‘Afternoons’ – Context (AO3)

LEARNING OUTCOME: YOU WILL BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND AND APPLY CONTEXT TO CONVEY MEANING
Chocolate Bar Activity

- Fold your piece of paper so that when you open it up you have 8 squares - like a bar of chocolate!
- Write something you know about Philip Larkin on one of the squares.
- Then go to someone else in the class and swap your facts with them so that you can add theirs to your collection.
- Collect/swap other facts from around the class until your 8 squares are filled with information and facts about Philip Larkin.
- Return to your seat and annotate your poem with the ones you think will help the understanding of the poem.
Annotate your poem with contextual notes.

- You will increase your understanding of the poem if you understand where the poet was and what was happening at the time he wrote the poem.

"I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any—after all, most people are unhappy, don't you think?"

Philip Larkin
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Larkin thought...</th>
<th>Larkin wrote...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. women <em>(think about the facts about his mother)</em> and their lives?</td>
<td>1. <em>(about women’s lives)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. men <em>(think about the facts about his dad)</em> and their lives?</td>
<td>2. <em>(about men’s lives)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Children <em>(think about his own childhood and how he viewed children)</em> and their lives</td>
<td>3. <em>(about children’s lives)</em></td>
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<td>4. Overall <em>(magpie an idea from the analysis notes sheet)</em></td>
<td>4. <em>(magpie something about his style of writing)</em></td>
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The lives of the young mothers in the poem seem sad and unfulfilled. They are ruled by their demanding children (who 'expect' to be taken home) and pushed 'to the side of their own lives' (which suggests that they now live for others not themselves). The mothers' lives seem regimented - they 'assemble' (a word with a much more formal connotation than 'meet') at swing and sandpit, and the landmarks of their lives, 'at intervals' behind them, appear predestined.

Their children are the ones with the energy - they are the ones who must be set free, who play at the vigorously-alliterating 'swing and sandpit', who seize the unripe acorns (a symbol of their impatience to seize the world, perhaps). The mothers' courting-places - symbols of their own youth - are still courting places, 'but the lovers are all in school', signs that a new generation is supplanting them. Larkin drains the young mothers' lives of the romance they must once have had - their wedding albums lie abandoned by the television (which presumably receives more attention than they do), and there is perhaps a bitter pun on the word 'lying'. For them, there is only 'an estateful of washing', a metaphor for their domestic drudgery, and a beauty that is thickening (coarsening, a sign of the end to their youthful good looks).

Link the mood of *Afternoons* to *To Autumn*. 
The title 'Afternoons' symbolizes the point in their lives that these women have reached: not yet the evening of old age, but no longer the morning of childhood, either. Their 'summer is fading', as Larkin puts it, a second symbolic use of time in the poem. Notice the number of images of fading or ending: the end of the day, the end of summer, the falling leaves, the memories of their wedding, the fading of their courting-places, their beauty, control over their own lives.

But Larkin contrasts this with images of the new: the newness of the recreation ground (and, by implication, the new estate), the newness of the women as mothers, the newness of the lovers taking over the old courting places, the unripeness of the acorns. Newness is an unattractive idea in the poem, a poignant contrast with the lives the women find slipping from them. The afternoons for them are 'hollows' - an ambiguous word suggesting both welcome shelter (from what? the domestic chores behind them? or the approaching evening ahead?) and hollowness, emptiness. The poem is full of verbs ending in '-ing', suggesting the gradualness with which this change is creeping over them; indeed, in the final two lines of the poem Larkin is no more specific than to write 'something' is pushing them.
How does Larkin suggest life is nearly over for the ‘young mothers’ in the poem Afternoons? Why might he think this?

Provide evidence to support your view.

Make a link with To Autumn on the final stanza in which Spring is over.
Making Links

This is a melancholy poem, about the inevitability of change and the passing of youth.

Check your links. Did you use any of these key words?

Key words: Cycle  Life  Change  Season  Mood

If not, how could you add one of the key words?