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Practice exam question

Desire and detachment

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Guidance for the question on p. 29 of the magazine.

The final part of an answer

Yet 'Wild Oats' does more than recount one disappointment in love; it suggests that love in general, far from fulfilling romantic ideals, is a source of disappointment. This disappointment is manifested in the speaker's tone, ranging across emotions from hurt to apathy and sarcasm. The poem's narrative charts the course of two loves: the main relationship with the woman the speaker was engaged to, and his feelings for her beautiful friend. Each stanza marks a stage in the main relationship — getting together, developing the relationship and breaking up — yet the seemingly simple structure conceals a more complex and ambiguous portrayal of love.

The first stanza appears breezy, detached and comical, with the speaker's juxtaposition of the women appealing to a coarse and sexist sense of humour. The contrast is reinforced through both imagery and sound: the desired woman is described in polysyllables and long vowels ('bosomy English rose'), encouraging the reader to linger on the description, while the 'friend in specs' is conveyed using monosyllabic words formed of harsh consonants and short vowels. By the poem's close, the tone grows more ambiguous. Jack Heeney suggests the speaker 'feigns disinterest to mask the disappointment of their unfulfilled wishes', but this feigned disinterest towards the fiancée also shades into disdain. His confession of his faults — being 'too selfish, withdrawn,/ And easily bored to love' — might be read subtextually as disguised criticism of her, the phrase 'easily bored' implying that she bored him. This reading is supported by the second stanza's summary of their courtship — 'over four hundred letters' and meetings in 'numerous cathedral cities/ Unknown to the clergy' — presented as a tedious list.

The treatment of the beautiful friend is different. Any true sense of lost love centres on her, not the fiancée. She is the focus of enduring desire, a fantasy love sustained without a real relationship. Larkin's use of contrasts reinforces this: what might seem to be a poem about a dissatisfying but real relationship is actually about a vivid, unfulfilled attraction. In the first stanza, the idiom 'the whole shooting match', which her face 'sparked', adds a colloquial, comic tone, but beneath this is the image of an instant, almost explosive attraction. The impact is underlined by the plain next line — 'But it was the friend I took out' — and by the unequal allocation of lines: four colourfully descriptive lines for the desired woman, two terse lines for the fiancée.

The second stanza shows the midpoint of both love stories. The relationship with the fiancée reaches its peak in boredom, while the fantasy love peaks in rejection. The most emotionally raw lines may be 'She was trying/ Both times (so I thought) not to laugh.' No direct emotion is stated, but the idea of being secretly laughed at exposes the speaker's insecurity and vulnerability. To love someone is to risk being hurt by them, and Larkin heightens the impact of this hurt, or even humiliation, by reporting

that it occurred ‘twice’. Here there is no breezy tone or explanation — only space for the reader to infer how this unrequited love has affected the speaker.

By the final stanza, disappointment in real love dominates the account of the fiancée: his faults are briskly listed as reasons for the break-up, and the terse sentence, ‘Well, useful to get that learnt.’, has a sarcastic, carefree tone. There is no sense of genuine emotion for her, despite their seven-year relationship. It is only fantasy love that offers the speaker any excitement, even if it is a love that goes nowhere. The final image of the speaker revealing his sexy pictures — ‘Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on’ — creates a cyclical effect as readers remember the initial impact she had in real life when she ‘came in’ to the speaker’s workplace with her friend. Rather than concluding the poem with a triumphant riposte to the fiancée, Larkin’s final image and his final thought on that image finish it with uncertainty that reverberates through the poem’s only full rhyme of ‘snaps’ and ‘perhaps.’

Thus, the poem that began with an ambiguous title ends on an ambiguous note. In ‘Wild Oats’ no wild oats are sown; instead, the poem explores many shades of disappointment in love. Ultimately, Larkin presents love as an experience in which the excitement lies not in lived relationships but in unattainable fantasies — passions that, however perverse, outlast experiences of love in real life.

Commentary

This is a very well-developed, coherent argument that shows a perceptive discussion of the poem in relation to the question. Expression is accurate and fluent throughout, and analysis is integrated seamlessly into the argument. The student takes a confident approach by exploring the contrast between the narrator’s failed real-life relationship and his enduring fantasy love. There is a confident grasp of literary concepts and apt use of terminology, with critical terms such as ‘narrative’, ‘tone’ and ‘ambiguity’ applied effectively to explore meaning and effects.

The essay offers detailed, perceptive analysis and evaluation of the writer’s use of language and poetic techniques to create meaning. For example, the exploration of ‘bosomy English rose’ and ‘friend in specs’ considers contrasts of both visual imagery and aural effects, linking this directly to the portrayal of the two women. The analysis is supported by confident and apt textual support, with quotations integrated smoothly into the discussion.

The argument is consistently evaluative. For example, the student contrasts the breezy tone of the first stanza with the ambiguity of the last and interprets the speaker’s self-criticism as potentially disguised criticism of his fiancée. This ability to suggest alternative readings is both confident and perceptive.

There is a strong sense of how structure and the development of ideas across the three stanzas contribute to the poem’s impact. The cyclical effect created by returning to the fantasy woman at the close is recognised and explored in detail, with a perceptive comment on how the only full rhyme (‘snaps’/‘perhaps’) draws attention to this moment and reinforces its ambiguity.

The conclusion synthesises the main points effectively, returning to the question and offering a clear final thought: that Larkin presents love as more exciting in fantasy than in lived experience. Overall, this is a confident, thoughtful reading that engages with the question fully and combines detailed analysis of language and form with an evaluative, well-supported line of argument.