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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PHILIP LARKIN'S POEMS

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Abstract

Philip Larkin, a noted English poet, gradually marked his presence felt among his contemporaries--becoming a familiar figure and gaining the admiration of the readers. His poems are read and appreciated by readers not because they let them in on some valuable inside know- how, or because they are socially significant or because it makes them laugh and cry, or that they modify their physiology in any of the available ways; but because it presents what precision, what absolutely right hitting nail on the head, the English language is still capable of. His poetry has qualities that one can always admire: subtle observation, controlled emotions and language, and the very accurate and subtle expression of sadness, failure, half-success, anticipated loss and boredom. Earlier, following Yeats and Dylan Thomas, Larkin consciously tried to leave Yeats and evolved his own style. He gave up Yeats in favour of Hardy. Like Hardy, Larkin's voice is wry, skeptical detached almost to the point of misanthropy, which made him one of the most important emerging voices in postwar England. His poetry indeed represents the postwar era, with its frustrations, doubts and failures. His poems present a grave comment on the erosion of values and are telling comments on contemporary society, shrouded in a lack of faith and resultant frustration. He looked at the mental trauma of middle-class people. Instead of a mere depiction of life around, Larkin focuses his attention on the analysis of the human image in depiction. These are the aspects that have been discussed in this paper i.e., his concern with the mundane, the social documentation, the debunking of the romantic illusion, the exploration of the truth, and a note of pain dominating very strongly, especially in the poems.

Keywords: Contemporary Society, Failure, Lack of Faith, Pathos, Time, Loneliness, Postwar Era.

Introduction

Philip Larkin, a noted English poet, gradually marked his presence felt among his contemporaries--becoming a familiar figure and gaining the admiration of the readers. Once dubbed as a "minor poet" by Black Morrison he has now emerged to be recognized as "one of the best craftsmen now working in English" The position of Larkin among his contemporaries is reflected in different responses to his works by his critics. Larkin enjoys a high reputation among his contemporary poets. Barbara Everett observed in her article in *Essays in Criticism* (1980), "Now after two decades of steadily increasing success, Larkin has come to be considered by many not only the best English poet but one of the best in Europe (P.227)" In his article 'Landscapes of Larkin', Donald Davie calls Philip Larkin "the effective, unofficial laureate of post-1945 England (P 64). "

Philip Larkin's poetry indeed represents the postwar era, with its frustrations, doubts and failures. He looks at the mental trauma of middle-class people. His poetry presents a grave comment on the erosion of values. It is a telling comment on contemporary society, shrouded in a lack of faith and resultant frustration. Instead of a mere depiction of life around, Larkin focuses his attention on the analysis of the human image in depiction. We see a collage of contemporary images in his poems. Some of his poems like "Deception", "Church Going" and "Next Please" (LD) are good poems to study. These poems have blown a breath of fresh air. Written with remarkable sensitivity, evoking his mood - sad and isolated, the poems are marked by touches of pathos.

Larkin's first volume of poetry, *The North Ship* appeared in 1945 and was revised in 1966. After a very short interval, these works were followed by two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). The remaining volumes have been collections of poetry and have appeared at widely separated intervals: *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). Larkin has also edited *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973) and a collection of his own essays on Jazz, *All What Jazz* (1970).

Larkin's first volume of poems *The North Ship* attracted little attention. It was observed that there was nothing in it which could possibly have made one forecast the quality of its successor. *The Less Deceived*, which was published ten years later. In the introduction to the second edition of *The North Ship* (1966), Larkin records that this volume which first appeared in 1945, was heavily influenced by Auden, Dylan Thomas and, above all, by W. B. Yeats. However, later, Larkin consciously tried to leave Yeats and evolved his own style. Therefore, after *The North Ship*, there happened a change in style and attitude to the themes treated in the later volumes. Larkin himself was aware of this shift when he wrote in the introduction to *The North Ship* which shows Larkin's reaction against Yeats:



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Undramatic, complete and permanent. In early 1946 I had some new digs in which the bedroom faced east so that the sun woke me inconveniently early. I used to read one book I had at my bedside the little blue chosen Poems of Thomas Hardy. (P11)

Larkin's enchantment with Yeats was no longer enthralling. He gave up Yeats in favour of Hardy. The conflicting strains in Larkin's personality are perhaps most evident in the two poems he wrote in 1946, the year he read Hardy. One of these numbered "XXXII" has been added as a coda to the 1956 edition of *The North Ship*, to announce the change that had come over his style. Larkin says in this poem:

As a coda, I have added a poem.... which though not noticeably better than the rest, shows the Celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly (P10).

The first stanza of this poem leads us at once to a world far removed from the artificiality of literary expression observed in *The North Ship*.

Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair,
I looked down at the empty hotel yard
Once meant for coaches. cobblestones were wet,
but sent no light back to the loaded sky,
sunk as it was with mist down

("Waiting for Breakfast" NS, P 48)

Thus, we have no doubt that Hardy played a decisive part in liberating Larkin from the enchantments of Yeats. Secondly, the move from a cloistered wartime Oxford to the drabness of a small provincial town must have led him to cast a chilly eye on the myth-ridden world of Yeats. Without prying into a private life that Larkin has resolutely kept private, we may guess that his experience of the world and his involvement with other people compelled him to abandon Yeats as an early influence upon him.

Like Hardy, Larkin's voice is wry, skeptical detached almost to the point of misanthropy, which made him one of the most important emerging voices in postwar England. Everywhere he was exhibited as what a recent anthologist has called the voice of a whole generation (P.16)." Larkin is also Hardy-esque in his use of the real language, the language of men, the language of urban industrialized Britain.

Philip Larkin's second volume of poems *The Less Deceived*, though coming from an obscure press and without any large number of publicities such as a richer publisher might have laid down, was quite quickly received with enthusiasm. This slim and rather austere-looking book, the first publication of the Marvell Press and the one which arrived with the old-fashioned device of a subscriber's list, was widely recognized as an outstanding poetic product of the 1950s. There was an individual contemporary voice that, without fuss and strain, but often with moving eloquence, marked out a whole area of felt experience. "Church Going" (LD), the longest poem in the book, became as Mr. G. S. Fraser puts it, "the showpiece of the New Movement and was examined and discussed in countless classrooms and extension courses. Hardly an article or review of contemporary poetry could omit Larkin's name." *The Less Deceived* ran into a number of editions and its content spilt into anthologies.

The Less Deceived, a book of twenty-nine poems, was venturesomely published. Brownjohn says, "One gains an immediate sense from the first page of growing technical command and range (in the highly wrought nine-line stanza of "Church Going" and the witty, terse quatrains of "Toads"); of greater substance, and of a careful, sensitive thoroughness in the working through of ideas in work as different as the reflective, nostalgic love poem "Maiden Name" and "Poetry of Departures", with its mordant observations on freedom of action. There is now for the first time, a thread- of wry, decidedly disconcerting humour ("I Remember, I Remember" and "If, my Darling", where he writes at once nakedly and bizarrely about private quirks and fears). There is some lovingly detailed observation of the real-world ("At Grass" and "Church Going"). But the largest difference is summed up in a new ability to convince and move the reader through the confidence of a fully developed poetic personality: because Larkin has now discovered that it is perfectly valid and indeed liberating, to be entirely himself, using his own language."²⁹

Thus, *The Less Deceived* made him a known poet. Some marked changes both in the choice of subject and its treatment became noticeable in Larkin's poetry here. The poems are dominated by the ideals of orderliness, restraint, exactitude, coolness of tone and lack of affectation. The following lines from "Maiden Name" would illustrate the point:



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Marrying left your maiden name disused
 Its fine light sounds no longer mean your face,
 Your voice, and all your variants of grace.
 For since you were so thankfully confused
 by law with someone else, you cannot be
 semantically the same as the young beauty:
 It was here that these two words were used
 No, it means you. Or, since you're past and gone
 It means what we feel about you then.

("Maiden Name", ;LD, 23)

Here the theme is time, which is a recurrent theme in several other poems in the volume such as "No Road" "Next Please", "At Grass", and "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album". Larkin was apparently struck at this stage by the depth, intensity and multifaceted character of the change which takes place in human beings with the passage of time. As far as the style is concerned the poem no longer makes use of the metaphorical abstractions and the linguistic or syntactic deviations which we find so often in The North Ship. Host of the poems in The Less Deceived are marked by clarity and relaxed rhythms of natural speech backed by the regularity of syntax.

The publication of Philip Larkin's new book, "The Whitsun Weddings" was an advance on The Less Deceived in many ways. The reputation Larkin established with The Less Deceived was confirmed by this next volume of poems. Again, Larkin evokes for us, in poem after poem, the post-war English landscape, rural, urban and suburban. The first poem "Here" at once places the reader in the middle of Hull.

Here dames and statues, spires and cranes cluster
 Beside in-scattered streets, barge-crowded water
 And residents from raw estates brought down

 Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes iced lollies,
 Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers---

("Here", WW9)

The captivating accuracy with which he catches the physical feel of the life of England in The Whitsun Weddings, as in poems like "Here" and "The Large Cool Store" leads to considerable praise for Larkin as a social observer.

Larkin's fourth and last collection of poems "High Windows" was published in 1974. Larkin's evolution in High Windows has been thematic like the earlier volumes. Against poems of the most intense pessimistic, Larkin develops the affirmative features of his talent in this volume. In "The Trees", the poet knows that the trees are growing older as we are, yet each year they imply the renewal of all things, the rebirth of the whole world in a recreation of the paradisaical time:

Yet still, the unresting castles thresh
 In full-grown thickness every May
 Last year is dead they seem to say,
 Begin afresh. afresh. afresh.

"The Trees" HW (2)

Similarly, in 'Show Saturday', the poet also stresses to be positive when he observes an occasion when a country community comes together as an experience which gives strength and renewal. However, in High Windows, once again, some of the moments of utmost seriousness are approached and the themes of how to live, of age and death, of loneliness, are also treated here. But the critics accept the fact that there is no doubt that the subjects were familiar but at the same time were developed and clarified in a different manner. It would, therefore, be wrong to take this last volume as a mere imitation or extension of the earlier ones. In the three major poems of the collection, 'Living', 'The Old Fools' and 'The Building', absolute solemnity is built from the beginning in the development of the central ideas. All three poems deserve a close look and show that they are different in many ways.



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These are the aspects as have been discussed in this paper i.e. his concern with the mundane, the social documentation, the debunking of the romantic illusion, exploration of the truth, etc. which eventually placed him alongside Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, Elizabeth Jennings of the Movement of 1950s. Larkin emerges as a writer who owes his fame primarily to the fact that he can write. He has been regarded as a fine craftsman. His poems are read and appreciated by readers not because they let them in on some valuable inside know-how, or because they are socially significant, or because it makes them laugh and cry, or that they modify their physiology in any of the available ways; but because it presents what precision, what absolutely right hitting nail on the head, the English language is still capable of. His poetry has qualities that one can always admire: subtle observation, controlled emotions and language, and the very accurate and subtle expression of sadness, failure, half-success, anticipated loss, and boredom.

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