

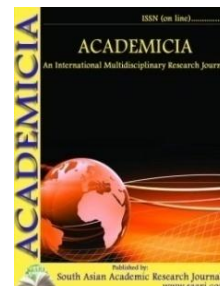


Published by: South Asian Academic Research Journals

ACADEMICIA:

An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

(A Double Blind Refereed & Reviewed International Journal)



THEME OF ALIENATION AND ISOLATION IN PHILIP LARKIN'S POETRY

Mahender Singh*

*Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Kurukshetra University,
Kurukshetra, India.

ABSTRACT

Philip Larkin seems to produce through his poetry a recognizable and democratic vision of his contemporary society, in opposition to the high-minded and irrelevant concern of Modernism. However, he is a poet of deep complexity and contradiction which is depicted in nearly all his poems. Although he appears to stand firmly against the values of Modernism, yet at the same time his poetry is chiefly concerned with one of Modernism's key themes; the alienation and isolation of modern life. Therefore, the present research article deals with the theme of alienation and isolation in the poetry of Philip Larkin.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Larkin is type of poet who continuously goes to considerable lengths in order to deliberately present himself as a poet of the ordinary, making the mundane poetic and finding significance in the commonplace objects of daily life. He got immense popularity and recognition as a first rate poet among the literary figures of London with the publication of *The Less Deceived* in 1955. Despite his success as a literary figure in his own lifetime, Larkin eschewed the London literary scene, and chose to live a deeply provincial life; which is the testimony of his predilection for the isolated life style. Even his job as a librarian involves "handing out antiquated tripe of the lower levels of the general public" (Larkin 85). He continuously gave his service as a librarian throughout his literary life, despite no financial imperative to do so; the year before his death, he even turned down the office of Poet Laureate.

Larkin's poems have an undoubted focus on the everyday life, with their surface examination of the monotonous trivia of daily life; from advertising hoardings, to dreary tented

lodgings and even to 'cut grass.' He also bears the stamp of being a committed literary traditionalist, who is chiefly associated with a group of poets, including Kingsley Amis and D. J. Enright, "most of them university teachers, known as the Movement,' who stood for clarity, traditional forms and reasonableness" (Lerner 4). The manifesto of the 'Movement,' to which Larkin ascribes, is equated to a "refusal to abandon a rational structure and comprehensible language, even when the verse is most highly charged with sensuous or emotional intent" (Lerner 4). Larkin believes in acknowledging poetry as something not to be offered up for detached and arid literary criticism, but as a way of preserving experience by replicating emotion in others, and "generating delight in the state of living" (Larkin 115). He therefore seems to present it as logical in order to publicly position himself firmly against Modernism and its preponderance of learned literary allusions, complex structural techniques and repeated use of, in Larkin's derisive phrase, a 'myth-kitty.' For Larkin, Modernism and literary criticism are intertwined in a vicious circle of interdependence because "criticism [is] designed to prevent people using their eyes and ears and understandings to report pleasure and discomfort. In such circumstances, Modernism is bound to flourish" (Larkin 294).

This combination of the modernist themes and traditional structure comes to the fore in a poem such as "Mr. Bleaney." The apparently simple conceit of the poem shows the narrow moving into lodgings previously inhabited by the title character of the verse. However, as is common throughout Larkin's poetry, a simple and accessible opening situation is merely the foundation on which he can make subtle and astute observations on the human condition, especially the psychology of ordinariness. While the narrator and Bleaney have shared the same bleak, lonely room—"Bed, upright chair, sixty watt bulb, no hook/ Behind the door, no room for books and bags," their experience and impression of the same situation is portrayed as differing vastly from one another, at least originally, in the mind of the narrator. While the poet persona, the 'I' of the poem, passively despairs that all his life has yielded him is this "one hired box" with its "fusty bed" and "thin and frayed" curtains, he doubts that Bleaney ever felt the same sense of misery and failure that he himself admits to. Indeed, from the landlady's second-hand descriptions of Bleaney, it appears that he is certainly a more optimistic and active figure than the Larkin character, as emphasized by his repeated attempts to win the football pools—"He kept on plugging at the four always." The poet persona is juxtaposed as being both superior to and jealous of the humdrum Mr. Bleaney; disparaging his attempts to create a "bit of garden" on a "strip of building land," while at the same time being envious of Bleaney's potential freedom from nights of insomnia watching "the frigid wind." In the final line of the poem, Larkin goes on to undermine any claim to narratorial superiority over Bleaney as his persona has to finally admit he simply does not know whether Bleaney has access to the same thoughts and feelings as himself. The refinement of felling that the narrator has is both all too tangible, making him clearly aware of how his lodgings represent the empty failure of his life, but also tragically limited; he is alienated from an ordinary man such as Bleaney because he has no idea whether he can share his own sense of deep isolation. The combination of this duality means Larkin, both as persona and person, must exist outside what is considered the ordinary. As critics Laurence Lerner aptly states that "Mr. Bleaney could not have written 'Mr. Bleaney'" (8).

This sense of remove from everyday experience runs throughout Larkin's poetry and is especially evident in "The Whitsun Weddings." The poem recounts a Saturday train journey between Hull and London, and the narrator's impressions of the weddings which he witnesses

occurring across the length of the journey around the country side. The Larkin persona exists in a state of passive ironic detachment from events, observing from the distance of his train window “The fathers with broad belts under their suits/ And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;/ An uncle shouting smut.” The tension between Larkin’s somewhat snobbish sense of superiority to the ordinary people he depicts, coupled to his wish for a sense of belonging in his life, is a key trope of Larkin’s work and is clearly in evidence in “The Whitsun Weddings.” Although the narrator mocks “the perms, the nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes” that are on display, the poem’s progression from the first person singular to the first person plural connotes the narrator has gained access to a feeling, albeit transitory, of community through what he has viewed over the course of the day; “I was late getting away [From Hull]” becomes “We hurried towards London,” after witnessing the “bunting-dressed/ Coach-party annexes” and “fresh couples” on his journey. As a Larkin poem however, it is perhaps no surprise that the narrator is still at a reach the realization that the people he has seen are all interconnected in that “their lives would all contain this hour,” it is coupled with the poignant understanding that it is only the poet who can see this—“none/ Thought of the others they would never meet”. Just as the wedding parties are from each other, Larkin is both connected yet utterly separate from society. There seems that the poet feels estranged or separated from his milieu, work or self and displays the lack of commitments to shared social conventions of behaviour.

The theme of alienation is more explicitly spelt out in the poem “Essential Beauty,” a title which sardonically mocks the idea that advertising gives access to a form of Platonic beauty. In this poem, however, the distance between “how life should be” and how it actually is, is shared equally among all the characters, from “the pensioner” to the “dying smokers” and “the boy puking his heart out in the Gents.” This is arguably the first poem in the collection, where the poetic narrator is sharing the experiences of his normal characters, rather than merely observing it. The poem focuses on the contrast between the unreal existence depicted in advertisements and the real world “where nothing’s made/ As new or washed quite clean.” Larkin’s sympathies are clearly with the inhabitants of the real world, as suggested in the rhyme which juxtaposes reality and advertising fiction—“Rather they rise/ Serenely to proclaim pure crust, pure foam/ Pure coldness to our live imperfect eyes.” The opposition between “pure” and “imperfect” suggests an equal opposition between the “coldness” of advertising perfection in conflict with the warmth that can be found in real life. This is perhaps one of Larkin’s most optimistic poetic statements, as he tells his reader, albeit indirectly, that life, for all its imperfections and melancholy, is infinitely preferable to ersatz and sterile images of “Well-balanced families, in fine Midsummer weather, [who] owe their smiles, their cars,/ Even their youth, to that small cube each hand/ Stretches towards.”

In a poem such as “The Old Fools,” published in *High Windows* ageing and death is no longer presented in the abstract terms of “Nothing to be Said” and “Home is so Sad,” but faced directly as a “terrifying present reality embodied in the senility of geriatric people” (Day 720), something Larkin viewed with “terrible dread” as personally fast-approaching” (Larkin 576). While the poem begins with an apparent declaration of disgust with drooling, incontinent, old people, over its course it displays great sympathy for the condition of the aged, and their retreat into the past as a means of escaping the unpalatable present—“This is where they live:/ Not here and now, but where all happened once.” Larkin goes on to make the final admittance that the poet’s anger at the specter of the “whole hideous inverted childhood” of ageing is borne not out

of contempt, but fear—“We shall [all] find out” eventually what it means to be an old fool. The employment of the first person plural sees Larkin no longer at a remove from his ordinary characters. Whatever his literary learning and refined sensibility, Larkin knows that death is an experience, that everyone must share, and it is this commonality that brings him a sense of community with his characters and his readers.

“The Building” is another melancholic poem about death, ageing and disease that examines people’s futile attempts to beat mortality, as embodied in the form of a hospital building. Larkin uses oblique description throughout the poem to create an air of terrifying mystery, while an irregular rhyme scheme that carries over to succeeding stanzas continues the mood of undefined threat that pervades the poem. However, while the poem does have an undeniably morose air, it is equally a celebration of life; when viewed from inside the hospital, the trivial artifacts of everyday life take on a transcendent and beautiful quality, signifying the freedom of existence:

Then, past the gate,
 Traffic; a locked church; short terraced streets
 Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch
 Their separates from the cleaners—O world,
 Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch
 Of any hand from here! (70)

Larkin’s candid, yet sympathetic; understanding of the human condition is present in the above mentioned poem. Larkin is accepting himself as an active agent in society, a progression from the passive persona of “Mr. Bleaney” and “The Whitsun Weddings.” Ageing has finally made him a member of the society he once wryly depicted from the position of outsider.

Therefore, it is fair to say that he is a poet who did successfully achieve his aim of presenting a recognizable vision of everyday life with an absolute clarity as well as pathos. While he shares many of the Modernist concerns, chiefly absence, isolation and emptiness in the modern world, his success is to marry these themes to traditional and more accessible forms of poetry, free from pretentiousness and cloudy verbiage. Even though Larkin meditates his own experience as a male bachelor into his poetry, this does not limit his perspective on the rest of contemporary society. Instead, in *The Whitsun Weddings*, his detached status allows him to view it more clearly and acerbically, while in *High Windows*, Larkin’s own “terrible dread” about death removes his isolation from society and brings a new, poignant concentration on the inevitability of ageing and death.

WORKS CITED

Day, Roger. Larkin. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987. Print.

Larkin, Philip. Collected Poems. London: Marvel Press and Faber, 1988. Print.

Larkin, Philip. Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982. London: Faber and Faber, 1983. Print.

Larkin, Philip. Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985. Ed. Anthony Thwaite. London: Faber and Faber, 1992. Print.

Lerner, Laurence. Philip Larkin. Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1997. Print.