that any joy felt from the arrival of spring is fleeting and superficial. Accordingly, the speaker comes to seem like a rather cynical, pessimistic person. And because this cynicism is so characteristic of Philip Larkin's poetry, some readers will perhaps view the speaker as Larkin himself.

SETTING

There are two settings in the poem. The first stanza takes place in a neighborhood in the final days of winter or the early days of spring. The days are starting to get longer, but there is still a chill in the air (the light is "cold"). The speaker also mentions a "bare" garden, suggesting that it's still not quite warm and sunny enough for flowers and plants to grow back. The location is probably a suburb of some sort, given that the speaker watches the spring sunlight wash over different houses.

The second half of the poem switches settings, moving to "a scene / Of adult reconciling." The speaker imagines a child stumbling upon this scene, which conjures an image of two adults—maybe the child's parents—making up after a fight or argument. There is still tension and awkwardness in the air that the adults cover up with "unusual laughter," but the child doesn't fully understand what is happening and feels happy.

The poem equates this second setting to the early spring setting described in the first stanza. The "chill and yellow" light of the new season is like that "unusual laughter," the poem implies—a tenuous and perhaps false joy after a season of darkness.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

One of the most famous British poets of the 21st century, Philip Larkin has a reputation as a fairly cynical and bleak writer who often challenged cliché ideas about love, happiness, and life in general. This is evident in "Coming," a poem in which Larkin dismantles the idea of spring as a time of joyous rebirth and renewal. A similar kind of cynicism resurfaces in his poem "This Be The Verse," in which the speaker argues that all parents inevitably do emotional damage to their children and that, because of this, the only way for people to break out of this cycle is by dying without having children of their own. Another notably bleak sentiment arises in Larkin's poem "An Arundel Tomb," which questions whether love is actually an enduring force.

Larkin himself is considered a quintessentially British poet, which is why he's often associated with the Movement—a group of English writers in the 1950s that included people like Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, Kingsley Amis, and Ted Hughes. The characteristics that bound these writers together are admittedly difficult to articulate, since most people believe that a general British sensibility—a certain Englishness—is what united them. Still, poems like "Coming" that feature a vague sense of dissatisfaction align with the Movement's somewhat austere and contemplative attitude.

Having said that, the poem also draws influence from the Victorian Realist Thomas Hardy, whose work Larkin greatly admired. In particular, Larkin connected with Hardy's poetry and its tendency to present things in a simple way while still managing to render great feeling. In keeping with this, "Coming" is constructed in a straightforward, uncomplicated way even if it also hints at deeper emotions that are much more complex than the scene at hand.

Historical Context

"Coming" was published in 1955, meaning that it emerged ten years after the end of World War II and roughly five years before the counterculture movement of the 1960s. For the most part, the 1950s were relatively calm in England, as the country began to recover economically from World War II. In particular, the middle class began to see prosperity and security, as unemployment rates dropped significantly.

Given that "Coming" seems to take place in a suburban setting, this sense of stability is relevant to the poem. "Coming" is set in a seemingly pleasant environment; nothing especially troubling takes place in the poem, and the speaker's description of spring sunshine bathing "serene" houses enhances this sense of suburban contentment. However, the poem is actually at odds with this, since it becomes evident that the speaker doesn't derive true happiness from these surroundings.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Larkin's Life — Learn more about Philip Larkin through this overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)
- The Philip Larkin Society — Check out all things Larkin on the Philip Larkin Society's website. (http://philiplarkin.com/)
- The Paris Review Interview — Read Larkin's 1982 interview 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)
- The Cynical Poet — If you can't get enough of Larkin's specific brand of sadness and cynicism, check out the poem "Home is so Sad," which, like "Coming," takes something seemingly happy and turns it into something sad. (https://poets.org/poem/home-so-sad)
- Larkin's Portrait — Take a look at Larkin's likeness, rendered in both paintings and photograph, in the National Portrait Gallery's six portraits of the poet himself. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp05491/philip-arthur-larkin)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- An Arundel Tomb
- The Whitsun Weddings
- This Be The Verse

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