

An Analysis of the Themes of Death, Decline and Disappointment in Philip Larkin's Poetry

Shabnum Iftikhar, M.A. Political Science, M.A. English Literature, ELT

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:7 July 2013



Courtesy: <http://www.philiplarkin.com/statue.htm>

Introduction

Philip Larkin (1922-1985), a noted British poet, novelist and critic was born in Coventry, England, and educated at the University of Oxford. He treats the modern English setting in a withdrawn and non-sentimental manner. As a matter of fact, the very non-sentimental approach has been the hallmark of his poetry. Throughout his poetic career, his bleak outlook on human life has been an essence of his poetic stance. Human life and its predicament and the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013
Shabnum Iftikhar, M.A. Political Science, M.A. English Literature, ELT
An Analysis of the Themes of Death, Decline and Disappointment in Philip Larkin's Poetry 370

disappointment and disillusionment have been the recurring motifs of his poetry. Moreover, Larkin's agnostic approach has played a pivotal role in shaping his personality and poetry simultaneously.

Larkin's Agnostic Approach

The age of Larkin was an age of disaster and chaos on a social and moral level all over the world. The flames of Second World War were still burning in the late nineteen-fifties and there was a decline in the values cherished by societies. People had seen much destruction in the wake of first and second world wars and they had started raising questions about the existence of God. That was a scenario where Philip Larkin was born and brought up. No wonder he gives the runaround to God, religion and religious creeds. In spite of this non-sentimental and agnostic approach, he has earned a reputation of a great poet of his time as he deals with the stark and harsh realities of his time with great realism. In fact, it is his non-romantic approach towards the precarious conditions of life that has given his poetry a long lasting popularity. As a poet, he has a great command over his emotions that doesn't let him romanticize human life in any capacity and enables him to capture the chaos and decline of human life on social and religious levels.

The Religious, Social and Political Context of Larkin's Poetry

Larkin was not a prolific writer and he published just four major collections of his poetry, which he did so with long intervals. But even with this limited writing legacy, he has been successful in leaving an indelible mark on his poetic era. His first collection 'The North Ship' was published in 1945; 'The Less Deceived' in 1955; 'The Whitsun Weddings' in 1964 and 'The High Windows' in 1974. From the very first to the last collection, a sense of alienation, detachment and disappointment prevails very strongly.

Church Going

Larkin has composed his poetry in the context of his temperament and of his personal views on life, religion, and religious dogmas. He shares his thoughts about God, religion and the existing scenario of religious beliefs of different classes of society in one of his poems, 'Church Going' in a realistic manner. His poem 'Church Going' chronicles the account of that time, when

people had become suspicious of the existence of God and religion. Larkin's sarcasm is seen from the very first line of the poem,

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books, sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

On a surface level, this poem makes fun of the church going tradition, but on a deeper level, Larkin points out the dilapidation of a church, as people's religious credibility also was a victim of dilapidation. There was a time of general decline in the attendance of churches as churches were no longer able to attract all people towards religion.

Impact of Social and Political Atmosphere

Deep and profound is the influence of the social and political atmosphere of his time on Larkin's poetry. Larkin's realistic approach towards his time makes him write what he has written. We can see the true portrait of the post-war England in Larkin's collection of poetry, or it can be said that his poetry is greatly reinforced by the cataclysmic scenario of post-war England.

Grass

Larkin's poem 'At Grass' is one of his great poems, where Larkin describes the situation symbolically and connects his main theme with the current awkward situation of the post-war England. The retirement of some horses from the horse-race and their idle life after the retirement symbolized Britain's loss of power and glory. Critics have rated this poem as one the most popular poems of post-war Britain. This poem expresses much more in a sympathetic way

to convey the elegiac mood of that time, when Britain was facing the aftermath of the Second World War.

‘At Grass’, is according to an eminent critic, “an essentially English poem. Its Englishness is to be found not merely in its memories of ‘cups and stakes and handicaps’, but also in the modified mood of the pastoral convention.” (Chapter 2, Page 7)

This poem is enriched with eighteenth century pastoral convention and the elegiac tone simultaneously as the poem asks the wistful question.

“Do memories plague their ears like flies”?

Differences of Class and Culture in Larkin’s Poems

Larkin’s poetry is filled with themes and images portraying the changed social climate of his era. Besides giving plenty of space to his pessimistic and agnostic approach, he delineates a crystal clear picture of his society where the differences of class and culture emerge from the advancement of the industrial revolution.

The volume ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ (1964) reflects the circumstances, in the late nineteen-fifties, when class and culture conflicts were coming into vogue. In this perspective, Larkin couldn’t keep himself detached from the changing atmosphere. His poem ‘Here’ points out the change in the life style of people, who were gradually getting attracted towards the material comforts of life, to the exclusion of the finer things of life. We come across the following lines in ‘Here’.

‘Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies, electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers’

Mr. Bleany

The same scenario runs through another one of his famous poems, ‘Mr. Bleany’, where he presents the sketch of a person, named Bleany, who is leading a sub-standard life in his apartment. Mr. Bleany is a lonely person, isolated from others; there is nothing neither charming

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Shabnum Iftikhar, M.A. Political Science, M.A. English Literature, ELT

An Analysis of the Themes of Death, Decline and Disappointment in Philip Larkin’s Poetry 373

nor attractive in his life and in his apartment. Apparently, this poem tells the story of Mr. Bleany, a very boring person. But Larkin describes very realistically the truth of our social life, wherein a person's character is judged by his style of living. There are no digressions or superfluities in the poem, but just a character-portrait with a spontaneous flow of thought, very vividly rendered.

Pessimism in *Afternoons*

Another poem 'Afternoons' from this volume has been written with the same approach, which records the changing social and cultural climate of the late 1950's and early 1960's in an extraordinary way. The climate is depicted by the references to the 'new re-creation ground, to husbands in skilled trades, to an estate full of washing, to the albums lettered 'Our Wedding' lying near the television'.

These phrases undoubtedly indicate the changes, which had begun to take place in the social life of England at the time this poem was written. The pessimism of this poem is obvious as the young couple in this poem find that something is pushing them to the side of their own lives.

One thing is very certain that Larkin's poetry is encompassed with the same kind of dissatisfaction, which goes parallel even in his poems where he writes about the social and cultural changes. This dissatisfaction is part and parcel of Larkin's poetic ability so much so that he does only portray the inability and incapacity of human life that seem inevitable to human existence.

The Inevitability of Death for All Classes of Society

Larkin's poetry is greatly overwhelmed by one single thought and that is death, which eventually leads the human mind to decline and deprivation. In this case, critics are unanimous in calling him, 'the saddest heart of the post-war super market'. His pessimistic approach is deeply rooted in the isolation, alienation, and predicament of human life that he saw around him. He does not describe directly the massacre and destruction of the Second World War, which played

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Shabnum Iftikhar, M.A. Political Science, M.A. English Literature, ELT

An Analysis of the Themes of Death, Decline and Disappointment in Philip Larkin's Poetry 374

havoc with human beings, but he crafts his poems in such a way that the pain, suffering and helplessness of a man can be felt in the face of these destructive forces. Larkin has been at his best with this single theme of death, which he considers the ultimate destruction for all classes of society, regardless of age, race, sex, color, and religion.

Nothing to be Said

Larkin's poem 'Nothing to be Said' implies that life at all levels and for every single person is ultimately the same, because all life inevitably ends in death. "From this point of view, the lives of 'cobble-close families in mill-towns' are really not different from the lives of the 'nomads among stones' or from those of 'small-saturated tribes'". (Chapter 2, Page 13) The stubborn and straight fact of death seems to darken every aspect of human life and activities. 'Dockery and Son' is written in the context of the same idea, where Larkin compares his bachelor life with his friend's married life, who has to die even he is married and has a son. Hence, it doesn't matter whether a person is a bachelor or is married, since both are destined to die in the long run.

Impossibility of Escaping from Disease: *Ambulances*

In the 'Ambulances' the impossibility of escaping from disease and death has been captured with great sensitivity. With his utterly non-sentimental approach, Larkin has a great capacity to touch on the sensitive issues of human life. He emphasizes the omnipresence of death in the gloomy line, 'All streets in time are visited'.

Another poem 'Aubade' conveys the same thought and proves that nothing in the world is permanent except death; therefore, nothing can defeat and mitigate the horror or permanence of death. Larkin's melancholic approach towards life is very well understood, when he talks about death that is inseparable to man. He is perfectly realistic in creating an atmosphere of pathos by rendering vivid pictures in his death-obsessed poems. It seems that Larkin is able to arrive at the comprehensive conclusion that all efforts of human beings to live life better and to make life better end in fiasco, especially with the inexorable approach of death. By applying his

pragmatic approach throughout his poetry, Larkin constructs a clear-cut paradigm of human life; where death does not distinguish between the haves and have nots.

Larkin's Attitude in his Love Poems

Again we see that Larkin's unromantic and non-sentimental attitude gives a unique quality to his love poems. He is realistic at heart and he wants to see things clearly and truthfully. Intentionally and deliberately, he does avoid deceptions and through his perceptions, he presents the facts as they actually exist. Even his love poems describe an utterly unromantic view of human life in the backdrop of the sexual act, which is generally believed to bring about fulfillment and sexual relief.

Sexual Act – A Deception: “*Places, Loved Ones,*” “*If, My Darling*”

In Larkin's poems, the sexual act is altogether a deception and a sense of dissatisfaction and hopelessness seems to penetrate everything with a feeling of emptiness. “In the poem, ‘Places, Loved Ones’, for instance, the speaker admits with a mixture of disappointment and futility that he has never met that special person, who could claim everything he owns”. (Chapter 2, Page 10)

Similarly, the speaker in the poem, ‘If, My Darling’, insists upon his own realistic judgment of life's deficiencies and any idealization of womanhood is carefully avoided. Larkin's so-called love poetry, devoid of any romantic passions and emotions by focusing on the peripheral issues of human life reveals tragic aspects and tragedies that have been inseparable to man, since time immemorial. This has been Larkin's approach that altogether shuns superficial treatment of human suffering and presents pathetic, realistic pictures of human life.

Focus on Free Sex

One notable thing is the selection of words by Larkin in his sexual poems that indicates his attitude towards free sex. He dares to show his thinking through the use of such apt words whenever he wants. For instance, in the poem ‘Annus Mirabilis’, he asserts,

Sexual Intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me)
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles first L.P

Larkin’s choice of words in this poem is also the mirror of the society of England, where sexual freedom had started in 60’s and had not remained a taboo any longer.

Marriages

In his poem ‘Marriages’ his manner of dealing with the topic is somewhat cynical but realistic as he says that marriage in most of the cases is a matter of accepting an undesirable and unwanted partner. In this case, he attributes marriage to the loss of one’s freedom and as a result a man gets nothing but boredom and feels like a failure. It can be said that Larkin’s love poetry threatens the independence of the individual.

Larkin’s cynical and realistic point of view does not let him idealize relationship, marriage, sex, and sexual satisfaction; rather, he creates an atmosphere of disappointment and disillusionment.

In Larkin’s opinion, sexual fulfillment and erotic passion are mere deception and nothing else. Sexual desire is also the subject of the poem ‘Dry Point’. Here the physical experience is a struggle that is presented accompanied by fear and panic, and the aftermath is one of disappointment and disillusionment. In a nutshell, an element of disenchantment escorts his love poetry all the way to the final destination and that destination is nothing but a mirage.

=====

Works Cited

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013
Shabnum Iftikhar, M.A. Political Science, M.A. English Literature, ELT
An Analysis of the Themes of Death, Decline and Disappointment in Philip Larkin’s Poetry 377

Saqlain, Sajjad. *Philip Larkin, Selected Poems*. (Revised Edition). Famous Products, 2007, Urdu Bazaar Lahore, Pakistan.

=====

Shabnum Iftikhar, M.A. Political Science, M.A. English Literature, ELT
University of the Punjab
Lahore
Pakistan

Ph.D. Candidate, Argosy University
Atlanta Campus, Georgia 30328
USA
shabnum53@hotmail.com