Choose a poem which deals with an issue of importance to human experience.

With reference to appropriate techniques, explain how the issue is presented and discuss how it enhances your appreciation of the poem.

PLAN

Human experience – passing of time/aging

Intro – TART

P1 – Setting – summer passing into autumn

* Courting places becoming those of the children

P2 – Relationships – Now distant and passion is gone

- Wedding album lying around

P3 – Children – Now the focus of the mothers (no agency in

their own lives)

* Are taking over and repeating the cycle

The human experience of aging and suffering from the passing of time is explored in Philip Larkin’s seminal poem ‘Afternoons’. Through effective use of contrast, symbolism and word choice, Larkin’s poem explores the lives of young mothers as they observe their children in a local play park. The theme of loss contributes to our understanding of aging as the women lose both their youth and the agency they have in their own lives.

The poet’s use of setting is instrumental in conveying how the women experience the passing of time. The opening lines situate us at the beginning of autumn:

“summer is fading:

The leaves fall in ones and twos”

Larkin’s use of symbolism creates a sad tone from the outset. The seasons here symbolise the aging of the mothers as they watch on. Just as the peak of summer has passed, so too are the women growing older and losing their youth. There is a clear sense of loss from the women, they cannot regain what has been taken from them. The fact that the foliage slowly drifts from the trees suggests continuous, slow decay reinforced through the choice of “fading”. The mothers’ beauty is vanishing however we understand that they do not notice it – time passes slowly for them. Furthermore, the physical setting reinforces the idea of time passing:

“The new recreation ground.”

Newness is an idea that is particularly unattractive in the poem. It suggests an unfamiliarity and uncomfortability – the women are uneasy around anything that reminds them of their aging. The fact that the play park is “new” emphasises that it is not for them, it is designed for the next generation – their children. The focus for the mothers has shifted away from themselves to the young ones. With the passing of time, they lose the meaning in their own lives and lack any joy instead defining themselves and their youth through their children. The reader feels a sense of pity for the women as they cannot stop the passing of time – an experience that will come to us all.

The relationships between the mothers and their husbands is critical in our understanding of time passing. The distance between them is explored in the second stanza:

“Behind them, at intervals,

Stand husbands in skilled trades”

It is clear here that the marriage between the mothers and their partners is unsteady. What once may have been a relationship filled with passion has aged and a distance, both physical and emotional, has emerged. The men are “behind” their wives. While this might suggest a supporting role, the tone of the poem points towards them being unimportant in the lives of the women. The passing of time is further emphasised through the choice of “intervals”, implying that there are a limited number of times when the relationship is positive. The men are portrayed as working class, their jobs suggesting stability and repetition again referencing the passing of time. Their marriage is further clear through the description of their photo album:

“And the albums, lettered

Our Wedding, lying

Near the television”

The wedding album is symbolic of the hopes and dreams of the women – that they will be content and happily married – however it lies unopened and untouched suggesting the relationship has severely deteriorated. The album, and relationship, has been discarded. In contrast, it lies next to a television – a source of excitement and action, revealing that this is what the women are missing in their lives. It is implied that the television receives more attention from the men that the women do. So much time has passed that the relationship has wasted away and lost all passion and love – it is now perfunctory in order to raise the children. Again, the reader feels sympathetic towards the women as, due to their aging, all passion and love has been removed from them.

With the passing of time, the children grown in importance in the lives of the mothers, becoming the sole focus of their attention.

“And their children, so intent on

Finding more unripe acorns”

In the final stanza, the children are explored more thoroughly. They are described as being ‘intent’ on their search, ignoring what is around them – their mothers. Gaining knowledge and learning is imperative so they can age and grow effectively. They cyclical nature of child growing into adult is reflected in the poem as it is suggested that the children are doomed to make the same mistakes of their parents, seen in the parenthetical remark of the closing stanza. The relationship between mother and child appears to be demanding as the children:

“Expect to be taken home”

The women are entirely consumed by the needs of their children and have lost all agency in their own existence as time has progressed. The children have disrupted the young women and have forced them into a routine that the children themselves will repeat. The passing of time and aging has made the women spectators of their own lives, unable to change and improve their outcomes. The reader feels despair for the women as they seem entirely unable to better themselves and are clearly trapped by their choices and by time.

In conclusion, Larkin’s ‘Afternoons’ is an effective poem that details how the passing of time deeply affects the mothers in the poem. Through effective choices of language and symbolism, Larkin explored how hope, beauty and love are lost to the inevitable passing of time, and how humanity appears bound to repeat time over and over.