

UNIT-5

POEM-1

NEXT, PLEASE

-PHILIP LARKIN

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching; every day
Till then we say,

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear
Sparkling armada of promises draw near.
How slow they are! And how much time they waste,
Refusing to make haste!

Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks
Of disappointment, for, though nothing balks
Each big approach, leaning with brasswork prinked,
Each rope distinct,

Flagged, and the figurehead wit golden tits
Arching our way, it never anchors; it's
No sooner present than it turns to past.
Right to the last

We think each one will heave to and unload
All good into our lives, all we are owed
For waiting so devoutly and so long.
But we are wrong:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.

In classic Philip Larkin style, *Next, Please* is a bleak reflection on life and the inevitability of death. He argues that people spend too long fixated on the future, forgetting to live in the present. In this poem he looks at people who have wasted their present, waiting for a future that never comes. In an incredibly depressing poem, Larkin implores the reader to focus on the present, before it's too late. The entire poem can be read [here](#).

Stylistic Elements in Next, Please

Next, Please finds itself upon the extended metaphor of ships in the distance representing the future. This far off 'armada' is glorified, with Larkin's imagery painting the sought future as something remarkable and beautiful. He depicts people as waiting on the shores of the present, looking out over an ocean, longing for their futures. Larkin continues his extended metaphor until the end of the poem, where he flips the connotations of the device. Instead of representing promise, the ship in Stanza 5 is used to represent death. This sudden change from the glorified future to the harsh actuality of approaching death is incredibly depressing.

The Title – 'Next, Please'

The title, 'Next, Please', effectively summarises the sense of urgency the people feel within the poem. Larkin categorises the characters of the poem, indeed 'we', as impatiently waiting for the future to arrive. The use of the imperative 'next' suggests a tone of impatience, with the title demanding the arrival of the future, similarly to how the people within the poem are also eagerly waiting. In this poem 'Next' symbolises the future, with the demand for its arrival suggesting a dangerous disregard of the present. At core, this poem is Larkin pointing out the stupidity of asking for the future instead of enjoying the present. While the future does indeed draw closer, so does the inevitability of death.

Analysis of Next, Please

Stanza One

A tone of impatience, first suggested within the title, is instantly communicated through the word 'eager' within the first line. This tone of impatience is continued throughout *Next, Please*, characterising the poem.

Within the first line, Larkin uses the pronoun 'we' to group the reader within those about which he is talking. Larkin believes that all people, reader included, have this obsession with what the future will bring. We can see that he frowns on this 'habit of expectancy' through the preceding adjective, 'bad'. This poem acts as a warning, he wants the reader to focus on the present instead of the future.

The ever-nearing future is Larkin's key focus in *Next, Please*. The 'always approaching' future draws nearer 'every day'. Yet, 'we' are impatient of this slow daily progress. The use of, 'every day, suggest closeness between the present and future. Yet, the line break actually serves to drive apart the two concepts. 'Till', on a new line, is emphasised. The far off impossibility of the future is described through the ambiguous word. It is within this line, 'Till then we say', that a glimpse of Larkin's depressing view is revealed. Larkin suggests that the future is not close at all, time waiting for its arrival is time wasted.

Stanza Two

Stanza two is where the concept of Larkin's extended metaphor begins to take shape. The 'sparkling armada' of boats is an idolisation of the future, with the ships representing possible futures. Larkin still talks through the perspective of 'we', and the reader is drawn into the fascination of the beautiful future. Indeed, the imagery of 'sparkling' and the grandeur or 'armada' elevate the beauty of these future 'promises', romanticising the future. The impatience of 'we' is again shown in this paragraph, with the two exclamations (L7+8) reflecting the eagerness.

Larkin creates a certain divide between 'We' and 'Them' within this Stanza. 'We', those who passively wait for the future, and the future actively drawing nearer. This seeming reversal, with the future being the thing moving towards us allows 'we' to take on a passive role. We believe that it is not our duty to chase down the future, expecting and waiting for it to arrive. This is the core of Larkin's argument, and where he finds frustration. 'How slow they are!', 'how much time they waste' – is a picture of humanity denying that it is actually us wasting our own time. Instead of taking responsibility, we blame something else, taking a back-seat in our own lives.

Stanzas Three & Four

These two stanzas hold the majority of the romanticisation of the future. Yet, it is also here that Larkin describes the harsh reality and punctures this idolisation. Larkin paints a beautiful picture of the nearing ships, representing the glorious future. 'Golden tits' suggests wealth, but is also sexualisation of the future – romanticised right up until the end of its approach.

Yet the ship never docks, the future never arrives as wanted. Although the future 'arch[es]' towards 'we', it 'never anchors' – the disappointment palpable. Larkin uses negative semantics, 'wretched', 'disappointment', 'never' to describe the bitter realisation of 'we' that what they have been waiting for has eluded them. We have realised, all too late, that the present has turned to the past. Larkin suggests that time slips through your fingers if you are constantly fixated on the future. The romanticisation of the unknown future is toxic, as it draws focus away from the present.

Stanza Five

This paragraph is introspective, again relying on the 'we' pronoun. He talks about how we expect the future to arrive and bring us what we desire. But this is not the case, 'we are wrong'. The grammatical isolation of this line, 'But we are wrong:' is a moment of clarity within *Next, Please*. Whereas 'we' are those who romanticised the future, this is a flash of reality. Preceded by an end stop and coming at the end of the stanza, this line is given a solemn

emphasis. The short, monosyllabic sentence is cripplingly depressing after the beautiful imagery of the last few paragraphs.

The double use of so: ‘so devoutly’, ‘so long’ summarises the problem in focusing on the future. The ‘we’ in the poem spends ‘so’ much time idolising the future they forgot to think about the present. A whole lifetime wasted by waiting and waiting for something that never came.

Stanza Six

After the sombre tone of Stanza 5, this stanza reflects the harsh reality of life – the inevitability of death. Bleak, right? At this point in the poem, the illusion of the future has been shattered. Instead, the extended metaphor of ships is subverted into one describing death. While ‘we’ have been waiting for the ‘sparkling armada’ of the future, the only thing that has been getting closer is ‘one ship’ – the ‘black-sailed’ figure of death.

This stanza is bitterly depressing. The sheer still force of death, is characterised by a ‘huge and bridless silence’. Larkin employs a daunting, and terribly quiet, image of death drawing nearer and nearer. The final line compounds this horrible stillness, with the lack of movement, ‘no waters breed or break’, attributing to the complete nothingness of death. Death arrives where the future did not.

In conclusion, romanticisation of the future is a dangerous game. Larkin urges the reader to break out of the ‘we’, to grip the present and not let go. Depressing or enlightening? I’m not so sure.

POEM-2

CHURNING DAY

-SEAMUS HEANEY

A thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough-cast,
hardened gradually on top of the four crocks

that stood, large pottery bombs, in the small pantry.
After the hot brewery of gland, cud and udder,
cool porous earthenware fermented the buttermilk
for churning day, when the hooped churn was scoured
with plumping kettles and the busy scrubber
echoed daintily on the seasoned wood.
It stood then, purified, on the flagged kitchen floor.

Out came the four crocks, spilled their heavy lip
of cream, their white insides, into the sterile churn.
The staff, like a great whisky muddler fashioned
in deal wood, was plunged in, the lid fitted.
My mother took first turn, set up rhythms
that slugged and thumped for hours. Arms ached.
Hands blistered. Cheeks and clothes were spattered
with flabby milk.

Where finally gold flecks
began to dance. They poured hot water then,
sterilized a birchwood-bowl
and little corrugated butter-spades.
Their short stroke quickened, suddenly
a yellow curd was weighting the churned up white,
heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight
that they fished, dripping, in a wide tin strainer,
heaped up like gilded gravel in the bowl.

The house would stink long after churning day,
acid as a sulphur mine. The empty crocks
were ranged along the wall again, the butter
in soft printed slabs was piled on pantry shelves.

And in the house we moved with gravid ease,
our brains turned crystals full of clean deal churns,
the splash and gurgle of the sour-breathed milk,
the pat and slap of small spades on wet lumps.

CRITICAL APPRECIATION:

This poem reflects Heaney's memory of growing up in the family farm and witnessing the buttermaking process -a regular part of the life of the farm. The poem uses a range of imagery -the sounds and smells of the farm are clear in the writing, as is a small boy's wonder and fear at the process, for this is one of the poems laden with military imagery – the 'pottery bombs' for example, which permeates many poems in this collection – Trout, Advancement of Learning, Digging. In these pre-Troubles poems Heaney is on record as suggesting such imagery was derived from the relative proximity of WW2 and the constant television programmes dedicated to such things, yet a Catholic growing up in Protestant Northern Ireland cannot have been unaware of the potential for violence inherent in the relative peace of rural Co. Derry. No doubt the bombs refers both to the potential danger of explosion as the milk fermented within as well as the distinctive shape of the vessels themselves.

Structurally the poem comes close to free-verse in the lack of a clear rhythmic pattern, which is not to say lines are devoid of their own strong rhythmic tread, as in the opening of the second stanza when the crocks emerge like characters in Disney's Fantasia. The march of the crocks can be scanned thus: 'Out came/ the four/ crocks, spilled/ their heav/y lip' a mixture of spondees and Iambs recreating the heavy labour emphasised by the caesura in the middle of the third foot, as though resting from the exertion. Elsewhere, Heaney plays with a half line at the mid-point, to draw attention to the miraculous moment when the 'flabby milk' becomes 'gold flecks' which began to dance for joy and the whole family breathe again, as the butter becomes reality. For butter really is seen as a life-giving element. It is 'coagulated sunlight' a metaphor which juxtaposes the negative and positive but focuses on the wonder of the butter, stirred by a 'whisky muddler' – apt since whisky is also the 'water of life'.

Heaney opens by linking the milk in the churns with the landscape, establishing a typical sense of being derived from the very land itself – the crust is reminiscent of ‘limestone rough cast’ a building material and in contrast to the metaphorical machinery which produced the milk in the first place. The wonderfully alliterative ‘brewery of gland, cud and udder’ represents a cow and is the voice of the older man who can see past the affection which might be felt for such animals to their practical purpose – the voice of the speaker in ‘the Early Purges’ who can countenance the death of the innocents as a necessary part of rural life.

The process is brought to life by alliteration and imagery as the poem continues. Onomatopoeia is used as the ‘plumping’ kettles – giving both sound and shape – are contrasted with the light and speedy ‘busy scrubber’, again giving a clear idea of the sounds heard emanating from within. In contrast again, the battalion of crocks are poured into a huge churn, and the work required is emphasised in a series of short sentences split across lines 14-17. The verbs are effortful – thumped, ached’ and the stops seem to signify the need for pauses to catch one’s breath in this labourious process which has until now been told in long, flowing sentences of description.

The actual buttermaking is again a thing of contrast – the milk is ‘flabby’ and is vomited forth from the ‘white insides’ of the crocks into a newly sterile, indeed, ‘purified’ churn, as though prepared for a religious ceremony. As Heaney recalls his mother working valiantly, he is rewarded with a thing of wonder. Across the split half lines, the miracle takes place. The closeness of the poet’s mother is replaced by a more distant third person plural as the boy is shut out of the ritual on a personal level, much as he is prevented from indulging his love of wells in Personal Helicon. Still the imagery of religion continues – a ‘birchwood’ bowl is sterilized ready for the next stage. Heaney is beautifully precise in his memory and his love of the rural life emerges in the memory of specific woods used in elements of the ritual activity. The line of perfect’ nimble iambic pentameter at ‘and **little corrugated butter spades**’ serves to highlight the rhythm of this next step in the process – light work, requiring delicate treatment- leading to the emergence of the ‘gilded gravel’, the simile likening this discovery to prospectors panning for gold.

However, after this wonder, reality bites. The final stanza sees an older voice recognising the mundanity of the action and the unpleasant by-product – the smell. Heaney places the surprisingly harsh verb ‘stink’ as a stressed syllable in a line of iambic pentameter, as though suddenly realising the truth and accentuating it through the glottal attack on the trochee which opens the next line – ‘**acrid**’. No longer is there magic here, but rather a sense of ennui. The crocks have lost their military power and are empty, the rhythm stressing this as the lines pick up extra syllables as they flow into each other, suggesting the abundance now available in the pantry. Heaney now recalls the aftermath as part of the facilitators rather than as an outsider looking in – ‘we moved with gravid ease’ allows him to join the whole family in a sense of tired relaxation, but also with an awareness of ‘gravid’ meaning both carrying a weighty meaning and the state of being heavily pregnant. Perhaps Heaney is getting a sense of achievement tangible in completing such an arduous yet, natural task. There is little magic left – more onomatopoeia conveys the sounds of the liquid in the ‘plash and gurgle’ of milk which is now seen as sour-breathed and has lost the purity of earlier in the poem. We are left with the sound of butter-shaping. Yet now the ‘gold flecks’ and coagulated sunlight’ are seen merely as ‘wet lumps’.

Magic is a thing of the innocent. Children wonder at the mundane. Heaney explores this here, he revels in the memory of the events and recalls his mother working like some master magician, much in the same way as he reveres his father and grand-father in Digging. However, he leaves the poem rooted in the reality of an older, more experienced man. He has grown up.