

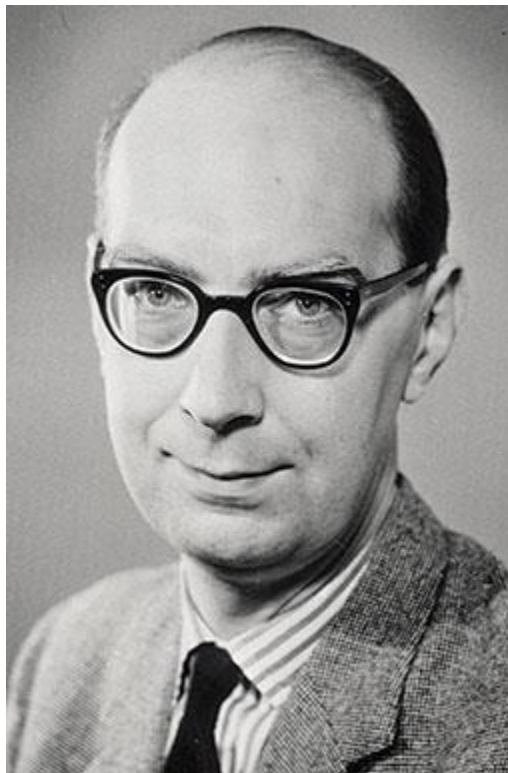
## Rhetoric and Poetic Excellence of Philip Larkin

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Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

Courtesy: [http://philiplarkin.com/larkin\\_biography/](http://philiplarkin.com/larkin_biography/)

### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to present Philip Larkin as a dramatic poet who uses ‘rhetoric’ and ‘poetic excellence’ simultaneously in his poetic realm. This paper also displays how Larkin adopted a deterministic view of life where time destroys everything as it moves. This paper analyses his poems and claims that there is a conflict among dreams, hopes and expectations as common themes especially in a rhetorical way. Thus, this paper exposes how the rhetorical and lyrical qualities of Larkin moves together.

**Keywords:** Philip Larkin, Rhetoric, Lyric, dramatic, Time, conflicts, sensuous, emotional.

Philip Larkin is known as ‘Movement Poet’ and his poetry has stemmed from the main lines, quite transmitted from obscurity to clarity. The movement to which he belongs is in a way peculiar assortment with a single animus to be sometimes unendurably explicit and forthright. He is an adept in presenting with rare accuracy the outward appearance and the social climate of suburban England in the 1950’s. “His verse is suffused with a compassionate melancholy, a sense of sadness and the transience of things, an awareness of the random quality inherent in human existence” (Press 254).

*The North Ship* is considered as enormous advance on Larkin’s earlier work. according to John Press, this poem exhibits for the first time, the features of his mature poetry. It is, as John Press puts it, “a fine, though unobtrusive, power of evoking an atmosphere and the subtleties of an emotional relationship; a muted wit; a masterly control of tone a lyrical poignancy tempered with irony” (P 254).

The young poets of the 1950’s set out right poetry which is no way as obscure as T.S. Eliot’s or even Auden’s. A more obvious sense of form, easily recognizable rhythms and precise and definite meanings were taken to be the gospels for this type of poetry. The outburst of this poetry was announced in October 1954 in an article *The Spectator*. The new trend in poetry was named ‘The Movement’. The poets belonging to this trend were Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, Philip Larkin, Thomas Gunn, Kingsley Amis, D.J. Enright, Donald Davie, John Wain and Robert conquest who wrote ‘a genuine healthy poetry’. The restoration of a sound and fruitful attitude to poetry and a rational structure and comprehensive language charged with sensuous or emotional intent are the qualities shared by these poets.

Through his poetical creations, he does strongly preserve things he has seen, thought and felt both for himself and for others. He admits it thus:

“... I feel that my prime responsibility  
is to the experience itself, which I am  
trying to keep from oblivion for its own  
sake. Why I should do this I have no  
idea, but I think the impulse to preserve  
lies at the bottom of all art ...” (258).

Moreover, it is his strong belief that every poem must be ‘its own sole freshly-created universe’. From his statement, it is confirmed that he has no belief in ‘tradition’ or ‘a common myth kitty or casual allusions’. The poet in Larkin evolves a rhetoric which is open and transparent. Larkin’s rhetoric is quite original and natural which has not stemmed from the so-called modern poets like Eliot or Pound. He is the poet enjoying the poetry of those to whom technique seems to matter less than content.

Larkin overestimates the value of things which extends to his resolute avoidance of literary self-aggrandizement and to the attitude he displays towards the writing of poetry. He

is of the strong opinion that a poet must write only about that which he feels deeply. Poetry, in his view, is the record of the poet's recovery of his authentic response to experience and his muse is the muse of memory. Moreover, he insists that poetry should both communicate and give pleasure to the reader. This approach has only demanded his fidelity to experience. He even castigates 'modernists' for their refusal to communicate through their literary works. Even a single reading of Larkin's poetry tells us that he goes hand in hand with Hardy in his writing. Hardy, blending traditional forms with very personal pressures of feeling, antedates the modernist movement. Larkin has accepted of receiving from Hardy "a sense of relief that I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life" (king 3). This influence has only led to shed the high romantic style of *The North Ship* and to set out to write from the tensions that underlay his own everyday experiences. Larkin has gone into use Hardy's employment of traditional forms and techniques with subtlety and variety.

Larkin is said to have emerged as a consistency of poetic identity. It is this identity of a detached yet careful observer of the behaviour of himself and others. Commenting on his identity, P.R. King says,

"In many poems, he seems to turn away from the society of others and to take up a solitary stance implying a purer vantage point from which to survey life in his humorous, self-deprecatory and observant way" (P 4).

In no way does it mean that Larkin is unmoved by his feelings and responses to what he observes and remains apart as a result of his commitment to an art. It is to record and preserve life rather than to enact on transcendent life. This is made clear in his poem 'Reasons for Attendance' which insists on art as way of remaining true both to himself and to what he observes. The voice of this identity has many tones and idiom. It can be sharp and satirical (Vers de Societo), quiet and almost plaintive (Broadcast, conversational and meditative (Church Going) and even lyrical and mysterious (Coming) and occasionally resentful and bitter (Send No Money). In all poems, there is a conflict among our dreams, hopes, and expectations, and the various ways in which reality serves to make them collapse. Larkin is very much concerned to expose our illusions and evasions so that we may stand naked but honest. We may be 'less deceived' by ourselves before the reality of life and death. And this only has led to the constancy of the relatively small number of themes in Larkin's poetry such as the passage of time, the illusory visions of man, old age and death, memory of the past, etc. but this continuity of theme has the variety of tone, form and intention in these poems.

Larkin in many of his poems has handled 'the passage of time', the theme which, according to him, is the bearer of realities. Time is like a chain that binds us to our earlier

homes and dreams but later we realize that they do not become real. Larkin adopts a deterministic view of life whereby Time destroys us and corrodes any meaning we attach to our lives. In poems like 'Triple Time', 'Next, please, 'I Remember, I Remember'. 'Dockery and Son' and 'Arrivals', 'Departures', Larkin uses this familiar theme of his – the passage of time. In 'Triple Time', the poet assumes that the present is colourless and empty. This dull feeling is intensified by the fact that this present was once considered a bright future in the gloomy past. 'Next, please' takes an even more Sombre look at time. The familiar theme and metaphor are infused with a new texture in this poem. In the opening lines, the attitude that there will be an inevitable and continuous frustration of all our hopes is merely an assertion that rises from the poet's personal conviction. This final stanza of 'Next, Please' spreads beyond the personal and partakes of a common reality whose very impersonality is part of its shattering truth. For Larkin in these poems, time 'brings no comfort'. 'Arrivals, Departures' has similarities to 'Next, Please' in its handling of a related theme. It too develops a comment on time and the frustration of our expectations by means of a metaphor connected with ships. The ship which carries us on our journey may also be the ship of death, its siren luring us on with a call we can neither ignore nor command.

'I Remember, I Remember' and 'Dockery and Son' concern the relationship between past memory and the possibilities of hope. These two poems excel as best poems. Each is concerned with the memories of the poet's own past. They succeed in convincing the reader of his honesty to these feelings. The poem 'I Remember, I Remember' is the poet's reminiscence of his childhood which is not choked with any sentimental feelings which naturally arise when one talks about his birth-place. In a series of satirical thought, the poet casts aside any idea that his own past has a particular significance that marked him out at an early stage as someone special. His honest recognition of the ordinariness of his childhood is a deliberate defiance of all the romantic self-aggrandizing gestures of the artist and his favouring public. The final line "Nothing, like something, happens anywhere" is isolated from the body of the poem. It throws its shadow back across the whole poem. P.R. King's remark on this poem can be an apt concluding remark.

"It (the poem) implies that man is always tempted to twist his memories of his past under the pressure of self-justification or self-glorification. The appeal of the poem lies in the poet's self-exposure, his own refusal to compensate for his own sense of ordinariness by sentimentalizing his past. But the reader carries away from the poem an after-feeling that someone who can so confidently assert the omni-presence of 'nothing' is unlikely to be the one to escape the sense of the dullness and futility of life" (P11)

This poem is a poem of Larkin's blend of honesty and self-doubt. It begins in a calm, unruffled manner, which is soon broken by a realization of the passage of time and opportunities. It culminates in an acceptance that our lives are ultimately controlled by powers beyond those we may influence. The success of the poem lies in its precise rendering

of the changing tones of voice and the tension between the idea of divergent paths in people's lives and the poet's personal conviction that our lives are determined by powers outside our control. The poem, in one sense, generalizes the poet's state.

'At Grass' is a poignant poem touching on the inexpressible agony of a creation like horse which often tries to flee away from itself, not even given to taking its fodder quietly. Now in a race – course – court of grass, the rhetoric of the poem adjusts the reader's view to a diachronic picture of the course, the grassy field, the horses now old, the horses once young and how they ran and ran to please all without actually living their days. What is left for them is only a name, 'Are their lives name-sake?' is a poser or question that one is likely to ask for himself on reading the poem. Pathetically, fallaciously Larkin involves himself with the shaking horses and is concerned about the plaguing memories which keep them now no longer at ease. They are now 'Shadow'; less substantial, withered, almost retired. Their 'summers' are over. Only the meadows are their friends now. None could cheer them up. No cries for them, no shocks for them, excepting the silent grass. What are they now except their names once? This 'out-of-useless' honoured and locked unaware is exploited by Larkin and his phrases in a pain-free way enact it. The rhetoric has an analgesic character. The poem 'compline' is a hurried talk to God' from a place where flickering out of lives is very common.

"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done  
produce our lives beyond this night,  
open our eyes again to sun" (C 3-6).

It is in the very same place, every moment a life ends 'Church Going' gives vent to personal experience which is used to give credence to the universalized meanings that follow. This poem, according to P.R. King, is not a religious poem unless the word 'religion' is taken in a broad sense. The poem is not irreligious too. The greatness of this poem lies in expressing two contrasted ideas at once. Andrew Motion has rightly pointed out, in his "As Church Going' indicates, Larkin's dilemma is not whether to believe in God but what to put in God's place..." (P 60). Actually, the poet employs rhetoric skills in his poetry. In the words of Jones, "writing was to be the agency that tests, and the poet hopes, demonstrates, the extent to which the mind and especially the imaginative faculty, is indeed in command (PP 325-26). Rhetoric and poetry are quite natural in Larkin's case. He himself has accepted it in View Points: Poets in Conversation: "I mean something was grinding its knuckles in my neck and I thought : God, I've got to say this somehow, I have to find words and I'll make them as beautiful as possible" (P 116). Mentioning the importance of writing to Larkin, Jones writes:

"Writing remains an explicit symptom of  
false consciousness, and a gesture towards  
compensation and recovery. It is at once

the only home that exists, and a sure sign  
of incontrovertible isolation” (P 338)

When the associating nature of rhetoric is concerned, it is clear that dramatic quality is required. Basically, Larkin “is a dramatic poet” (Terry 10). When the roll of modulation in rhetoric is taken for consideration, a scholar finds too much of successful cases in which the modulation in tone plays a major part. In Larkin’s poems also, one can evidently see the variation in modulation, as Terry has pointed out very rightly,

“There is a range to his voice and it  
includes modulations that are audible  
as tones of humour, wit,  
sadness, compassion, praise and  
celebration” (P 30).

To conclude, in one sentence, it may be repeated that rhetorical quality in Larkin is curved and contoured towards the expression of the lyrical specula ‘I’ of Larkin as against the personal ‘I’ of him. If one knows his rhetoric, one knows him better.

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