Talking in Bed
Philip Larkin
(1922-1985)

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far
An emblem* of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky.

None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation
It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

*emblem – sign, symbol

Enjambment: The running on of the thought from one line, couplet, or stanza to the next without a syntactical break/punctuated pause.

Lexical polysemy: The coexistence of many possible meanings for a word or phrase.

Paradox: a contradiction in terms; words with an implication that is opposite to their meaning.
What is the poem about?

What is the subject of the poem?
- It is a story about a failing relationship between two people isolated from each other and who find it difficult to communicate.

Who is speaking?
- The poem gives us the idea that this is a male speaking.

Who is the narrator speaking to?
- The male speaker is speaking to his married partner.

What is the location/setting of the poem?
- “in bed”

Themes and messages of the poem:
- The poet contemplates a problem which is a common one in the modern world: the breakdown of a marital relationship. Set in the 1960's when divorce was frowned upon and difficult to achieve, the poet looks at the emotional silence which often envelopes a long relationship, and the difficulty that this gives rise to when there is no way out for the couple. It is also about the difficulty of telling the truth and being nice at one and the same time.

- This poem enables us to relate to possible common experiences in our own lives and provoke us to think about both – the gap between expectations and reality – and irony of love in modern world. The irony, which is a dominant feature in this poem, gives us the opportunity to create our own perception of love.

Attitudes and feelings in the poem:

Emotions and feelings of the speaker:
- The speaker is neither positive nor negative towards love and his partner.

Tone of the poem:
- Ironic, delicate (because the speaker never blames his partner for their problems), meloncholic, sombre tone.
**Form and structure of the poem (rhyme, rhythm, line length, stanza length, etc.):**

- The sense of broken communication and isolation is well displayed through the structure and form of the poem.
- Half-rhyme - slant rhyme.
- The poem consists of twelve lines (relatively longer line, (8), and two relatively shorter lines, (11) and (12)), predominantly in the iambic pentameter, divided into three tercets, rhyming ABA CAC DCD, and a final tercet rhyming EEE, what portray the absence of continuity and the broken-up nature of the couple's marriage.
- Each line usually has ten syllables.

**Type of poem:**

- This makes it a short lyrical ballad. These types of poems are used mainly to express a certain feeling of the protagonist, which is achieved through the tone, the language, and the imagery.

**Poetic devices (e.g. metaphors, similes, enjambment, alliteration, personification, etc.):**

- Explained in the following questions and in the poem above.

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**Personal response to the poem (how do I feel, what impact does the poem have on me):**

- Perhaps this poem is a wake-up call for those who are falling into silence, warning them before it is too late to make things better.
- This poem enables us to relate to possible common experiences in our own lives and provoke us to think about both – the gap between expectations and reality – and irony of love in modern world. The irony, which is a dominant feature in this poem, gives us the opportunity to create our own perception of love.

**YOUR PERSONAL RESPONSE!**
Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far,
An emblem* of two people being honest.

Why should talking in bed be easiest?

- There is surely no more intimate place to be than side by side in bed with your partner? One would think that two people would have much in common before allowing themselves into that situation. Conversation should therefore be easy for them. It's not like attempting to communicate with a total stranger, this is your life long partner. “Lying together goes back so far” insinuates that they have been married/together for many years.

What do you think the poet means when he speaks of “lying together there”?

- The word “lying” has two possible meanings – example of lexical polysemy.
- It could mean a married couple lying side-by-side, “sleeping” in bed. Or it could mean telling untruths.
- In this poem, the poet means both meanings.
- He is talking about a married couple lying side-by-side in bed.
- On the other hand, he is also speaking about an old, worn-out relationship where the two people have ling become used to lying to each other, telling untruths, covering up their real emotions, hiding their inner thoughts from the other.

What would the poet have in mind when he says that lying together “goes back so far”?

- The poet could mean two things.
- First, he could be referring to a marriage which is relatively old; the couple could have been married for years.
- He might also mean that married couples telling untruths to each other is a very old tradition and they could have been doing this for years.

Why should lying in bed together be “an emblem of two people being honest”?

- Theoretically, two people should not be in such an intimate situation unless they are each being totally honest with the other. Otherwise, one is merely using the other.
- Marriage and intimacy in bed, says the poet, should therefore be the emblem or symbol of honesty – or else it was false from the very beginning.
Yet more and more time passes silently.
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky.

In your opinion, why is it that more and more time in marriage “passes silently”?  
• People do not spend enough time before marriage in getting to know each other.
• They get married too speedily.
• Married couples do not have enough in common to spend a lifetime together.
• Couples do not take the time to persue the art of a creative relationship.
• They do not take the trouble to listen carefully when the other talks.
• Each perhaps talk too much.

Why does the poet refer to the wind? How does the wind reflect on the marital silence? 
• In some ways, the wind is the opposite of/contrasting this marital silence. While the couple lie silently brooding in bed, the wind gusts noisily outside.
• The noise of the wind, on the other hand, highlights the silence between the couple.
• In a sense, there is also turbulence in the couple's relationship but it is a silent turbulence. The noisy wind draws their attention to the turbulence which is in their own silent lives.

The poet employs a double negative when he says “the wind's incomplete unrest”. What does he mean? Does this double negative leave us with a positive?  
• The wind's turbulence is not a complete one. It blows and then rests, blows and then rests. The unrest is not a complete unrest; It comes and goes.
• The double negative does not in any way produce a positive.

What is the poet's point when he says that the wind “builds and disperses clouds in the sky”? 
• The building and dispersing of clouds in the sky is a metaphor for their marriage. Clouds are forever forming within their relationship but they are usually dispersed by means of intimate conversation, doing things together. With all conversation gone, there is no way in which the metaphorical clouds can be dispersed.
• The “outside” mirrors the couple inside; the pressure builds and builds between them, and is never alleviated.
• “Builds and disperses” could be a metaphor for an argument; tension builds, and has to be either released or repressed, in this situation I would say that the tension is repressed (unresolved).
"Clouds" have both a dark and threatening aspect, and has the ability to obscure. Metaphorically speaking, if the sky was clear then the marriage would be peaceful, but clouds insinuate that the marriage is riddled with problems; these problems could potentially harm the marriage, so the clouds obscure them, if you can't see something then it doesn't exist.

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
None of this cares for us.

**What is the point of the poet's reference to the dark towns heaped on the horizon?**

- This darkness gathers up on the horizon as a looming reminder of the couple's future.
- He is also perhaps saying that what is happening in this bed is universal through all the towns, amongst all married couples. That everywhere there are dark towns of silence.
- “Dark towns” can also symbolise impediments, arguments, problems, loneliness, pain, etc.

**What point is the poet making about the breakdown in the marital relationship when he says “none of this cares for us”?**

- The truth is that nobody cares. Marital stress is a personal matter and needs to be solved personally, through talking about it.
- Indeed, any attempt by a third party to interfere makes it worse, this is why neither the noisy wind nor the dark towns has any care for what is going on inside the bedroom.

Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

**What is meant by “this unique distance from isolation”?**

- The marital relationship is indeed unique. Two people become as close, so intimate. They are together but at the same time they become isolated from the rest of the world. The distance between them is minimal.
- If then their intimacy falters and they drop into silence, they then become isolated from each other as well. Sleeping so close together but so isolated. Then you wonder: How close are they? How distant have they become?
- Someone can be distanced from isolation and ironically very close at the same time.
The poet again uses double negatives. Does “not untrue” mean “true”? Does “not unkind” mean “kind”?

- To be “not untrue” might mean that there are perhaps elements of truth in it. To be “not unkind” likewise might mean that there could be elements of kindness in it.
- Not fully true and not fully kind.
- “Not” + “un” leaves the reader with an ambiguous feeling of unfulfilled desire.

What conclusion is the poet reaching in the final verse?

- The poet is not reaching any conclusion. He is simply saying that one can offer no words of advice. Only the married couple can work things out for themselves.