

Elements of Pessimism in Philip Larkin's Poetry

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Abstract. Philip Larkin belongs to the Movement poets. An atmosphere of gloominess pervades his poetry. The fact is that this gloominess does not arise from cynicism. Rather it emerges from a detached observation of life. He reflects on a variety of themes ranging from the future of the churches to that of the environment. His lonely life and the depressing world scenario of his day made him a philosopher in his own right. He regards his childhood as forgotten religious wounding. He is against cruelty towards animals. His views on life are original.

Keywords : Recluse; melancholy; happy funeral; religious wounding; empathy; despondency.

Philip Larkin has been recognised as a major Movement poet. Pessimism is the dominating emotion in his poetry. In fact, it is his philosophical approach to life and his over sensitive attitude to human suffering which results in the all pervasive pessimistic ambience of his poetry. Born on 9 August 1922 he lived upto 2 Dec. 1985, the year in which he died leaving behind a meritorious poetic oeuvre. Critics recognize him as an extraordinary poet, novelist and librarian. *The Northship*, his first volume of poetry appeared in 1945. His two novels *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* succeeded this volume. *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* are his other noted poetic volumes. Regarding the note of pessimism in his poetry Anil Bisht remarks that his mind was deeply reflective and open to the other reality :

....a mind that at the same time responds keenly to every feature of the outside world; a mind that catches, not indeed continuously, but every now and then, glimpses of the reality of this world from the point of view of the self, unlinked to time and death... (Bisht, 69)

The note of pessimism dominates several of his poems. "Church Going" is one such poem where the speaker who is none else but the poet himself expresses his pessimistic views regarding religion and the church. He underlines the futility of going to the church and broods over the future of the churches. He says that after every visit to the church he is filled with the feeling that it was nothing but wastage of time. About the future of churches he says that as man's faith in God is dwindling these churches might fall a victim to disuse. In another contemplation, he observes that superstitious women might visit these places to seek superstitious cure to their children's diseases. In short, he is very sceptical about the continuity of faith:

Or, after dark, will dubious women come.
 To make their children touch a particular stone,
 Pick simples for a cancer or on some
 Advised night see walking a dead one?

(Light and Delight, 93)

Larkin was writing at a time when the world was facing the trauma and subsequent depression of the II World War. This all pervasive melancholy was joined by his own thoughtful and gloomy temper. He was born to distinguished parents. His first name was taken from the noted poets Philip Sidney. Having obtained his early education at King Henry VIII Grammar School he moved on to Oxford University from where he graduated with a first class in 1943. Here he made lasting friendship with John Wain and Kingsley Amis. Later on the death of poet laureate, John Betjeman he was offered the distinguished position. However, due to his reclusive nature he did not accept the offer. His friend Kingsley Amis was then given the honour.

After trying at several jobs he was appointed the librarian at the University of Hull in 1954, which he retained till his death in 1985. At personal level there were moments which materialized his marriage but it never happened. He was once engaged to Ruth Bowman but even this was cancelled. He remained a lonely figure throughout his life, living with books and dedicating himself completely to poetry. His four poetic volumes are *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974).

The melancholic note is constantly present in his poems. In the poem "Going", the poet describes an exceptional evening. It is full of darkness and is without all lamps and lights. Unlike other evenings it has no soothing touch. The sight of the usual tree is missing. He feels something beneath his hands. In the next moment he feels a heavy weight upon his hands. The reader easily realizes that the poet is indicating towards death. All through his life he felt the presence of death near and around him. Perhaps this perception might have had its origin in the vast destruction of World War II. As has been mentioned earlier he had no wife and children, so there was an underline sense of loss at the back of his mind. He described his childhood as forgotten boredom. Suddenly he found himself adult with no joy in this phase of life either. In the poem "Dockery and Son" he says that when he visited Oxford after a gap of so many years he was reminded of his student days at the University. The Dean informs him that the son of his friend Dockery is now the student of the university. Larkin regrets the fact that he has no son, no wife and no home. He concludes the poem by stating that the early part of his life was full of tedium and the next full of fear. He reaches the universal truth that however fruitful or fruitless, life ends in death :

Life is first boredom, then fear
 whether or not we use it, it goes

and leaves what something hidden from us chose,
 And age, and then the only end of age.
 (www.poetryfoundation.com)

That he remained unmarried was partly due to the fact that he always had an unfavourable opinion about marriage. In the poem "The Whitsun Weddings" he describes a train journey during which he witnessed scenes of mass marriage. There were newly wed couples who had undergone the ceremony of 'a happy funeral'. At least a dozen such couples had boarded the train. There was no trace of joy on their faces. They wanted the landscape indifferently. His use of phrases like 'a happy funeral' and 'a religious wounding' indicate to the fact that he holds a very disparaging opinion of it. He regards it as a necessary evil of man's life :

The woman shared
 The secret lide a happy funeral;
 While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
 At a religious wounding. (www.poetryfoundation.com)

In the poem *Going Going* he rises above personal considerations and talks about the future of his surroundings. Earlier he was of the opinion that the environment all around him would remain fresh and charged forever. But now he is revising the opinion. Now he is worried that if people go on throwing filth into the sea, even the vast sea would become polluted and would lose its natural beauty. Open space is being covered by jungles of concrete. He will not be surprised if in near future England becomes the leading slum of Europe. Man's greed will destroy the environment which will finally lead to his own destruction :

And garbage are too thick strewn
 To be swept up now, or invent
 Excuses that make then all needs
 I just think it will happen, soon.(www.poetryfoundation.com)

That melancholy is a constant in his poetry is evident in yet another poem "Wants" It is a brief ten line poem of turoquintains. The poet underlines the fact that to wish to be alone is a human instinct. It lies at the root of all human activities. Money is described as a social animal but the fact is that the wish is permanently present and it is very hard to recognize and access it. Outwardly man may be busy in social activities, family gatherings but here is an underline instinct to be alone. In the second stanza, loneliness is replaced by oblivion. Outwardly man wishes to be famous and recognized but at the core of his psyche he wishes to be in the realm of oblivion :

The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,
 The costly aversion of the eyes away from death.
 Beneath it all, the desire for oblivion runs.
 (www.allpoetry.com)

An interesting fact about Philip Larkin is that in 1943 he adopted the pseudonym Brunette Coleman under which he wrote works of fiction, poetry and critical commentary, "*Trouble at Willow Gables*", is one such work. Larkin's concern for the common man continues throughout his poetic oeuvre. Mr. Bleaney is one such poem. This poem depicts an imaginary individual who is given by the poet the name of Bleaney.

This poor fellow is without any belonging and house of his own. It is evident that Mr. Bleaney was as shabby to look as this room was. The speaker in the poem does not know whether Mr. Bleaney was aware of the fact that a man's nature and character could be judged by his mode of living and his habits. The picture present in the poem is the universal image of common man which the poet draws with immense empathy. "Toads" and "Toads Revisited" are two poems in which the poet argues in favour of work. Although he finds a life of leisure to be quite attractive and pleasant, he would yet like to keep himself busy with work. The poet would not like to idle away his time but would like to perform his duties conscientiously so that when death comes, he can have the satisfaction of having worked dutifully, "Toads Revisited" is a mental debate in which the speaker weighs the pros and cons of work and of leisure; and here he comes to the definite conclusion that work is preferable to idleness, to leisure, or to merely observing and watching life around himself. The poem "Explosion" is the description of a tragic incident. It describes the explosion in a coal mine in which a number of people were killed and it also describes the reaction of the wives of those men to the tragic deaths. This poem is full of pathos and sympathetic concern for the poor workers and their lives.

The period in which Larkin was writing was one of realism and anti-romanticism. The Second World War had ended in 1945 and the euphoria over the defeat of the Nazi and Fascist nations and also of imperialist Japan soon ended, giving way to a feeling of despondency over damage which even the victorious Allies had suffered. There was a general feeling of disillusionment and disenchantment among the common people as well as among the writers and artists. Set in this background the poetry of Larkin deals with the prevailing mood of gloom and melancholy.

Larkin could not have portrayed heroes and heroism in the face of the misery and the financial stringency which the country was experiencing. "An Arundel Tomb" is a poem about an Earl and his Countess. The poet does not recognize the feeling of mutual attachment between them in the way the sculptor has shown them as holding hands. But Larkin does not romanticize this attachment. Larkin's individuals are not heroes but common men. Very often the persona or the protagonist in his dramatic monologues is Larkin himself. In these poems he does not romanticize himself in any way. In the poem, "Mr. Bleaney", the speaker is Larkin himself, but the person about whom Larkin is speaking is another man to

whom he has given the name of Bleaney. In "Toads" and "Toads Revisited" Larkin does not adopt a heroic attitude towards work. He does not say that "work is worship". On the contrary, he says that work is a toad squatting on his life. Larkin is surely an anti hero. He does not even adopt a heroic attitude towards death which is one of the most prominent themes in his poetry. Larkin was obsessed with the thought of death, in many poems he reminds us of the inevitability of death. In brief, Larkin is realistic towards everything including religion, love, marriage, death and work. Much of the melancholy that pervades his poetry is the outcome of his realistic and empathetic approach to life.

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