

Themes, Structure and Vision in Philip Larkin's *The Less Deceived*

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Philip Larkin was a leading poet of what has come to be called 'The Movement' in English Poetry in the 1950's which rejected the Yeatsian neo-romantic style of the British poets who had emerged a decade before. His immense popularity among the young and the old alike led David Perkins to describe him as "the last great poet of English language" (Perkins:425). Although Larkin remained almost a recluse till the end of his life and avoided giving personal interviews, his poetry helps us delve deep into the mind of the man who wrote it. A study of Philip Larkin's four volumes of poetry – *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974) confirms that his poetry is "an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are". His distinction lay in his elevation of common, everyday subjects and themes to sublime levels despite the use of simple and colloquial language. Larkin is resolute, forthright, witty and gloomy by turns but underlying all these moods is a genuine, uncultivated, sincere philistinism. His pessimism, which elicited both hostile criticism and passionate defense from a wide variety of critics, forms the core of his poetic corpus. This was a man who declared famously that deprivation for him was what daffodils were for William Wordsworth. The results of his life in the shape of his poems are however gifts, not deprivations.

Philip Larkin was born in 1922 in Coventry, England. His father, Sydney Larkin, was the city treasurer, who admired Hitler. Describing his parents, Larkin classifies them as "rather awkward and not very good at being happy" (Larkin, interview with *The Observer*, 1985:47) His was an uneventful and unmemorable childhood which he spent living in a house described by Larkin himself (in the same interview) as "dull, pot-bound and slightly mad...". Larkin was educated at King Henry VIII School where he wrote for the school magazine. At the age of 18 he entered St. John's College, Oxford. He studied English, met Kingsley Amis, listened to jazz, and was known as a bookish dandy. During World War II he was exempted from military service because of bad eyesight. After graduation he became a librarian, first in the library of an urban district council in Shropshire, later in university libraries in Leicester and Belfast. From 1955 till his death he was the Librarian of Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull. Although he had a number of love-affairs, Larkin dreaded marriage and family, and never married. However, he managed to maintain three long relationships; Larkin spent most of his life with Monica Jones, a Professor of English, whom he had met when he was twenty-four.

Shortly after refusing the Laureateship, when his friend John Betjeman died, Larkin underwent surgery for cancer of the oesophagus, and died within a year on December 2, 1985. Despite wishes to destroy his papers, his manuscripts were saved. Andrew Motion, one of Larkin's literary executors, published a controversial biography of the poet in 1993. It revealed Larkin's politically incorrect views like Nazi sympathies, misogyny and casual racism. In an interview he had once defended himself:

People say I'm very negative, and I suppose I am, but the impulse for producing a poem is never negative; the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to have done. (<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/larkin.html>).

As a poet, Larkin made his debut with the collection *The North Ship* (1945), consisting of poems written in short lines and carefully worked-out rhyme-schemes. It was published at his own expense and showed the influence of Yeats. It was followed by two novels, *Jill* (1946), a coming-of-age story, dedicated his friend Kingsley Amis and *A Girl In Winter* (1947), after which he abandoned fiction. "I tried very hard to write a third novel for about five years", he later said. "The ability to do so had just vanished." (<http://books.guardian.co.uk/lrb/articles>). His lucky break came in 1955, with the

publication of *The Less Deceived*, which attracted extremely favourable attention from the public and critics alike. Larkin's association at this time with 'The Movement' contributed to the escalation of his popularity. His next volume of poems *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), triumphantly confirmed his enviable reputation as a poet and led to his winning of the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry. His crowning glory came with his last volume of poems, *High Windows* (1974) and established him as one of the finest poets in the English literary history. "Aubade", his last great poem, was published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in December 1977. If this had been the only poem Larkin had ever written, his place in English poetry would still be secure.

The Less Deceived (1955) was rightly regarded as Larkin's first mature work. It is a milestone in his life in many ways and firmly established his place among the most admired and famous poets of his generation. *The Less Deceived* contains twenty-nine poems which are diverse in their subjects yet similar in their basic theme of deceptions; as in deceiving of oneself by fantasies and delusions rather than deceiving others. As Simon Petch puts it: "It is shown to be a consequence of our tendency to project our desires into our lives, and then allow our lives to be governed by them" (Petch 1981:40). In most poems – as seen previously in his novels – a simple image or incident is chosen around which an entire commentary is constructed so as to make its meaning explicit. Like Hardy, Larkin is of the view that suffering and sorrow is an enriching experience for mankind because it eventually leads man to his spiritual growth and emotional maturity. This attitude is aptly demonstrated in the poem "Deceptions" based on the drugging and subsequent rape of a young woman in the 19th century London. Throughout his address to the rape victim, the poet's voice is compassionate, yet he feels helpless because of his knowledge that his sympathy cannot compensate for the degradation and pain that the girl has suffered.

Even so distant, I can taste the grief ,
Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.
..I would not dare ,
Console you if I could
(TLD: 13)

However, simultaneously, Larkin observes with clinical detachment that in comparison to her assailant, the girl is 'less deceived' because the rapist mistakenly felt that gratification of his sexual lust would bring him fulfilment. Thus the rapist's self-deception was of a greater magnitude than his act of having deceived the girl .

For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived , out on that bed ,
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
To burst into fulfillment's desolate attic.
(TLD: 13)

At one point the wretchedness and desolation of the girl is poignantly brought out by contrasting the image of her waking up in her room with the pre-occupied , hurried, unfeeling life of London which "bows the other way". Thus, sound, movement and imagery are aptly used to convey the horror of what the girl has experienced .The rhyme-pattern of the poem – the linking of the first and the third sentences of the poem to the second one in the first stanza and persistence of the first rhyme-sound throughout the second stanza–helps to underscore the poem's meaning and ensures stability through a developing syntactical pattern of statement, question and explanation.

One of Larkin's cardinal beliefs is that man is subservient to time and that human plans and hopes, in fact mankind's very existence is meaningless in the grip of this remorseless entity. Yet, ironically enough, it is time that we look upon and cling to, as the ultimate saviour which will fulfil all our dreams and eradicate all our worries in future. This idea is expanded in his poem "Next Please", where Larkin obliquely condemns the tendency to take recourse to an immature belief that the future will take care of the adverse circumstances one is perpetually facing in the present.

Always too eager for the future , we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.

Something is always approaching; everyday

Till then we say ...

(TLD: 20)

Larkin uses the image of a ship to symbolize these futile hopes. Heedless of the steep fall ahead, our eyes remain firmly fixed on the “armada of promises” appearing on the horizon. We oscillate between frustration and expectancy at their delay in reaching us:

How slow they are! And how much time they waste,

Refusing to make haste! (TLD: 20)

Larkin shatters this bubble of self-deception by reinforcing that most things appear more attractive in anticipation and that it is futile to expect the future to make up for all our past disappointments .

We think each one will heave to and unload

All good into our lives, all we are owed

For waiting so devoutly and so long.

But we are wrong:

(TLD: 20)

“Wants” can be categorized as the saddest poem of *The Less Deceived* because in it one sees not just an individual but an entire civilization longing for death.

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:

However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards

However we follow the printed directions of sex

However the family is photographed under the flagstaff-

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:

Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,

The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,

The costly aversion of the eyes from death-

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.

(Schmidt.M.(ed.) *Eleven British Poets* :97)

Larkin thus forces the readers to face the fact that death and time are two invincible elements that continuously work against all human hopes and crush all efforts to fulfil spiritual desires. This poem is thus another example of the underlying note of sadness that seems to flow through Larkin's poems, highlighting his belief in sadness as being the basic emotion which connects us compassionately with other human beings.

Many of Larkin's early poems as well as later ones have death as their subject. So is the case with his poem “Going”, where oblivion comes in the guise of an evening.

There is an evening coming in

Across the fields, one never seen before,

That lights no lamps.

(Schmidt.M.(ed.) *Eleven British Poets* : 98)

One is reminded of T.S Eliot's “Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock”, where the evening is compared to a patient etherized on a table. The concreteness and seriousness displayed here is reminiscent of the ‘Review Poets’ of the sixties rather than of the Movement Poets. Larkin also talks about the growing apprehension of death in a person's mind as he advances from youth to maturity.

Where has the tree gone, that locked
Earth to the sky ? What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?
What loads my hands down?

(Schmidt.M.(ed.) Eleven British Poets : 98)

The reader is thus overwhelmed with the picture of death as an alien and powerful force in the face of which its victim is steadily deprived of any intellectual and sensory response.

Philip Larkin's work is also characterized by a conflict between the harsh realities of life and life as it 'should' or 'could' have been. Poems like "Poetry of Departures", "Reasons for Attendance", "I Remember, I Remember" and "Toads" highlight this tension.

In "Toads", a man's desire to escape from the humdrum routine work of life is given an imaginative interpretation by Larkin. The office work is compared to a toad that seems to squat on the poet's life, who cannot free himself from it because of his social conditioning which directs his conscience to accept work as a necessary part of life. Further, the work he does has the obvious advantage of becoming a source of income for paying the monthly bills.

Six days of the week it soils
With its sickening poison-
Just for paying a few bills!
That's out of proportion.

(TLD: 32-33)

Larkin laments that the monotony of work has deadened his creative faculties. However, he goes on to humorously argue that even those who live on their wits alone don't starve:

Lots of folks live on their wits:
Lecturers , lispers
Losels , loblolly – men, louts –
They don't end as paupers;

(TLD: 32-33)

The poet further laments the lacking of the courage to say 'stuff your pension' and acknowledges that:

..something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me, too;
Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
And cold as snow,
And will never allow me to blarney
My way to getting
The fame and the girl and the money
All at one sitting.

(TLD: 32-33)

On the whole, it is a light and humorous poem with a serious self-awareness underlying it. The lines alternate in a tripping rhythm of trimetres and diametres and the language is idiomatic and lively. The amusing imagery makes the readers sympathize with the poet in his cry against the shackles of conventional employment.

Larkin's ability to create centres of consciousness distinct from himself is reflected in this poem "Wedding Wind". The speaker- a young woman who has just got married and is filled with joy and

love- is a fictitious character diametrically opposite in traits and attitudes to what Larkin is. In the first seventeen lines we find a description of the girl's surroundings on her wedding night and the chaos being caused by the winds outside.

The wind blew all my wedding-day,
And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind;
And a stable door was banging, again and again,
That he must go and shut it, leaving me
...When he came back
He said the horses were restless, and I was sad
That any man or beast that night should lack
The happiness I had.

(Schmidt.M.(ed.) *Eleven British Poets* : 95)

Here again, another aspect of Larkin's philosophy is manifested: that pleasure needs to be shared with everybody for it to become truly meaningful and that it takes a pure uninhibited heart to desire it so. Another point in focus is that it is our attitude to a particular situation or event that causes pleasure or pain. So the high-wind that dominated the wedding night, instead of quashing the bride's enthusiasm leaves her contented and happy. The poem is divided into two parts, night and day or love and work. The morning brings with it a return to the pressing reality of domestic necessity, yet the bride's experience of love is so all-pervading that she wishes to involve the whole universe in her happiness and tries to accommodate it in her prosaic world of the 'chipped pail' and the 'hanging cloth' on the line. Subsequently, the simple and descriptive tone of the poem is replaced by a sober one, which underscores the impermanence of the very happiness it had hitherto celebrated.

... Shall I be let to sleep
Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?
Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, conclude
Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?

(Schmidt.M.(ed.) *Eleven British Poets* : 95)

Thus, having merged his voice with that of the bride, the poet reminds us that death is the ultimate limitation in her happiness. The wind, which until now has symbolised the inspirational force which has taken over the bride's life is now likened to "a thread carrying beads", thus hinting at the frailty of her experience. About this poem Geoffery Harvey feels that: "The dramatic monologue allows Larkin the emotional freedom to explore a romantic, Lawrentian universe.... a world which is also evoked in the rich biblical cadence in the concluding lines."(Harvey 1983: 65)

One of the most celebrated, analysed, anthologized and widely quoted poems of Larkin is "Church Going" which went on to become the show piece of 'The Movement'. The development of the poem is basically concerned with revealing a growth in wisdom acquired through the habit of church-going. So subtle is the poet's technique in this respect that by the time the readers reach the sombre tones at the end of the poem, they have almost forgotten the causally informal tone of its opening:

Once I'm sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
... And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,
(TLD: 28-29)

Thus, in the very beginning, the speaker becomes the reader's representative, and details of this particular individual's church visit is what comprises the second stanza, too. The third stanza displays a shift in tone from dramatic immediacy to a universalizing of the experience as the speaker starts wondering about the future and function of churches.

When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

(TLD: 28-29)

In the fourth and fifth stanza the speaker carries this train of thought further and speculates on who will be the last person to visit the church as a church. This forms a prelude to the final stanza which is different from the rest not only in grammar-the tenses return and pronoun gives way to general 'someone'- but also in language which loses its colloquialism and becomes rather earnest and dignified.

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
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.

(TLD: 28-29)

The last stanza is a solution to the problem that the poet had posed to himself at the beginning of the poem. The poet who initially had been "bored, uniformed", and slightly cynical about going into the church, finally realizes that his 'church-going' has satisfied in him "a hunger to be serious" and even if the church, as a symbol of unity of events- like birth, marriage and death-may decay, but life would indeed be poorer if an individual's casual visiting of a church falls into ruin. As Simon Petch puts it, " 'Church Going' is a poem about learning rather than about being 'undeceived'. The speaker is struggling towards knowledge rather than working his way out of illusion." (Petch 1981: 57)

Larkin's 'love poems' form another category in *The Less Deceived* and includes poems such as "Lines on A Young Lady's Photograph Album", "If, My Darling", "Maiden Name" and "No Road". Each poem seems to affirm Larkin's contention that the famous brilliance of love is one of the supreme illusions of man. A broken relationship is the theme of "No Road" and is expressed through the metaphor of a disused road. The completeness of the break is envisaged by the first stanza in terms of a barrier of bricks and trees:

Since we agree to let the road between us
All to disuse,
And bricked our gates up, planted trees to screen us,
And turned all times eroding agents loose,
Silence, and space, and strangers-our neglect
Has not had much effect.

(TLD: 26)

This poem is not just about the end of a friendship but encompasses wider issues too- the extent to which an individual can control his life and the effect of time. The final stanza shows the speaker as a non-interfering and passive observer in the hand of impersonal time. This arouses in him a feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment on the one hand and a sense of his failure on the other.

To watch that world come up like a cold sun,
Rewarding others, is my liberty,
Not to prevent it is my will's fulfilment,
Willing it, my ailment.
(TLD: 26)

This final paradoxical stanza has Metaphysical connotations as it obviously combines thought and feeling together. Roger Day aptly concludes, "The feeling itself is both melancholy and stoic, but part of the retrospection is a degree of tenderness which entitles sense that the relationship, though over, is not dead". (Day 1976: 38)

"Maiden Name", once again, has time and memory as its theme and represents "a process of definition" according to Patrick Swinden. In this retrospective mediation, Larkin subtly expounds his feelings about a change of a girl's name after her marriage

Marrying left your maiden name disused
Its five light sounds no longer mean your face,
Your voice, and all your variants of grace;
(TLD: 33)

While musing on the girl's name, the speaker talks about the categorical division between the past and the present, but he also maintains that the link between them remains intact because of a sense of continuity between the two. Only the form changes.

... Try whispering it slowly.
No, it means you. Or, since you are past and gone,
It means what we feel now about you then :
(TLD: 33)

Since nothing happens between the poet and the girl, the sense of the dramatic comes from the change in the poet's mood and conduct rather than the situation. As is his general tendency, Larkin puts a break on his sentimental musings towards the end and the last stanza displays a catharsis of the raw emotion of the earlier ones. The movement is from attachment to detachment and is logically expressed thus:

So your old name shelters our faithfulness,
Instead of losing shape and meaning less
With your depreciating luggage laden.
(TLD: 33)

The whole poem displays an effortless elegance and lightness of diction which is the result of partly using rhyming couplets (abacba) and partly of a flexible use of iambic pentametres.

"Lines On A Young Lady's Photograph Album", the opening poem of *The Less Deceived*, is highly dramatic and is reminiscent of C. Day Lewis' 'The Album'. It is in the form of an address to a lady whose snapshots in an album are being viewed by the poet in her presence. The constant shifts in mood and tone express the effects that the past has on the present. The poem begins in a light-hearted manner with the poet in the process of opening an album:

At last you yielded up the album, which
Once open, sent me distracted. All your ages

Matt and glossy on the thick black pages!

Too much confectionary, too rich:

I choke on such nutritious images.

(TLD: 11-12)

He sees that the photographs hold the past moments with all their imperfections, and muses on the nature of photography:

But O photography! as no art is,

Faithful and disappointing ! that records

Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,

And will not censor blemishes

Like washing-lines, and Hall's-Distemper boards,

(TLD: 11-12)

At this point the poet's mood becomes sombre as he reflects on the effects of someone else's past on the present. It becomes clear that for him, meaning and vitality are condensed in the past and its images and that her photographs are more real to him than the girl beside him. This is succinctly summed up by David Timms thus: "The poet can risk engagement with the girl in the photograph, whereas the girl who stands before him may make demands he cannot fulfil." (Timms 1973: 79). The past gives the poet an opportunity to preserve his memories and to reminisce about them whenever he wants:

In short, a past that no-one now can share

No matter whose your future ; calm and dry,

It holds you like a haven, and you lie

Unvariably lonely there,

Smaller and clearer as the years go by.

(TLD: 11-12)

Other poems in this volume which feature women are "Latest Face" and "If, My Darling". The former is characterized by the same sense of detachment as his other so-called love- poems are. It begins with a sense of wonder and delight that the beauty of the lady in question is for him alone but subsequently the poet starts getting disturbed at what 'real untidy air' will do to his feelings and the conclusion echoes the poet's strong emotions as he questions whether this 'latest face' will overwhelm him or whether a denial of his feelings will lead to madness.

The second poem mentioned above "If, My Darling" which has a kind of anti-climax, because what originally had appeared as a lover's invitation to his beloved to get to know him better- 'jump, like Alice, with floating skirt into my head'- turns out to be a cynical dismissal of love as just another evasion of reality when the poet says that in his head, Alice would just find a mental slum filled with vicious rubbish instead of Victorian comfort to which she is accustomed. This, he jibes, would 'knock my darling off her unpriceable pivot'. This poem once again reaffirms Martin Dodsworth's view that:

His love poems are often sad anti-love poems: they build up to the romantic vision that it was almost true. This is, however, a pathetic moment because when it comes, he speaks with so much feeling that we know that Larkin is not able to eradicate the tempting falsehoods about love and kindness from his heart: he wishes that things were not as he insisted they are. (Dodsworth 1964: 87)

"At Grass", which is the concluding poem of *The Less Deceived* is considered the most flawless poem written by Philip Larkin up to that point of his poetic career. The pleasures and penalties of retirement form the theme of this poem, which features old race-horses resting in their stables. The effect is akin to that of seeing a film and hearing a commentary simultaneously. This was a conscious technique used by Larkin as he wrote this poem after watching a film on racehorses in retirement made by Brown Jack. In the first stanza, Larkin uses simple words to create the pathos of race-horses standing purposeless and anonymous, seeming to slowly fade into the darkness of death.

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in
Till wind distresses tail and mane;
Then one crops grass, and moves about
- The other seeming to look on -
And stands anonymous again.

(TLD: 45)

The second and third stanzas take us back to the triumphs of the racehorse's youth and the colourful vitality which used to surround them in the past :

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
Two dozen distances sufficed
To fable them: faint afternoons
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps..
... Silks at the start: against the sky
Numbers and parasols: outside,
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,
And littered grass: then the long cry
Hanging unhushed till it subside
To stop-press columns on the street

(TLD: 45)

Larkin uses words which simultaneously appeal to our visual imagination and hint at the frailty of human creations. As Simon Petch puts it, "The past is recreated by a further intensification of the visual details even out to imitate 'the long cry' described, while the visual impressions, preserved in 'hanging' and 'subsides' come to rest on 'stop-press columns'" (Petch 1981:56)

In the fourth stanza, which takes readers back to the present, the poet seems to disappear completely, but the sense of an observer is faithfully maintained while the poem itself gets absorbed in the life it describes :

Summer by summer all stole away,
The starting gates, the crowds and cries-
All but the unmolested meadows.

(TLD: 45)

The last stanza carries this hushed mood further and ends on a note of subdued elation as it describes the ideal kind of freedom which the horses seem to have at present since they're no longer involved in the race for power which society had forced upon them:

Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,
Or gallop for what must be joy,
And not a fieldglass sees them home,
Or curious stop-watch prophesises;
Only the groom, and the groom's boy,
With bridles in the evening come.

(TLD: 45)

According to Simon Petch:

The horses have escaped the fictions, imposed on them as symbols of human aspirations, and have become representations of unconscious identity. Liberated from the past and from the demands of time, they have finally become themselves in a pastoral world of innocence and permanence.(Petch 1981:55)

The shedding of identity can also be perceived as a desire for death which happens to be a recurrent theme in many poems of *The Less Deceived*. The other thematic concerns which bind the diverse poems of this volume are a search for a sense of identity, the link between memories of the past and illusions for future and an unawareness of the basic solemnity which pervades various aspects of human lives.

Larkin proved in *The Less Deceived* that he was a witty poet of immense verbal dexterity who could, using idiomatic language and subtle tone modulations, write movingly and profoundly on subjects that were of great importance to the common man. On one occasion he had said: "What I want readers to carry away from the poem in their minds is not the poem but the experiences; I want to live something through the poem, without necessarily being conscious of the poem as a poem."(Larkin 1966:177). This aim was brilliantly and memorably achieved through *The Less Deceived*.

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Abbreviations

TLD – The Less Deceived

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