

Light Verse Features in Selected Larkin's Poems

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INTRODUCTION

According to W.H. Auden's definition of light verse in *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, light verse poems had to be written in a plain, straightforward style, they had to be written in a language close to the ordinary speech, and should be related to a common experience.

Kingsley Amis in his *New Oxford Book of Light Verse* claimed that light verse poetry had to display several characteristics. It had to show virtuosity in the sense that the poem could show humour through "*perfectly controlled rhyme and rhythm*". Kingsley Amis pointed out that light verse uses the "*best words in the best order*" and requires "*precise technical work*". However, the poem looks as if it was written spontaneously and it gives the impression of ease when reading it. According to Amis, light verse does not need to be funny but a poem without humour cannot be light verse. Light verse poetry has to be not difficult to understand and should involve wit. It can also have a subversive quality and "*raise a good-natured smile*".

Do Larkin's poems display some of these characteristics? The aim of this paper is to show how some of Philip Larkin's poems fall in the definition of light verse poetry according to W.H. Auden or Kingsley Amis.

PHILIP LARKIN

Philip Larkin was born in 1922 in Coventry. He was the son of a middle class family and his father, Sydney Larkin, was the City Treasurer. Larkin attended King Henry VIII School and started to show his talent for writing by doing contributions to *The Coventrian*, the school magazine. After finishing with high school, he attended St. John's College, in Oxford, in 1940 –during the war time-. He was supposed to attend the army but he failed his army medical due to his poor eyesight.

There in Oxford, Larkin became really good friend of Kingsley Amis, a friendship that lasted all their lives. Philip Larkin graduated in 1943 with a First Class Honours in English, which meant that he was brilliant at this field of studies. Later in his life Larkin became a librarian, a job that he held during his lifetime in several places, such as the University of Hull. Larkin sometimes used the word "dull" as a rhyme word for this university.

Philip Larkin published two novels and several collections of poems. It is commonly said that Larkin was a solitary persona. In fact, in 1984 he was offered the chance to succeed St John Betjeman as Poet Laureate but he refused because he did not want to accept the public position that it was supposed to be. Ted Hughes finally became Poet Laureate that year.

Philip Larkin is considered to be one of the leading figures of the Movement, a group of British poets that worked during the 1950s. Writers of the Movement were, among others, Donald Davie and Kingsley Amis. It was said that it was a homogeneous group, since most of them belonged to middle classes, had attended grammar schools and went to study to Oxford or Cambridge and obtained good grades there. The writers of

the Movement published their work in the periodical *The Spectator* and wrote poetry for the common people, a poetry which was close to normal speech and favoured the colloquial with a plain and straightforward language. They wrote in a colloquial style because they wanted everybody to understand what they wrote. This is, somehow, opposed to Modernist features at the time, which made literature hard to understand.

In his *Oxford Book of Twentieth-century English Verse* Larkin refused to include poems “requiring a glossary for their full understanding”, which suggests a dislike for the modernist obscurity, which reveals a lack of concern for communication. Larkin also created a collection of jazz reviews, entitled *All What Jazz*. Larkin tried to like modern jazz, but he failed to do so. In this collection, Larkin criticizes modern jazz, and this criticism extends to modernism in general. Larkin affirms that the term “modern”, when applied to art, is an “irresponsible act”. He said that modernism did not help to enjoy art and that for instance, Picasso or Joyce dealt with “irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it”.

Another main sin of modernism, according to Larkin, was the separation of the artist from the audience. Larkin claimed that poetry had to move towards the reader and that poetry had to give pleasure: “if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience, he has lost the only audience worth having”, said Larkin. Therefore, it is important for Larkin that the reader understands the poem and likes it. Due to that, Larkin’s poetry appears as accessible and traditional rather than modernist.

Larkin’s early work was influenced by Yeats, the mystical and visionary poet, who dealt with mythological and historical issues, and used symbolism, but kept the traditional poetic forms. Larkin’s later work is said to be more influenced by the style of Thomas Hardy, whose technique was also traditional, used colloquial language and presented a sceptic attitude. In fact, the renaissance of the interest on Hardy was due to the influence that it placed on Larkin. Therefore, Hardy was rediscovered partly due to Larkin.

Larkin language has been qualified as plain, and because of that some critics have accused him of a lack of emotional involvement, which is debatable. One could disagree with that in the sense that some emotions can be noted in Larkin’s poems. Larkin dealt with modern life and this attracts the ordinary public, who can feel identified by that.

LIGHT VERSE FEATURES IN LARKIN’S POEMS

Kingsley Amis included several of Larkin’s poems in his *New Oxford Book of Light Verse*. These poems included in Amis’ book were “Fiction and the Reading Public”, “Toads”, “Toads Revisited”, “I Remember, I Remember”, “Self’s the Man”, “A Study of Reading Habits,” and “Annus Mirabilis”. Some of these poems are analysed in this paper in order to prove to what extent they can be considered light verse.

“TOADS”

“Toads” was written in 1954 and consists of nine stanzas, each of which has four lines. The poem features half rhyme; however, some exceptions take place, such as in the seventh stanza, where “too” and “snow” do not rhyme. According to Kingsley Amis, and as it has been mentioned in the Introduction of this paper, light verse required a “precise technical work” and rhymes should seem to be placed in the poem by casualty and, moreover, the poem should give the impression of ease when reading it:

“ Light Verse obeys Coleridge’s definition of poetry, the best words in the best order; it demands Carlyle’s definition of genius, transcendent capacity for taking pains; and it is the supreme exhibition of somebody’s definition of art, the concealment of art. In the result it

observes the most exact laws of rhythm and metre as if by a happy accident, and in a sort of nonchalant spirit of mockery at the real poets who do it on purpose". (Amis 1978: VI)

This is indeed the case in this poem, which seems to have been written spontaneously. In the first stanza, the speaker of the poem uses a metaphor in order to compare work with toads, which are ugly animals: *"Why should I let the toad work / Squat on my life?"* The speaker of the poem expresses his wish to get rid of his job. In the second stanza the speaker explains that having to work six days per week is hard for him. In the third stanza the speaker deals with people who do not have the obligation of having to work and they do not die. In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the speaker deals with people who do not work because they live on the social fringe and they survive without working. In the sixth stanza the speaker expresses that he would like to live without a pension and to be like the persons described before. However, he says that he is not brave enough to do that. In the seventh and eighth stanzas the speaker affirms that he has two toads, an external toad which may be work, and another toad which is internal and can be understood as fear, and this fear does not let him succeed, which can be seen as an inner lethargy. In the last stanza, the speaker says that the two toads are in confrontation with each other but at the same time they cannot live without one another.

The language in which "Toads" is written can be qualified as plain, since it is accessible and it is not difficult to understand: *"Six days of the week it soils with its sickening poison. That's out of proportion."* The lexis of the poem is not difficult and is written in a plain and straightforward style; there are not high words or words which are ambivalent. This would be a light verse feature according to Kingsley Amis and Auden. The vocabulary of the poem resembles the words used in common speech, such as *"work"*, *"a few bills"*, and *"folks"*. The colloquial mode of this poem is mixed with a serious theme, which is the debate between having to work everyday and seizing one's life. This theme of the poem can be seen as reflecting a common experience, since the fact of complaining about work can be considered common among people. At the end of the poem, the speaker cannot find a solution to the dilemma, since something "toad-like" prevents him of doing it. Therefore, the speaker continues going to work every day.

Kingsley Amis added some features to what Auden claimed about what can be considered to be light verse and what can not. Apart from not being difficult, light verse poems, according to Amis, had to be entertaining. This can be considered to be the case when analysing "Toads", since it deals with the internal debate of the speaker of the poem, and that can be considered interesting since it can happen also to the common reader, who can feel identified with the speaker of the poem. Also, the poem deals with people who do not have to work and, in spite of that, do not starve. It deals with homeless people, the underdog, and the social fringe, and this can also be considered entertaining. This also makes reference to the real world, since it deals with persons who can exist at any time and at any place in the world.

Realism was, according to Kingsley Amis, a very important characteristic of light verse. Realism is not only found in this poem through the persons it deals with, but also in some facts expressed in the poem. For instance, the speaker comments on the toad's sickening poison and some kind of toads actually have this kind of poison.

The language of the poem can also be considered witty in the sense that Larkin knew who to use the "best words in the best order" in order to suit the poem and make it attractive. This also makes reference to what Amis considered a feature of light verse: virtuosity. Larkin also included in this poem rhetorical devices such as alliteration: *"Lecturers, lispers, / Losels, loblolly-men, louts"*, polysindeton: *"the fame and the girl and the money"*; and a reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: *"Ah, were I courageous enough / To shout Stuff your pension! / But I know, all too well, that's the stuff / That dreams are made on"*. This can be considered writing with wit, which is, according to Kingsley Amis, also a feature of light verse.

It can also be said that “Toads” carries some light touches of humour, which is also a characteristic of light verse according to Amis, who said that light verse could “raise a good-natured smile”: *“And will never allow me to blarney / My way to getting / The fame and the girl and the money / All at one sitting.”*

“TOADS REVISITED”

“Toads Revisited” is a sequel to “Toads” and was written eight years later, in 1962. This sequel is written in similar quatrains as “Toads”, and thus consists of nine stanzas, with four lines each. As in “Toads”, the rhyme is constructed in a thoughtful way but, however, it gives the impression that the poem is very spontaneous. As Kingsley Amis pointed out as a light verse feature, it gives the impression of ease when reading it.

The speaker of the poem is now older than it was in “Toads” and does not complain about having to work any more. He has accepted the social norms and is contented with what he has. In “Toads Revisited”, old and retired people are described and the speaker of the poem sees elder homeless wasting their time. There is also a sense of loss in the poem, since the speaker is ageing: *“no friends but empty chairs”*, and now the speaker admits that he cannot live without working anymore. The speaker describes people *“turning over their failures”*, which means that they are also ageing and they have not achieved anything in life.

This reflects a common experience even with more force than “Toads”, since it can be considered common and natural for people to become old and see other people around becoming older as well. Getting older can make people accept the social norms and stop complaining about things that one has complained about at a younger age. This makes the poem a realistic one, since it deals with a topic with which the common reader can feel identified with. This point would make this poem light verse according to Auden and Kingsley Amis, who claimed that a light verse poem had to reflect the experience of the common people.

Also the fact that this poem is witty, especially in the last line of the poem, when the speaker says *“Give me your arm, old toad; help me down Cemetery Road”* convinced Kingsley Amis of including this poem in his *New Oxford Book of Light Verse*. In this poem, Larkin shows his wit using the words “Cemetery Road”, which is a street in Hull –where he worked as a librarian-, and also it can be understood as a reference to death, when the toad that has been squatting on the speaker’s life before, now the toad is the one who accompanies him to the end of the life of the speaker.

As well as “Toads”, “Toads Revisited” is also written in a plain style and close to common speech, which would convince Auden of being light verse, since it is not difficult and the common reader would understand it: *“Walking around in the park / Should feel better than work”*. The lexis of this poem is quite easy to understand and it is not difficult for the common reader, since it features plain vocabulary. In this poem, Larkin even made use of low terms, such as *“stupid”*. If this poem was written in an obscure way and if it was difficult to understand, it would not be considered light verse any more. As Kingsley Amis pointed out, *“Light verse makes more stringent demands on the writer’s technique. A fault of scansion or rhyme, an awkwardness or obscurity that would damage only the immediate context of a piece of high verse, endangers the whole structure of a light-verse poem”*. (Amis 1978: VIII)

Philip Larkin tried to write poetry for the common reader. In fact, in a short preface to D.J. Enright’s *Poets of the 1950’s*, Larkin said: *“I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt”*. To Larkin, one of the main defects of modern poetry was that it was distanced from life because it did not deal with common experiences.

The poem is also entertaining since it deals with old people and is written in a similar way as “Toads”. The fact that the poem is entertaining would be a light verse feature according to Kingsley Amis. “Toads Revisited” can be considered an entertaining poem since it is written following the style of “Toads”, and both poems

express a common experience, but “Toads” deals more with the working life and in “Toads Revisited” the speaker of the poem concentrates more on people getting old.

“I REMEMBER, I REMEMBER”

This poem also deals with the experience of the common men. In fact, it deals with Larkin’s childhood spent in Coventry. It is often said that Larkin’s childhood was not really happy when he was a child, partly due to the attitude of Larkin’s father. Andrew Motion published in 1993 a controversial biography of Philip Larkin, where he explained that Larkin’s father had Nazi sympathies and racist tendencies.

This is portrayed in this poem when Larkin qualifies his childhood with the adjective “*unspent*”. Once again, this poem shows the writer’s wit here, since uses “*the best words in the best order*” in order to write a poem referring to his childhood. The wit in this poem is also present in the reproduction of a conversation between the speaker of the poem and a friend of him, and it is in this way that the information about Coventry and a childhood spent there is given. All these features would constitute what Kingsley Amis considered to be “*virtuous*”, a characteristic of light verse.

The speaker of the poem comments that he “*wasn’t spoken to by an old hat*”, that is, he was never given advice by an older person; and that he had a “*splendid family [he] never ran to when [he] got depressed*”. These lines could be said to make the poem look sad or dull, but, however, there is irony in the sense that Larkin used the figure or personification “*old hat*” to refer to an old person, which can be humorous. He also qualifies his family of “*splendid*” but it is clear that if he never ran to them it is because they were not that splendid. Therefore, he makes use of irony, which is witty. Thus this poem can be considered light verse. There is also wit in the final lines when the friend says: ‘*You look as if you wished the place in Hell*’, and the speaker answers: ‘*Oh well, I suppose it’s not the place’s fault*’. Therefore, there is an indirect criticism to Larkin’s family. Thus the poem has a subversive quality which also was, according to Kingsley Amis, a clear feature of light verse poetry.

The language of the poem is plain, accessible and easy for the common reader to understand, which also makes it light verse: “*The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,/ Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be / ‘Really myslef’*”. The poem gives impression of simplicity when reading it and the rhyme scheme seems to be accidental.

There are also references to the society of the time, such as the famous brand of car, “Ford”.

This poem is also a parody of a poem, of the same title, by Thomas Hood, a writer of the Romantic period. Thus if Thomas Hood, in his “I Remember, I Remember” praised the place where he was born with a romantic perspective; Philip Larkin parodies this view and deconstructs Thomas Hood’s poem in a new version. Parody was, according to Kingsley Amis, one category of light verse, since it required “*exercise in virtuosity*”. As Amis wrote in his Introduction to the *New Oxford Book of Light Verse*:

“Like so much light verse, it is an exercise in virtuosity; the writer plays on a set of tensions, between closeness to the model and distance from it, the plausible and the entertaining, what makes a fair parody and what makes a good poem in its own right. When well executed, it gives pleasure not simply to non-prigs but again and again to those otherwise unacquainted with the original and even to those altogether unaware that what they are reading is parody, though they will know that it is light verse”.

(Amis 1978: XV)

“ANNUS MIRABILIS”

In this poem, which was finished in 1967, the speaker of the poem explains a jealousy he feels of those who are young, and those who still have choices to make and experiences to live. The phrase “annus mirabilis” is normally used to mean “wonderful year” or “year of miracles”. The speaker of the poem does not complain, like in “Toads”, of having lead a specific kind of life; the speaker only laments about not being young any more and comments that 1963 was the moment when “*life was never better*”.

This poem gives the impression of ease when it is read and the rhymes seem to have been placed in the poem by casualty: “*Up till then there’d only been / A sort of bargaining / A wrangle for a ring / A shame that started at sixteen / And spread to everything*”. The poem also shows wit in the sense that it makes use of the best words used in the best order and position, that is, it requires precise “technical work”. All this was according to Kingsley Amis, a characteristic of light verse poems and an example of virtuosity: “*Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three/ (which was rather late for me)*”. This remark of the speaker, who says that these years were late for him, can result humorous, since it deals with a reference to sexual intercourse. This, coming from the speaker of the poem, can “raise a good nature smile”, which would make the poem light verse from the point of view of Kingsley Amis.

This poem is written in a plain and accessible style and language. It is not difficult to understand and therefore it is directed to the common reader. Plain and easy language is considered a light verse characteristic, both by Kingsley Amis and Auden, and this can be found in this poem, since Philip Larkin tried to reach and attract the common reader with his poetry. As Auden wrote in the Introduction of *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*:

“When the things in which the poet is interested, the things which he sees about him, are much the same as those of his audience, and that audience is a fairly general one, he will not be conscious of himself as an unusual person, and his language will be straightforward and close to ordinary speech”

(Auden 1938: viii)

In this case, wrote Auden, poetry will be light. The vocabulary used in the poem is indeed not difficult; it does not present high words or difficult lexis. On the contrary, the poem features accessible and easy language, with words such as “*shame, sixteen, quarrel, bank, game...*”

The colloquial language of the poem is combined here with the theme of past historical times known to the reader. As it has been mentioned before, realism was considered an important light verse feature by Kingsley Amis. This poem can be considered realistic since it deals with the sixties. Moreover, there are present in the poem issues known to the common reader, such as the Beatles, or Chatterley Ban, which was a ban of D.H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s lover*. This novel was banned because there were in the novel many sex scenes which caused a scandal, and moreover, the writer made use of a lot of four-letter words.

The year between the Beatle’s first LP and Chatterley Ban were the years when young people were showing society the world as it was, and people had to get used to it. The sixties were a period of sexual revolution, social change, and there was a general feeling of freedom and liberty among society. The contraceptive pill was introduced in society and therefore people did not have to worry about marriage and could practise sex freely

without having to worry about “a wrangle for a ring”. Auden pointed out that “poetry intended to be read, but having for its subject-matter the everyday social life of its period or the experiences of the poet as an ordinary human being” would be considered light verse. (Auden 1938: IX)

Writing about society in a poem is a characteristic of light verse. Kingsley Amis also wrote in his Introduction of *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse* that the realistic verse he considers light verse is “a kind of realistic verse that is close to some of the interests of the novel: men and women among their fellows, seen as members of a group or class in a way that emphasizes manners, social forms, amusements, fashion (from millinery to philosophy), topicality, even gossip, all these treated in a bright, perspicuous style”. (Amis 1978: XVIII) That is, light verse has to be treated and produced in a clear way and this is indeed the case in Larkin’s poems.

It seems that the sexual references the speaker of the poem talks about would not be appropriate for high poetry: “Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three”. As Kingsley Amis pointed out in his Introduction, light verse “deals with low matters, with subjects, scenes and concerns that are either poetically or morally unsuitable for high consideration. It uses low terms, whether rustic, technical, colloquial, facetiously anachronistic, or vulgar, ill-bred, obscene. Its chief weapon is impropriety.” (Amis 1978: VIII)

“A STUDY OF READING HABITS”

In this poem, the speaker deals with different periods of time of his life, from the time when he read books at school until the present time. The attitude of the speaker progresses from the reading at school age until a lack of interest for reading in the present time. Therefore the poem deals with the personal experience of the speaker.

There are three stanzas in the poem, of three lines each. The rhyme scheme is *abcbac*, and the rhyme appears to be spontaneous, which would be considered a light verse feature by Kingsley Amis. Each stanza of the poem deals with a different period of time in the life of the speaker of the poem: the school boy, adolescence and the adult life; and each stanza presents the speaker’s different view and attitude towards books and reading habits.

On the first stanza, the speaker of the poem deals with the reading experience as a child, when the speaker did not have a good sight and “ruined his eyes” by reading. This child was probably unhappy and did not enjoy the school life. Then he immersed into a fantasy world by reading, and transformed himself into heroes or cowboys who defeated villains in adventure tales. On the second stanza, the speaker of the poem has grown and is more interested in vampire novels. Women are fantasies which are present in the life of the speaker, and he “clubs” them “with sex”. The third stanza deals with the present day of the speaker of the poem. The speaker of the poem confesses that he does not read much at the moment, and he has no longer fantasies when reading books.

The language of the poem is quite colloquial: “getting my nose in a book” and this casts a comic tone on the poem, which can make the reader “raise a good-natured smile”, and therefore make this poem a light verse piece. The poem is easy to read and understand which would also be considered a light verse characteristic. The speaker of the poem even makes use of slang or dirty words such as “crap”, “dirty dogs” or “the old right hook”. This colloquial and plain language makes a strong contrast with the title of the poem, which suggests a more formal language: “A Study of Reading Habits” could suggest a title for a research paper, which would present a formal and elevated language. This shows the writer’s wit and dexterity in writing; and there is also wit in the poem since it gives the impression of ease when reading it, since the rhymes seem natural.

At the end of the poem the speaker says that “*books are a load of crap*”. It can be surprising to see this ironical and humorous affirmation coming from a writer, even if we try not to identify the speaker of the poem with the writer. In this way, Philip Larkin creates a connection with the reader, specially the reader who dismisses poetry for being not easy to understand. This reflects Larkin’s wish of writing poetry easy to read for the common reader.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing some of Larkin’s poems we can affirm that these poems can be considered light verse poetry. From this paper we can extract that most of the poems share certain features that make them be light verse poems. For instance, all of the poems are written in a plain, straightforward style, which makes them accessible for any kind of reader. Philip Larkin wanted that any person could be able to be his audience. Most of the poems can be considered entertaining and some of them have some touches of humour, and feature a comic tone to deal with low matters.

All this characteristics are proper of light verse poems and most of the poems feature a spontaneous rhyme and a style which seems effortless but, however, requires a “precise technical work”. Kingsley Amis even defended that writers of light verse had to be even more careful and crafted than the writers of high verse, and exemplified that with a curious metaphor: “*the expectations of the audience are different in the two cases, corresponding to the difference in the kind of performance offered. A concert pianist is allowed a wrong note here and there; a juggler is not allowed to drop a plate*”.

The pianist would be the writer of high verse and the juggler, whose job is to entertain the public, would stand for the writer of light verse, since the performance would be done in a “light-hearted way” but a single mistake would damage the whole performance, that is, a single mistake would ruin the light verse poem. ●

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