Poetry of Departures

SUMMARY

Every now and then someone tells a story they've heard from someone else (who also didn't hear it directly from the source). This story sounds like it's commemorating someone who died, except that it describes someone who decided to just chuck it all and leave their life behind. The person tells the story in a way that implies you should be impressed by this daring, soul-cleansing, earth-shattering action.

And that person isn't necessarily wrong. Everyone resents their own lives and feels like they're trapped in the homes they've created. I hate my own room, for example, which is filled with a bunch of useless stuff I picked out myself like good books and a nice bed. I hate my neat and tidy life.

So when I hear that someone just got up and left everyone behind, it makes me feel a tinge of excitement—like when I read a sexy passage in a book in which a woman undresses, or when a character gets his revenge on the bad guy. Then I think, surely I could leave it all behind too? This thought, in a way, focuses my mind, making me clear-sighted and willing to work hard.

Yes, I *could* depart today—stroll down the nut-covered country roads or stow away aboard a ship, my face growing nicely covered with stubble—if it didn't seem so inauthentic, like a totally contrived, backward move that turns life into just another object to be molded or cast aside. This new life would be just like my books and dishes: disgraceful in its perfection.

THEMES

EVERYDAY LIFE AND THE FANTASY OF ESCAPE

"Poetry of Departures" explores the tension between mundane life and the thrilling, yet deceptive, fantasy of suddenly leaving it all behind. The poem's speaker admits that there's something romantic about the idea of "just clear[ing] off": pulling up stakes at a moment's notice and starting a new, exciting life elsewhere. Yet the speaker ultimately chooses their tame life at home over the fantasy of starting fresh. Such fantasies, the poem concludes, are deeply "artificial"; life isn't an "object" that can be left behind, like books or dishware, and exchanged for something else.

The speaker feels that ordinary life is boring; most people, themselves included, arrange their lives in predictable ways. The speaker "detest[s]" their own room, with "Its specially-chosen junk," because it seems so dull and unadventurous. Their books and the bed are both "good," and their life is "in perfect order," but this doesn't mean their life is actually perfect. Rather, they make their life choices along simple and unsurprising lines, choosing the merely "good" over anything risky or chaotic. Moreover, the speaker claims that "We all hate home / And having to be there," implying that *everyone* feels dissatisfied with their lives on some level.

Because their daily routines are dull, people fantasize about getting away: leaving everything behind, perhaps changing their identity, and starting an entirely new life. It's a thrilling thought, even to the poem's staid speaker. The speaker sometimes hears accounts of people who "chucked up everything / And just cleared off," though, notably, these accounts are "fifth-hand" rather than first-hand (i.e., they might be exaggerated or false).

These spontaneous "departures" get talked about as if they are by default "audacious, purifying, / [and] Elemental"—that is, as if they restore life to some purer, more exciting state. And the speaker concedes that it *is* exciting to imagine suddenly getting up, walking out the door, and never coming back. The idea makes the speaker feel "flushed and stirred" (physically thrilled). They can imagine how, if they did undertake such a "departure," they might "swagger the nut-strewn roads" (walk from town to town without a care in the world) or "Crouch in the fo'c'sle / Stubbly with goodness" (escape as a stowaway on some ship, their beard growing as if in rebellion against the drudgery of normal life).

But the speaker ultimately disapproves of this fantasy, declaring it "artificial." That is, it's self-deceiving to imagine you can outrun yourself or your life. Sudden "departure" would represent a "deliberate step backwards," an impossible attempt to undo the life one has already lived. Starting over would mean trying "to create an object" out of one's old life—to treat it as an item one can neatly cast aside, like "Books" or "china."

The ambiguous phrasing here might also imply that it's corny and self-deluding "to create an object" out of the *new* life: that is, shape it into something admired from afar (perhaps through "fifth-hand" anecdotes). Regardless, the lesson is the same: there's no escaping the boring, burdensome realities of life. Escape fantasies might be appealing on some level, but they're also invented (in short, they're "Poetry," as the title warns!).

The speaker thus opts to stick with the life they already lead. Flirting with the idea of starting over helps them "stay / Sober and industrious"—that is, focused on what they already have. This choice comes with a heavy dose of irony: the speaker's current life isn't anything special; it just has the slight advantage of being *real*. It may be "Reprehensibly perfect" (overly tame and tidy), but discarding it altogether would be its own kind of ridiculous, perfectionist gesture. The imagined,

alternative lives are a pure fantasy, and a clichéd one at that.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Sometimes you hear, ...
... just cleared off,

The speaker begins by describing how "you"—that is, anyone—occasionally hear stories about someone running away to start a new life. This is the type of "departure" to which the poem's title refers.

From the poem's start, though, the speaker seems skeptical about the idea of suddenly chucking it all. For one thing, the speaker says that you never hear the story directly. That is, you never actually talk to someone who has *actually departed* from their old life. It's never even told *second*- or *third*-hand but rather "fifth-hand," casting doubt on the idea that anyone ever follows through with this fantasy of escaping and starting again. The further a story is from its actual source, the harder it is to trust it is true (a bit like the game of telephone).

The speaker compares this archetypal story to an "epitaph," a commemorative phrase of the kind normally found on tombstones. These "fifth-hand" stories, in a way, memorialize the person who has disappeared, treating the breakaway from employment, friends, family, and so on as so deep and permanent that it's as if that person has died. The *point* of the story is to make "you" marvel at how someone can just kill off their own life with such daring.

Notice how casually lines 3-4 describe this disappearance:

> *He chucked up everything*
> *And just cleared off,*

Both "chucked up" and "cleared off" are colloquial British expressions, and both denote a kind of willing indifference. That's part of what's supposed to be so impressive about the story: the way people can dismiss their own lives as if they mean *nothing*. That heavy /uh/ assonance in "chucked up" makes this departure seem all the more sudden and abrupt.

LINES 5-8

And always the ...
... Elemental move.

In the second half of the first stanza, the speaker describes *how* this story of escape tends to be told.

The person telling the story usually sounds enthralled, "Certain you [the listener] approve" of the idea of "chuck[ing] up everything" and running away to start a new life. It's as though the person speaking gets to live out the escape fantasy vicariously, feeling some of the thrill and liberation of disappearing without a trace simply by talking about it.

The speaker implies that most people find this story enticing; after all, who hasn't dreamt for a moment of being someone else? The idea is so common as to be a cliché. "You" are supposed to marvel at the "move," seeing it as something "audacious, purifying, / Elemental."

These adjectives portray these "departures" as daring and, perhaps, cleansing for the soul (as if one can leave behind all the baggage that builds up over a lifetime). "Elemental" is a more ambiguous word. It can mean fundamentally important (as though these people are elevated above the ones too cowardly to make that break), or something more natural/supernatural (e.g., a lightning strike or some act of magic). All these possible meanings express a sense of awe and admiration. The asyndeton here speeds up the list, conveying just how exciting this departure supposedly is.

The end rhyme between "approve" and "move" adds music to the poem, but it also hints, already, that there might be something superficial or inauthentic about this departure. Rhyme is a deliberate *choice* in a poem, a way to make it sound more, well, *poetic*—less like ordinary, everyday language. This chimes with the idea the speaker will express later on: that these "departures" are "artificial" attempts to curate one's life.

LINES 9-11

And they are ...
... to be there:

In the second stanza, the speaker concedes that there *is* something enticing about the idea of leaving it all behind: "And they are right, I think" (line 9). The "they" refers to the people from the previous stanza: those who excitedly talk about the people who have escaped their own lives and expect "you" to be just as impressed.

Notice how the end-stop after "think" gives the poem a brief pause, as if the speaker takes a beat to sit with their own admiration for these departures. The speaker then states:

> We all hate home
> And having to be there:

In other words, *everyone* kind of resents the life they lead from time to time! "Home" can seem dull and boring, and "having to be there" can feel like voluntary imprisonment. Notice how the alliteration of "hate home" and "having" have an exasperated and spiteful quality, as though the poem huffs with annoyance.

For the moment, the poem is agreeing with those who think fleeing from one's own life is an attractive proposition.

LINES 12-15

I detest my ...
... in perfect order:

The speaker elaborates on the idea that "We all hate home," declaring that they "detest," or utterly loathe, their own "room." One's room is, presumably, a deeply personal space. Indeed, the speaker notes the "specially-chosen junk" that fills the space, nodding to the fact that they *made* this room for themselves. This speaker is sardonically pointing out how even the things we think we love, the "good books" and the "good bed," can at times feel mundane, familiar to the point of disgust.

The speaker further undermines these objects by describing them as "junk," acknowledging that, on some level, they don't really mean much at all. This idea that one's possessions are meaningless is essential to the mythical story of "departures"; this "junk" is what those supposedly brave folks leave behind when they decide to start over again.

The specific "junk" the speaker mentions also suggest a relatively predictable, unadventurous lifestyle. The books are "good," the bed is "good"; they're pleasant and functional, but they're not *mind-blowing*.

Note how the parallelism and alliteration in "The good books, the good bed" help to convey the monotony of the speaker's life. This line and the following also both include a caesura right in the middle; three words sitting on either side of a comma, suggesting balance, that everything is in its right place.

The speaker extends their dislike to their "life, in [its] perfect order." Or rather, *for* its "perfect order." Their life has no element of surprise, no risk, no danger—everything is just *nice*. The speaker doesn't really think that their life is "perfect," just that it represents a staid and steady sense of normality. It's the *opposite* of the fantasy of departure.

Readers shouldn't take the speaker entirely at face value; Larkin's poems are known for their dry wit, sarcasm, and irony. And here, the speaker isn't necessarily being totally sincere. They're gently mocking the contrivance of their "perfect life," even though they will later argue that the idea of escape is just as contrived and artificial.

LINES 16-20

So to hear ...
... that you bastard;

The enjambment of line 16 represents the poem's own rebellion against convention and restriction, the poet disregarding the "rules" of the poem's form:

> So to hear it said
> *He walked out on the whole crowd*

The enjambment conveys the wild, unpredictable burst of energy that seems to possess those people who can suddenly up and leave their entire lives behind.

Hearing about this fantasy of "departure" makes the speaker "flushed and stirred." In other words, the speaker feels a tinge of excitement at the thought of running away.

The phrase "flushed and stirred" sounds rather erotic as well, which perhaps explains why the next line compares the experience of hearing about "departures" to reading about a sexual encounter: "*Then she undid her dress*." The speaker provides another simile to illustrate what it's like to hear about these escapes: it's akin to reading/saying "*Take that you bastard*." In other words, the speaker feels a similar excitement to the idea of someone taking revenge against a bad guy.

Note that these quoted lines are both clichés. Both could easily appear in dime store novels; they don't feel like fresh, vivid descriptions of *real life*. By associating the fantasy of "departures" with these two tired tropes, the speaker subtly argues that the notion of escaping one's life—and even one's own self—is hackneyed and unimaginative.

LINES 21-24

Surely I can, ...
... I'd go today,

The speaker reflects on the possibility of making their own escape, their own clean break with the past. If this hypothetical "He" can do it—that is, the mythical person who people talk about when they tell this whole "departure" story—then surely the speaker can, too. It's just a case of getting up from the table, walking out the door, and never coming back.

The speaker poses this as a rhetorical question: "Surely I can, if he did?" "Departure" seems risky and dangerous, but also pretty simple and straightforward. Clearly, though, the speaker *hasn't* wanted to "depart" thus far: they still live in that room with its "specially-chosen junk." The question, then, gives the speaker a chance to explain *why* they've never "chucked up everything / And just cleared off." The poem reaches its turning point, where it's about to shift direction from a critique of everyday life to a rejection of the fantasy of starting over.

The fantasy still has its uses, though. It helps the speaker "stay / Sober and industrious"—that is, clear-eyed and hard-working. Notice how the enjambment on "stay" lets the word briefly, evocatively linger in the air:

> And that helps me stay
> Sober and industrious.

This rejection of "departures" affirms everyday life in all its mundane, repetitive glory. That end-stop after "industrious" makes the statement sound strong and uncluttered, reflecting the speaker's certainty that they *don't* wish to escape their life as it is now; they want to *stay*. Larkin once criticized the idea of

even going on holiday, stating, "I don't want to transcend the commonplace."

Line 24 sets up the entire last stanza. The speaker *would* "go today"—that is, depart—were it not for... (read on to find out!). This enjambment, which mirrors the break between lines 16 and 17, creates a dramatic little pause that makes the speaker's eventual rejection of the "poetry of departures" all the more rhetorically powerful—and cutting.

LINES 25-28

Yes, swagger the ...
... weren't so artificial,

The speaker reveals precisely *why* they don't want to follow the example of those who have pulled up stakes and left their old lives behind.

First, though, the speaker indulges in the fantasy a little, imagining life after "departure" in intentionally over-the-top language. On this new life adventure, the speaker could "swagger the nut-strewn roads"—strut through the countryside, their roads covered in the nuts that have fallen from the trees. But the language here makes the whole image seem comic and a little absurd, as though it's taken from some cartoon adaptation of Huckleberry Finn.

The other aspect of the fantasy is equally ridiculous. The speaker imagines themselves "Crouch[ing] in the fo'c'sle" of a ship. "Fo'c'sle" is an abbreviation of "forecastle," meaning the front part of a sailing ship, traditionally where the sailors' quarters would be. In other words, the speaker would be a stowaway, hitching a ride across the oceans to some far-off land. It's a kind of pirate-y adventure novel situation.

The speaker's face would start to grow "Stubbly with goodness," its roughness displaying the bold and rebellious undertaking of "departure." "Goodness" is ironic, gently mocking the way people seem to be so impressed by the idea that someone could just their old life behind.

But just like growing a bit of stubble isn't truly an act of rebellion, neither is this whole notion of departing. Indeed, it's here that the other part of the poem's title reveals its meaning. These imagined scenarios are evocative, sure, but they're also clearly invented. They're *poetic*, but none in the way that Larkin's poetry is poetic: the word here means something more like inauthentically romantic.

At this point, the sentence still needs a main verb. The enjambment between lines 25-27 builds grammatical tension that finally resolves with the rest of line 27 and line 28:

> Stubbly with goodness, if
> It weren't so artificial,

Therein lies the rub: the whole idea of outrunning one's own life is fake and inauthentic, the speaker says, and deeply so. For the speaker, it's as clichéd and conformist as staying put. Notice how the subtle rhyme between "fo'c'sle" and "artificial" subconsciously confirms that the whole stowaway image was constructed by the speaker: it's not a real option.

LINES 29-32

Such a deliberate ...
... Reprehensibly perfect.

In the last four lines, the speaker does away with the idea of "departures" once and for all. The whole fantasy of starting life over seems like

> Such a deliberate step backwards
> To create an object:

The speaker dislikes the notion of rejecting the past because it denies the forward march of time. Someone can leave the place where they live, but they can't leave behind the fact that they lived there. To stick with day-to-day life is, at least, an acceptance of reality.

Recall the negative connotations of objects in the second stanza: "The good books, the good bed" represented a boring, unadventurous life lived "in perfect order." *Departure* is meant to be a disavowal of those objects but ironically creates a *new* object out of life itself. Life becomes a *made thing*, something "specially-chosen." The poem implies cheesy and inauthentic "to create an object" out of life, to shape it into something people might admire from afar (and talk excitedly about through "fifth-hand" anecdotes). Starting over would also mean treating the old life as an object that can be cast aside, like "Books" or "china." Running away is just another cliché.

SYMBOLS

SPECIALLY-CHOSEN JUNK

The various possessions the speaker mentions throughout the poem—"good books, the good bed"—symbolize the mundanity of the speaker's life. This life is "good" but not great, the possessions suggest; it's dull in its predictability and perfection.

The speaker calls these items "specially-chosen junk," mocking themselves for curating such a boring life. The speaker "chose" to be surrounded by items that, presumably, make them content, yet they're "junk" in the sense that they're shallow, familiar comforts that keep the speaker tied to a particular place. Possesions such as "books" and "China" are like weights, the poem implies, preventing people from being their true, swashbuckling selves. The idea of leaving all these *things* behind represents leaving one's perfectly curated life behind; "chuck[ing] up everything" represents a break with the past, a

fresh start.

And yet, the speaker ultimately argues, that's not entirely true. These belongings might be boring, but they also represent an *authentic* life. These possessions at least speak to something real, rather than clichéd fantasy; they reflect the reality of someone's life as they've lived it thus far. Life goes with people—it's not something that can be simply packed up and left behind in a cupboard. Things like dishware, furniture, and clothes might be boring, but at least they don't pretend to be something they're not.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-14:** "I detest my room, / Its specially-chosen junk, / The good books, the good bed,"
- **Line 31:** "Books; china;"

POETIC DEVICES

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton adds to the poem's casual, conversational tone. The device first appears in lines 7-8:

> This audacious, purifying,
> Elemental move.

The speaker is describing how people are expected to react to the idea of someone running away from it all. The lack of any conjunction here speeds up the list of adjectives, creating momentum and excitement. The device recreates the awed tone that tends to accompany these mythical "departure" stories.

The asyndeton in line 14 again mirrors the poem's content. Here, the speaker describes their "specially-chosen junk":

> The good books, the good bed,

Placing each item on either side of a caesura, without any conjunction between them, creates a sense of balance and steadiness. The line is neatly divided into two equal halves (three words on each side), evoking the staid predictability of the speaker's everyday life.

The poem's final two lines feature more asyndeton:

> Books; china; a life
> Reprehensibly perfect.

Now, the list feels less breathless and more boring. The speaker nonchalantly places "a life" right alongside "Books" and "china," the asyndeton not allowing for any hierarchical distinction between these things. This, in turn, reflects the speaker's point: that "departing" just turns life itself into another object, something no different from the carefully chosen books and dishware with which people fill their homes.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "This audacious, purifying, / Elemental move."
- **Lines 12-13:** "I detest my room, / Its specially-chosen junk,"
- **Line 14:** "The good books, the good bed,"
- **Lines 25-27:** "swagger the nut-strewn roads, / Crouch in the fo'c'sle / Stubbly with goodness,"
- **Lines 31-32:** "Books; china; a life / Reprehensibly perfect."

ENJAMBMENT

Many of the sentences in "Poetry of Departures" unfold over multiple short lines, creating enjambment. This enjambment creates tension between the poem's *form* and language's attempts to escape/resist that form—its refusal to be hemmed in by things like line breaks.

For example, the final four lines of the first stanza are all enjambed, creating a sense of building excitement and restlessness. This fits the poem's context, as the speaker is listening to people excitedly discuss pulling up stakes and starting over.

The enjambment across stanzas 2 and 3 is particularly striking:

> So to hear it said
> *He walked out on the whole crowd*

Grammatically speaking, there should be a comma after "said." Instead, the poem barrels forward over the line break, evoking the force with which this "He" suddenly walks out on his life.

There are some other, more subtle moments of enjambment as well. Note, for example, how the break between lines 22 and 23 creates a little extra emphasis on the word "stay:"

> And that helps me stay
> Sober and industrious.

For a brief moment, that "stay" is suspended in the white space of the page.

Note, too, that some lines use end-stops to counter this frequent enjambment. Line 9, for example, concludes with a firm full stop:

> And they are right, I think.

The speaker seems to be taking a beat to piece their argument together.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "sound / Certain"
- **Lines 6-7:** "approve / This"
- **Lines 7-8:** "purifying, / Elemental"
- **Lines 16-17:** "said / He"
- **Lines 17-18:** "crowd / Leaves"
- **Lines 22-23:** "stay / Sober"
- **Lines 24-25:** "today, / Yes"
- **Lines 26-27:** "fo'c'sle / Stubbly"
- **Lines 27-28:** "if / It"
- **Lines 31-32:** "life / Reprehensibly"

IRONY

"Poetry of Departures" is filled with irony. The speaker indulges the "poetry of departures"—that is, the allure of the *idea* of running away and starting over—only to knock it down at the end. The poem reframes this myth of escaping one's own life as just another predictable cliché—one that's no different from the staid life that running away supposedly rejects.

The opening stanza sets up this irony, as the speaker recounts how they sometimes hear about how someone else has "chucked up everything/ And just cleared off." The person telling the story also assumes that "you"—that is, the person listening—approve of the escape, finding it "audacious, purifying, / [and] Elemental."

For a while, it seems like the speaker is buying into this idea; they admit that it's normal to occasionally hate your boring, regular life. But in the end, the speaker rejects the romance of "departure." Ironically, the speaker argues, there is nothing *truly* daring or adventurous about trying to outrun one's own life. People think of these departures as these incredibly brave, special breaks with the past, but, in fact, they're just as predictable and pretentious as staying put and buying nice things for the house.

The speaker spells this out clearly in the last stanza. There is a big difference between the *idea* of running away and the reality. Ironically, "departures" create an "object" out of the life left behind—turning that old life into just another piece of "china" to stack in the cupboard, out of sight. Departing isn't some bold forward dash into some wild, great unknown, but a "deliberate step backwards," in the speaker's mind: just another attempt to contrive a "perfect" life.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** "Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand, / As epitaph: / He chucked up everything / And just cleared off, / And always the voice will sound / Certain you approve / This audacious, purifying, / Elemental move."
- **Lines 24-32:** "But I'd go today, / Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads, / Crouch in the fo'c'sle / Stubbly with goodness, if / It weren't so artificial, / Such a deliberate step backwards / To create an object: / Books; china; a life / Reprehensibly perfect."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem asks just one rhetorical question, but it comes at an important moment:

> Surely I can, if he did?

The act of just getting up, leaving one's things behind, and walking out of the door without saying goodbye doesn't seem *that* difficult. If this hypothetical person has managed it, surely the speaker can do it too—right? For a moment, running away seems like a real, tangible possibility.

The point of the question is not really to find an answer, however, but to provide a change of direction. Entertaining the idea of "departing" allows the speaker to switch gears and work through the argument *against* the whole fantasy of escaping one's own life. It makes the reader wonder why the speaker *doesn't* "walk[] out on the whole crowd," when it seems so exciting, possible, and even easy.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "Surely I can, if he did?"

SIMILE

In lines 16 to 17, the speaker describes how they feel when they listen to the "fifth-hand" stories of people suddenly quitting their old lives and running away. The speaker *does* find the idea a little exciting, admitting that it "leaves [them feeling] flushed and stirred." "Flushed and stirred" suggests a bodily reaction, a quickening of the pulse as if in the presence of something dangerous and unpredictable.

The speaker compares this feeling through simile to a similar feeling that they get when reading books or possibly watching movies. Specifically, they get a similar tingle of excitement when they reach a sexy scene or the moment when the bad guy finally gets his comeuppance:

> So to hear it said
> *He walked out on the whole crowd*
> Leaves me flushed and stirred,
> Like *Then she undid her dress*
> Or *Take that you bastard;*

Sure, both examples represent exciting moments. But they're also clichés: "Then she undid her dress" could be lifted from some dime store novel, while "Take that you bastard" probably gets said in hundreds of old detective movies. The simile thus

draws attention to the fact that the whole escape fantasy—the idea of running away—is itself a tired trope, recycled and rehashed in a way that the speaker ultimately finds inauthentic.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-20:** "So to hear it said / He walked out on the whole crowd / Leaves me flushed and stirred, / Like / Then she undid her dress / Or / Take that you bastard;"

VOCABULARY

Fifth-hand (Line 1) - A story told about someone five people removed from "you" (a joke riffing on "second-hand").

Epitaph (Lines 1-2, Line 2) - Commemorative words about someone who has died.

Chucked Up (Line 3) - Threw away/discarded.

Cleared Off (Lines 3-4) - Ran away.

Audacious (Lines 7-8) - Daring and a little wild.

Elemental (Lines 7-8) - Vital, powerful, and/or magical.

Flushed and stirred (Lines 17-18) - Excited and even a little embarrassed.

Sober and industrious (Lines 22-23) - Clear of mind and wanting to work hard.

Swagger (Line 25) - Walk confidently and carefree, as if you own the place.

Nut-strewn (Line 25) - Covered in nuts (as if they had been thrown all over the place).

Fo'c'sle (Lines 26-27) - Traditional abbreviation of "forecastle," which is a maritime word relating to the front part of a sail ship (where the sailors's quarters would normally be, and thus the place the speaker would hypothetically hide themselves).

Stubbly (Lines 26-27) - Marked by stubble (the early stages of hair growth).

Reprehensibly (Lines 31-32) - Condemnable; worthy of hatred.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Poetry of Departures" consists of four octets, or eight-line stanzas.

The form provides one of the ways that the poem juxtaposes the two main ideas at stake: staying put in one's normal, everyday life vs. escaping it all and starting again. The stanzas are like little boxes or rooms (in fact, *stanza* means "room" in Italian), reflective of the supposedly restrictive nature of regular life. The poem's short lines seem to wrestle against this shape through enjambment and caesura. In two spots, the speaker's words actually break *across* two different stanzas, as though trying to escape the rigid confines of the poem:

> So to hear it said
> *He walked out on the whole crowd*
> [...]
> But I'd go today,
> Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,

There's a kind of push and pull going on, an attempt to break free that never quite succeeds.

METER

"Poetry of Departures" might look like it's written in free verse, but it actually uses a rough accentual meter: most (though not all) lines contain two or three stressed syllables, but a differing number of unstressed syllables. Here's the first stanza as an example:

> Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand,
> As epitaph:
> *He chucked up everything*
> *And just cleared off,*
> And always the voice will sound
> Certain you approve
> This audacious, purifying,
> Elemental move.

This stanza, like the others, could be scanned in a few ways, but it's clear that the sounds of the poem aren't random. The poem sounds quite conversational yet has a subtle underlying pulse to it.

RHYME SCHEME

Though the reader might not even notice it at first, there is a regular rhyme scheme at work throughout "Poetry of Departures": each stanza runs ABCBADCD. Most of the rhymes are decidedly slant, sharing nothing but some final consonance (as in "epitaph"/"off" or "fifth-hand"/"sound"). Still, there's a pattern at work in each stanza. Here's stanza 1 as an example:

> [...] fifth-hand, A
> [...] epitaph: B
> [...] *everything* C
> [...] *off,* B
> [...] sound A
> [...] approve D
> [...] purifying, C
> [...] move. D

Given how subtle the rhymes are, it's probably not until "approve"/"move" that the reader first recognizes that the poem *is* rhymed at all! As with the poem's rough accentual meter, this use of rhyme makes "Poetry of Departures" sound at once musical and conversational, at once carefully constructed *and* free-flowing.

It's worth thinking about the rhyme scheme in relation to the debate at the heart of the poem: is it better to run away and start a new, supposedly freer life, or stay in the boring one you already have? Rhymes are "specially-chosen" and might represent the "perfect order" that running away supposedly rebels against. The frequent use of slant rhymes could be its own minor rebellion against poetic form, something the poet stretches without breaking altogether.

SPEAKER

"Poetry of Departures," like much of Larkin's poetry, is written in the first person. Readers don't have to take the speaker as being Larkin himself in order to understand the poem, but the speaker's values line up pretty neatly with Larkin's own. Larkin once said, "I don't want to transcend the commonplace"—which is basically what lies behind the clichéd idea of starting again.

In any case, the speaker is the first to admit that their life is kind of boring. They acknowledge the way their room reflects their personality with its "specially-chosen junk," including "good books" and a "good bed." Everything about the speaker's life is nice and agreeable, rather than daring and adventurous. Ultimately, though, the speaker accepts the value of living the "reprehensibly perfect" life you've already got. Rejecting your life to start over, the speaker claims, is "artificial"—as "specially-chosen" as anything else.

SETTING

"Poetry of Departures" doesn't take place in any specific location or at any specific time. That said, it does contrast two very different settings.

There's "home," which, according to the poem, "We all hate." Home represents regular, everyday life. The speaker's "room" is filled with "good books," a "good bed," and all the other "specially-chosen junk" with which people tend to surround themselves. Ironically, such a space can become utterly loathsome to its occupant; despite carefully crafting this home, its "perfect order" can feel stiflingly boring and predictable.

The fantasy of escaping this day-to-day life *seems* to offer an antidote to the drudgery of "home." The poem implies that people admire those who suddenly leave it all behind to start over again. These "departures" are usually presented as a kind of daring adventure, a bold break from the drudgery that keeps people from living their lives to the fullest. The speaker indulges in the idea a little, but with a touch of mockery, imagining how they'd "swagger the nut-strewn roads" and "Crouch in the fo'c'sle" of some ship as it sails across the ocean. To the speaker, these fantasies are ultimately as clichéd and "artificial" as just staying put. The poem implies that there's nothing inherently more authentic about building a "perfect" fantasy than building a "perfect[ly] regular life.

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.

"Poetry of Departure" appears in *The Less Deceived* alongside other well-known favorites like "Toads," "Deceptions," and "I Remember, I Remember." Many of the collection's major themes are on display here, including self-deception, the mundanity of everyday existence, and the fear of mediocrity. The speaker's attachment to their "room," despite their evident resentment towards it, also foreshadows the repetitive, hermetic lifestyle on display in a later Larkin poem, "Mr Bleaney."

Larkin gained a reputation as both a brilliant stylist and a literary curmudgeon, and he was strongly associated with an attitude of blunt realism bordering on bleak cynicism (though some of his poems, including "An Arundel Tomb" and "The Whitsun Weddings" itself, contain redemptive notes as well). While Larkin doesn't buy into what he sees as the clichéd deceptions that often make life bearable, he *does* value everyday existence. In an interview with biographer John Haffenden, he once remarked, "I don't want to transcend the commonplace"—which, perhaps, neatly sums up the view of the speaker in "Poetry of Departures."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Following the hardships of World War II, along with the first phase of the decolonization movement that dissolved the British Empire, the UK found itself in reduced circumstances. Having narrowly avoided bankruptcy after the war, Britain was slow to recover economically and entered an "age of austerity" that included rationing of food and raw materials. Prosperity returned to the country during the 1950s, when Larkin published *The Less Deceived*, but the memory of wartime belt-

tightening remained, along with the sense that Britain's days as a global superpower were over.

Larkin was an Oxford University graduate from an affluent middle-class family. But his generation witnessed both the austerity years and the subsequent boom years—which brought, for example, a nationwide increase in home ownership, buoyed by government investment in the construction of new homes—and his poetry reflects its time and place in many subtle ways.

Larkin lived for a while in bedsits (a.k.a. bed-sitting rooms), a form of cheap lodging whose popularity in Britain increased after the war, which might explain the speaker's reference to "my room" rather than, say, "my house." However, Larkin—like many Britons during the postwar decades of renewed prosperity—evidently aspired to better circumstances. He eventually moved into a more spacious flat in Hull, where he remained for nearly two decades, and eventually bought his own house in 1974. Still, for most of his career, he lived modestly (despite his growing literary fame), and he remained a bachelor until he died.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the poem by Larkin himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsYy3Bui1Kk)
- Larkin at the British Library — Browse the resources of the Philip Larkin Collection at the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/philip-larkin#)
- A Larkin Documentary — Watch the 2003 documentary "Philip Larkin: Love and Death in Hull." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqa6L22m0rY)
- An Interview with the Poet — Watch poet John Betjeman interview Philip Larkin in 1964. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Coe11pgoj8E)
- A Biography of the Poet — Learn more about Larkin's life and work courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- Afternoons
- An Arundel Tomb
- A Study of Reading Habits
- Church Going
- Coming
- MCMXIV
- Mr Bleaney
- The Trees
- The Whitsun Weddings
- This Be The Verse
- Water

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