



## DULL EXISTENCE AND DEADLY EMPTINESS AS PICTURIZED IN THE POETIC REALM OF PHILIP LARKIN: AN APPRAISAL

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### **Abstract**

*This article is an appraisal of dull existence and deadly emptiness picturized in the poetical works of Philip Larkin. What is generally understood is that his poems are very often sad in tone present a deep sorrow being related to loneliness, boredom, frustration, defeat and failure. Making extracting references to the poems of Larkin, this paper exposes how Larkin has reflected boredom through pathos and also talked about the instances where Larkin spoke about death. He spoke about all these aspects in a most subtle manner. Thus, this article projects Larkin as a representative of common man who undergoes both happiness and plights in life.*

**Key Words:** *Disillusionment, Boredom, Death, Shattering, Truth, Loneliness, Emptiness.*

Philip Larkin's position amongst modern poets is, no doubt, significant, for along with Ted Hughes, he is considered to Britain's frontline poet. Larkin has something in common with William Wordsworth in that he believes a poet is fundamentally man covering with men. In addition, he seems to agree with the Lake poet's "spontaneous overflow" method of writing poetry for he believes one should indulge in poetry writing only when one feels inclined to do so and stresses that "writing isn't an act of the will" (Timms 61). Larkin always stresses the need to be level-headed, for he is aware that the "recognized rewards and goals in life are deceptions" and that it is "more sensible not to strive for such things" (Brownjohn 3) as success or happiness.

The poem titled, "places, Loved ones" is a typical example and gives ample evidence of Larkin's philosophy. Though at the beginning, he speaks of not having been able to find "The place where I could say / This is my proper ground", at the end a distinctive change transforms the mood:

"And wiser to keep away  
From thinking you still might trace  
Uncalled for this day  
Your person, your place".

Larkin warns us against fondling hopes for a perfect future. Idealism has its limitations. If we are wise enough, we should realize that hoping for complete perfection is hoping against hope. The net result of such an endeavour is severe disillusionment. In "Next, Please" Larkin decries our habit of waiting for something wonderful and rewarding to happen. We are in for disappointment because the only future reality we can be sure of is death: "A huge and birdless silence. In her wake / No waters breed or break". Here, Larkin "spreads beyond the personal and partakes of a common reality whose very impersonality is part of its shattering truth" (King 9). "Poetry of Departures" (TLD 34) elaborates on the theme of liberating ourselves from the wearisome monotony of life and in "Reasons for Attendance" (P 18), he does submit to the truth that "everybody needs both experience of life and experience of art if they are to be complete people" (Macbeth 276).

Larkin's poetry is essentially sad for in most of his poems, there is an undercurrent of deep sorrow. With characteristic reticence, he quietly takes up common events and concentrates on them with the result that his poetry becomes a refreshing and enlightening experience and the subjects he chooses are often related to loneliness, boredom, frustration, defeat and failure. His poetry, no doubt, reads like "the testament of a man who has grown resigned to the dull ache of existence" (Press 101). Even in his first volume of poems, one hears the voice of a lonely and grief-stricken individual who at times seems to enjoy his very solitariness while on other occasions appears to suffer agony of his separate existence.



At several moments, one gets the distinct impression that Larkin is attempting to “get some private experience of exhilaration and release … against the dullness of ordinary, solitary existence and the prevailing sense of death” (Brownjohn 6). In poem IX (The North Ship 21), the speaker is pictured climbing a hill with a fierce wind blowing wildly all around him. At the peak, absolutely alone, he imagines he is in a blissful state. The music of nature seduces his senses and he “submits himself exultantly … as a Romantic poet might” but quickly the euphoria vanishes and he is “carried back relentlessly to the harder human world” (P 7), for as he penetratingly queries:

“How to recall such music, when the street  
Darkens? Among the rain and stone placed  
I find only an ancient sadness falling.....” (11).

Eventually and inevitably he discovers “The heart in its own endless silence kneeling”. Thus, while loneliness has its joys, there is also pain and sadness enmeshed with a solitary existence. The speaker who thrived or felt he thrived, amidst the wind’s frenzy, is experienced enough to realise that the music he heard on the hill-top was deceiving him after all. On the plains, he would be a total misfit if he foolishly clung on to the romantic idealism he was enamoured by on the Summit of the hill. He understands the drawbacks involved in enjoying one’s own company to the core. But though for Larkin, solitude can be creative at certain junctures, there are instances when the dread of being alone sweeps across the poet’s mind.

In Poem VI of The North Ship (P 17), the speaker desperately tries to prolong the talk on this or that excuse”, for “when the guest/Has stepped into the windy street, and gone”, he asks:

Who can confront  
The instantaneous grief of being alone?  
Or watch the sad increase  
Across the mind of this prolific plant,  
Dumb idleness?”.

Loneliness and boredom attack him in tandem and he is keenly aware of his total helplessness. It is to combat this feeling that he urges “kick up the fire, and let the flames break loose/To drive the shadows back” (19.) In “Dawn” (TNS 15), the poet undergoes a moment of utter loneliness. Rising early morning, he hears a cock crowing and on pulling back the curtains, he sees “the clouds flying”. Imprisoned in the tower of his solitariness, he plaintively murmurs; “How strange it is for the heart to be loveless, and as cold as these” (19). “Vers de Societe” (High Windows 35), does investigate “the tensions between solitariness and sociability, truth and hypocrisy” (King 21).

It is true that “Society hides its fear of loneliness under the guise of a false morality when it utters the clichés. “All Solitude is selfish” or “virtue is social” (King 21), but at the same time, the poet has an undeniable and “genuine dread of loneliness, a feeling that solitude is most enjoyed in youth” (Brownjohn 19). In the words of David Timms, “Vers de Societe” shows Larkin’s most consistent themes like “disappointment in life, the pressures of society on the individual, the desire to escape those pressures together with the fear of the isolation such escape brings”. Boredom is reflected by the pathos of the lines:

“Life is first boredom, then fear.  
Whether or not we use it, it goes ....” (P 38).

Earlier, “the growing sense of unease even disappointment, failure and loneliness emerges vividly in “the concrete particulars of the journey” (King 12), the poet takes on his way home from the university and in the reference to “the awful pie” he consumes at a railway station while changing trains:

“... Well, it just shows  
How much .... How little .... Yawning, I suppose  
I feel asleep, waking at the fumes  
And furnace – glares of Sheffield, where



I charged,  
And ate an awful pie" (P 37).

"Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel" (High Windows 18) tersely and sharply depicts this theme of loneliness:

"Through open doors, the dining-room declares  
A larger loneliness of knives and glass  
And silence laid like carpet".

A porter browses through an unsold evening newspaper while "Hours past / And all the salesmen have gone" home leaving remnants of stuffed ashtrays: In shoeless corridors, the lights burn. How isolated, like a fort it is ...." (21). The void left by the crowd is astutely indicated by the light falling "darkly downwards from the highly clusters of lights over empty chairs. The poem "evokes", according to Barbara Everett;

"The hushed cosy unnerving meaninglessness  
That tends to descend at late evening  
In a hotel, the sense of waiting  
For something to happen or the feeling  
That something just has, and it creates  
This sensation of inhabited void by  
Describing sequence of human gestures  
First divested of import and then located  
in interior bric-a-brac" (P 240).

Within the night is coiled an unmovable numbness best defined as loneliness and boredom. In "Wants", (The Less Deceived 22), one is given to understand that Larkin craves for this loneliness as something which is a basic truth in life, ruling everything we do:

"Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:  
However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards  
However we follow the printed directions of sex  
However the family is photographed under the flagstaff-  
Beyond all this, the wish to be alone" (22).

One cannot deny this is a poem of "utter sadness and exhaustion" (press 101) and that Larkin's need for being "alone" is generated by the certainty that "life has become too disillusioning" (Peschmann, 51). There are many poems in Larkin's canon which seem to foster the very concept of a separate existence. In **The Importance of Elsewhere**, Larkin welcomes the disparity in "customs and establishments" prevalent in Ireland in those in England:

"Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home  
Strangeness made sense. The salt rebuff of speech,  
Insisting so on difference, made me welcome,  
once that was recognised, we were in touch" (P 34).

In Ireland, the "draughty streets" and the "herring hawker's cry" proved conclusively that he was "separate" but not "unworkable". Hence, loneliness set him apart an yet, made him comfortable. Back home in England, he has to toe the line. Or as he briefly puts it, "Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence". The poet talks of understanding the true nature of sadness in poem XVII (TNS 29) and affirms a belief that joy is to be sought through sadness – not by turning one's back on grief or skirting round it, but by going straight through the middle of it" (Wain 178).

In “This Be The Verse” (High Windows 30), Larkin concentrates on the logic that from generation to generation, man “hands on misery to man” and stresses;

“It deepens like a coastal shelf,  
Get out as early as you can,  
And don’t have any kids yourself ” (HW 30).

The mood is one of defeat and “complete frustration of life itself that the poet experiences” (Peschmann, 55). In Larkin’s poetry, there is “a strong suggestion that our lives are beyond our control and that we are being continually displaced from our own possibilities by a force stronger than ourselves or at least by the unwilling habits of a lifetime binding us into a straight jacket that denies us any freedom to change” (King 13).

Death figures prominently in Larkin’s poetry. He often returns to this theme, again and again, as if trying to capture the various angles from which death can be examined sometimes, death is personified as in poem II (TNS 13):

“Are you prepared for what the night will bring?  
The stranger who will never show his face,  
But ask admittance....? ”

Or, as in “The North Ship”, it is given a symbolic dimension. “The North Ship” resembles “Next, Please” where Larkin firmly and tellingly states that the “something” which is “always approaching” us is not success or splendor but death:

“Only one ship is seeking us, a black  
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back  
A huge and birdless silence” (P 20).

There are echoes of D.H.Lawrence’s “The Ship of Death”:

“Oh build your ship of death: Oh build it;  
For you will need it  
For the voyage of oblivion awaits you!” (960).

The employment of “ship” as a symbol for death or as a carrier of death is not new in its conception but the manner it is used in “Next, Please” reveals the completeness of the experience of death; the sterility awaiting us at the end when “No waters breed or break”. There are many passing references to death in Larkin’s early poetry. In “Night Music: (TNS 23), the poet observes: “Long since had the dead / Become untroubled” in the soil. In poem XVIII (TNS 29), the speaker who desires to write a song as “sad as the said wind” must first “visit the dead”. We are told in poem XX (TNS 32) that the two “old ragged man” clearing snow express “All actions done in patient hopelessness / All that ignores the silences of death” (P 33). Poem XVII (P 40) describes approaching death thus:

“Hands that the heart can govern  
Shall be at last by darker hands unwoven;  
Every exultant sense  
Unstrung to silence” (P 40).

One important characteristic feature of the Young Larkin is to romanticize events and deeds related to death for which “conscript” may be taken as an example but death is treated much more pointedly in his mature poetry as in “Going” which seeks to imagine the human consciousness at the point of death:

“Where has the tree gone, that locked  
Earth to sky? What is under my hands?  
That I cannot feel?  
What loads my hands down? ”.

The tree “seems to represent nothing less than life itself” (P 172). “Wants” offers a more direct and concrete expression to the dilemma:



“Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:  
Despite the artful tension of the calendar,  
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,  
The costly aversion of the eyes from death –  
Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs”.

Larkin summarizes, what he considers “the truth about human destiny and passions” and “the absence of complaint or of self-pity … cannot hide the fact that this is a poem of utter sadness and exhaustion” (Press 101). “Myxomatosis” has the poet killing the diseased rabbit out of compassion for its suffering. Death is, as Larkin calls it in “Ambulances” (TWW 33) “the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do”. “Ambulances” is quietly disturbing and crystallizes Larkin’s belief that death is so near to all of us at every moment though we are not aware of its presence. In “Nothing to Be Said” (TWW 11), he argues that man is close to death the moment he comes into the world. Larkin turns to nature in “Cut Grass” (HW 41) and finds disconsolately that death dogs it too:

“Cut grass lies frail:  
Brief is the breath  
Mown stalks exhale  
Long, Long the death  
It dies in the white hours  
Of young – leafed June ” (P 41).

The heady perfume of freshly cut grass impresses upon those who stand around and “makes creation seem perfect – until we remember that what we smell is a dying breath” (Timms 129). “The Explosion” treats the death of miners in the pit-disaster with solemnity and produces “a vision of immortality at the end” (Haffenden 96) as Larkin himself put it. In “Dublinesque”, there is shown a group of dancing street walkers moving along with the hearse during a funeral. There is a mingling of gaiety and sadness which catches Larkin’s eye and speaks much of Larkin’s Keen observation of the wide-ranging aspects of death.

To conclude, it may be said that Larkin is the laureate of the common man who himself has stated that “what one is not released from is the constant struggle between mind and imagination to decide what is important enough to be written about” (Context 32). What is to be commented upon in his poetry is that it is “a poetry of great emotion, accuracy and control, which draws on a whole range of common emotions without ever becoming common place”. No doubt, he is fundamentally a man conversing with men and his poetry picturizes dull existence and deadly emptiness in life situations at all levels.

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