



PHILIP LARKIN AS THE LAUREATE OF THE COMMON MAN DEALING WITH RITUALS AND AFFIRMATIONS IN HIS POETIC REALM: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the outstanding craftsmanship of Philip Larkin who is regarded as one of the hallmarks of his age and reveals how his technical skill and craftsmanship excellence received universal appeal and recognition for, he is very much dedicated to reach out his readers, for that he writes about the life around him in the words of the society close at hand. It beautifully stresses in this with Philip Larkin as the laureate of the common man.

Key Words: *Detachment, Purification, Affirmation, Versification, Ritual, Perennial Confrontation, Baptism.*

No doubt, Philip Larkin is recognized as a figure of considerable importance amongst poets in the world today, who has established himself abroad not only as an excellent craftsman but also a poet par excellence. As Anthony Thwaite puts it, “Other poets inevitably look imperfect set next to Larkin, whatever is boring or pretensions or incompetent in them is magnified by his virtues” (P149). The reason why scholars and researchers have become fully aware of his poetic brilliance is none other than the fact that Larkin is a poet whose themes rely on formal perfection and orderly arrangement. E.L.Black is right in saying

“Clarity of vision characterizes his verse and he is blessed in having a reliable instinct for orderly arrangement and a respect for formal perfection. He makes the most of his gifts and has an accurate sense of his limitations” (P151).

In the span of about thirty years, Larkin is said to have published only five volumes of verse, including the privately printed and elusive **XX Poems** (1951), two novels, a book on jazz and chosen the poem’s in **The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse**. Philip Larkin was born in Coventry on 9 August 1922. He had his school education at King Henry VII school and even from his school years, he was in the habit of writing both verse and prose. As the love for literature was instilled in Larkin even in his youth, he was able to greedily consume the works of D.H.Lawrence, Aldous Huxley and a few others. He contributed poems to the **Convention** and **The Listener**. Having completed schooling, Larkin went to St.John’s college, oxford where he did study English literature and language, thereby finding oxford to be “a nourishing experience. Larkin himself stated thus:

“I made some very good friends and enjoyed being there, but I never had the **Brideshead Revisited** feeling about it. I could never write there... When I left. I felt a great upsurge of well, since its so long ago I’ll call it creative relief” (P 93).

At the age of 21, Larkin left oxford and joined the library of Wellington. In 1944 some of his poems appeared in **Poetry from Oxford in Wartime**, edited by William Bell and published by the Fortune Press. In 1945, **The North Ship** saw the light of day. From Wellington, he went to University College, Leicester in 1946. **A Girl in Winter** came out in 1947. Three years later, Larkin migrated to Belfast to work as a sub-librarian at Queen’s University. In 1951, he did publish **XX poems** and his publication of **The Less Deceived** in 1955 won for him good reputation and recognition as a poet of eminence resulting in the publication of **The Whitsun Weddings** in 1964 which won him the Queen’s Gold medal for poetry in 1965. Recognized world-wide as a true representative of Movement Poetry, his writing is “a direct and personal response to particular experience and he has never withdrawn from facing the great theme on principle, nor the heightened diction that is often necessary for its statement” (Timms 20).

Larkin’s verse possesses a performance sadly missing in other poets of the group of movement poets. Technically too, he is far superior to the rest and his rare ability in describing people, places and events with an accompanying



keen sense of economy, place him in a class of his own. He was regarded as the most talented poet among those who wrote for **New Lines**. Commenting on Larkin's poetic genius, Ian Hamilton observes as:

“... The poet whose contribution to New Lines seems to Me to have any lasting potency; at one level, it could be said that Philip Larkin's poems provide a precise model for what the Movement was supposed to be seeking. But having noted his lucidity, his debunker ... and other such “typical” attributes, one would still be left with the different and deeper task of describing the quality of his peculiar genius, the task of talking about poems rather than postures” (P 73).

A reading of poems like “The Whitsun Weddings”, “Dockery and Son”, and “An Arundel Tomb” does neatly bring home the point that in **The Whitsun Weddings**, Larkin's development as a poet is pronounced where his technical skill shows greater competence and eloquence. In **High Windows** (1974), his fourth and best book it is found that “alongside poems of the most intense gloom and alarm, Larkin develops the affirmative features of his talent” (Brown John 18). The importance of the ritual element is stressed and a more positive vision of life, embracing the hope that happiness is within the reach of a chosen few is described. Rituals and affirmation often appear in Larkin's poetry. “Rituals” for Larkin are not always connected with religious rites – as the word traditionally means - but rather with events and activities which through repetition assume an importance of their own. Such recurring movements invest life with greater meaning and a sense of permanence is gained through the observance of symbolic deeds. Moments of affirmation are noted down but at the same time, the swift passing nature of these moments is readily acknowledged.

In Larkin's verse “profound, even primitive beliefs” are evident. For him, rituals deserve respect because they represent ancient, deep-seated feelings whose basic premises cannot be tempered with. Among the poems which concentrate on the importance of rituals in our lives are “Show Saturday”, “To the Sea” and “Church Going”. In “Show Saturday”, “Larkin discovers that the opportunity offering itself when people in a community get together is one capable of invigorating men and women. After the show is over, there is the hope expressed that “the show may provide some strength during the winter; something which stands apart from the ordinary calendar time; a moment which transcends the ordinary profane moment of day to day” (Watson 357) or as Larkin phrases it;

“... something people do,
Not noticing how time's rolling smithy-smoke
Shadows much greater gestures;
Something they share
That breaks ancestrally each year into
Regenerate union. Let it always be there” (P 39).

Earlier, Larkin strolls through tents and enclosures, closely watching what people do; the games they play, the stuff they buy or sell and finally sees the participants “loading jumps on a truck / Back now private addresses, gates and lamps” (P 38). His rejection at the plight of individual human beings is compensated” by such rituals as are “performed regularly in the same places and perpetuated by the will of men is general” (Brownjohn 22). The successful existence of these rituals owes to the fact that men have from experience learned the need and influence of symbolic deeds. In “To the Sea”, his joy reaches its peak when he realizes that the seaside customs beach where crowds come in large numbers:

“It may be that through habit these do best,
Coming to water clumsily undressed
Yearly; teaching their children by a sort
Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought” (P 10).

In the final lines of “The Whitsun Weddings” Larkin attempts to define the response he feels at the sight of the newly-wed couples in the compartment as the train approaches London:



“A sense of falling,
Like an arrow-shower,
Sent out of sight,
Somewhere becoming rain” (P 23).

There is the hint of “the change wrought in human destinies by carrying through certain observances, the hint of fruition achieved somewhere” (P 15). This, in turn, is a pointer to the underlying truth of rituals. “Church Going” begins with an air of detachment but concludes on a serious note which proves the church worthy of reverence even in our agnostic age:

“Since someone will forever be surprising,
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in?
If only that so many dead lie round” (P 29).

The poem reveals our continuing need to recognize and symbolize our deepest nature” (King 33). The three important Christian functions – baptism, marriage and death – give the church a solemnity which works on even the poet who has no idea. “What this accounted frowsy barn is worth” admits that “it pleases me to stand in silence here”. In other words, Larkin strikes an affirmative note. “Water” has Larkin vowing to utilize water as the fundamental material if he “were called in / to construct a religion.” He refers to “all the traditional symbols – purification, renewal, the life-giving force” and the poem comes to represent “a miniature of affirmation”. An abundantly positive mood prevails:

“And I should rise in the east
A glass of water
Where any – angled light
Would congregate endlessly”.

“Coming” has Larkin in an ecstatic frame of mind in the first half of the poem and the reason for this is owing to the “reaffirmation of spring, of the possibility of new growth” which is akin to” a sudden visitation of grace to the poet to allow him to enjoy the scene and season without his fully understanding the reasons for such an unexpected accession of delight” (King 29). Larkin is moved by a thrush’s song, “It’s fresh-peeled voice / Astonishing the brickwork.” But it is in “solar” (P 33) that one can find Larkin’s most precise expression of affirmation.

Larkin is “the Laureate of the common man” for his themes are pertinent and comprehensible to the man on the street. As is seen, he takes on themes such as time’s effect on man, the perennial confrontation between reality and illusion, loneliness, failure and death, rituals and affirmation that do not escape his grasp. His tone of voice is so personal that it does not lend itself easily to imitation and what is to be commended in his poetry is that it is to be commended in his poetry is that it is “a poetry of great emotion, accuracy and control, which draws on a whole range of common emotions without ever becoming common place” (Thwaite 146).

To conclude, Philip Larkin’s position amongst poets writing today is no doubt, sound. Along with Ted Hughes, he is considered to be Britain’s frontline poet. Larkin is a man who seldom travels abroad but his fame has slowly but surely spread. Those who have “studied the subtleties of his technique, the rhythmic facility of his versification, the strict control of his medium, or who have experienced his profound understanding of and deep compassion for, the dilemmas and the sufferings of ordinary humanity, there must be few who would deny him the distinction of being the authentic voice of our troubled day” (Peschmann 57). No doubt, he is a writer of poetic brilliance and clarity of vision.



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