

# The Creative Launcher

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## Pessimistic Worldview and Existential Nihilism in Philip Larkin's Poetry

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### Abstract

Philip Larkin is one of the most respected men of letters of the twentieth century. A major characteristic of his works was his preoccupation with the overshadowing gloom and despair that resulted from the Second World War and the loss of the golden era of the British Empire. Unsociable by temperament, Larkin was fully alive to the harsh realities of the modernized world that post-War generation was living in. As was natural to his nature, he developed a deep-rooted pessimism and even a nihilistic tendency towards life and human existence in general. This paper attempts to evaluate four of Larkin's so-called pessimistic poems, namely, "Mr. Bleaney", "Next, Please", "Afternoons" and "Days" from his different collections of poetry in order to analyse his preoccupation with death and a general pessimistic attitude towards the worth of human life.

**Keywords-** *Death, Despair, Existence, Modernized, Nihilism, Pessimism*

Philip Larkin's poetry originated and bloomed at one of the most tumultuous periods in the history of the world, that of the Second World War. The disillusionment and despair that resulted from the war, casted grave doubts on the meaning of human life and existence. The very belief in a theological worldview and the existence of an entity known as "God" was called into question. People saw life as trifling and that it could be over any moment without caution or explanations. Being a responsive poet, Larkin was aware of the harsh realities of the gradually modernizing world he was living in and the atmosphere of gloom and pessimism thus colours much of his poetic output. Larkin, like most of the others of that generation, had to struggle hard before he could find his place as a respected poet. It was the years spent at the Oxford University which helped him generate a pragmatic approach to life

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as well as literature. By legal compulsion in Britain of the times, he was required to enlist in the army but, fortunately for him, he failed the necessary medical fitness tests and was thus channeled towards a life of literary endeavours. He took up jobs at several educational institutions as a librarian and so began his long-lived affair with books and literature. The struggles that he had to face in life, coupled with the general anarchy of the world at large, engendered a dull and drab attitude towards life in his psyche. He saw little worth in human existence and as such the atmosphere of pessimism is quite pervasive in all of his major poetic collections. It is this temperament which led the likes of Eric Homberger brand him as "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket". (Eric Homberger, 1977) Through the ageing years, Larkin grew increasingly unsociable and developed a gloomy view of things as they were. This feeling of a general submission to the perils of life is characteristic of old age but Larkin harboured such an attitude since his youth. When Larkin turned sixty, Anthony Thwaite, published a book on him in which Alan Bennett presented a summation of his bleakness towards life in apt words: "Apparently he is sixty, but when he was anything else? He has made a habit of being sixty; he has made a profession of it. Like Lady Dumbleton he has been sixty for last twenty-five years. On his own admission there was never a boy Larkin, no young lad Philip, let alone Philip, ever". (*Larkin at Sixty*) This general mood of obsession with the futility of life and the eventual imminence of death pervades most of his poems. The selected poems from various of Larkin's poetry collections highlight the dominant theme of the worthlessness of human life and the gradual passing of time waiting for the chariots of death approaching the individual with little or no hope of any sort of fulfillment.

First published in 1955 and later included in one of Larkin's most well-received poetic collections, *The Whitsun Weddings*, "Mr. Bleaney" is a poem which showcases a brilliant example of man whose life practically amounts to nothing, more or less. It describes a pretty ordinary setting in which a working man is about to rent a room at a woman's boarding house and the two happen to discuss a few particulars about that room's previous inhabitant, Mr. Bleaney. The poem takes twists and turns to explore several confusing notions along with the idea that it is necessary to amount to something in our lives and to lead a good life, a person must stand tall on certain parameters. The poem begins by describing the shabby little room in which Mr. Bleaney stayed while he was at the boarding house named, 'the Bodies':

... Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,  
Fall to within five inches of the sill,  
Whose window shows a strip of building land,  
Tussocky, littered. 'Mr. Bleaney took  
My bit of garden properly in hand.'  
Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook

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Behind the door, no room for books or bags —

(“Mr. Bleaney”, *Philip Larkin Poems*)

This was before Mr. Bleaney left the place. The shabbiness of the room was quite compatible with the mundane existence of his life which is indicated by the thin and worn out curtains which are shorter than the window sill. Even the building outside, which is visible from the window in the room is littered with rubbish which indicates the similar lack of activity and worth in the outside world as within the room. Though, the landlady acknowledges the fact that Mr. Bleaney used to take good care of her garden. The room has a sixty-watt bulb and there is hardly space for keeping books or bags. This indicates the meagre amount of possessions that Mr. Bleaney could have boasted of and how uneventful a life he might have been leading. Despite the room being so congested the speaker intends to stay there and later lies on the same bed that Mr. Bleaney used to lie on:

So it happens that I lie

Where Mr. Bleaney lay, and stub my fags

On the same saucer-souvenir, and try

Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown

The jabbering set he egged her on to buy. (“Mr. Bleaney”, *Philip Larkin Poems*)

These lines are acutely crucial as they point towards a great similarity of inactivity in the lives of Mr. Bleaney and the speaker who is to take his place. This lying on the same bed metaphorically links the humdrum routine of Mr. Bleaney’s life to that of the speaker indicating that an entire generation was fatigued by the perils of the times and had become submissive enough to succumb to the pressures of an overpowering external reality. None of them could have worked through the disillusionment resulted by the war easily and the disorder of the public life (represented by rubbish in the world outside the window) reflected itself on the private life of the household too (represented by the untidy room).

The speaker tends to follow in the footsteps of Mr. Bleaney when he does the same activities that he used to do while he was there. He smokes a cigarette and ends putting it into the same saucer that he used. He acknowledges that somehow he is aware of Mr. Bleaney’s habits and his ways of life, his preferences, his visits to his several relatives at different times of the year. The very fact that the speaker is even meditating on the different aspects of his life shows the purposeless existence with which he himself has been gripped by that he has plenty of time to while away thinking about a man whose life did not seem to amount to anything worthwhile. The pessimistic tenor strikes the poem in the ultimate stanza where the speaker states in clear terms that Mr. Bleaney was not successful in terms of worldliness. Judged by the standards of a successful man, he fell too short of satisfaction:

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That how we live measures our own nature,  
And at his age having no more to show  
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure  
He warranted no better, I don't know.

(“Mr. Bleaney”, *Philip Larkin Poems*)

The speaker is doubtful whether Mr. Bleaney ever understood the futility of the life he was leading since the way a man structures his life, his work, his relationships, reveals a lot about his character. Mr. Bleaney, at such an advanced age in life, had not much to his credit in terms of achievements apart from that single rented room. The speaker is quite convinced that he deserved no better than that little room since he seemed to be a man of dirty habits and lacked any amount of motivation or ambition to achieve good things in life. However, it is crucial to observe that the speaker too is settled in the same rented room and is following the same dull routine. He has nothing to attest to the big claims of a successful man's life that he is making. Thus, as the pessimistic philosophy counters the idea of progress and modernization, the poem too, seems to highlight the fact that the advancements that the world has seen in terms of science and technology have been futile. Considered to be a mark of a nation's strength and the degree to which it has progressed in science, the weapons of mass destruction have only pushed the world far backwards into an era of despair and anarchy. They have resulted in death and nothing good has come of the war for either the winning or the losing party. Thus the poem harps on the philosophy of existential nihilism which suggests that there is no inherent meaning of life and that man is pretty insignificant in the overall scheme of things. Even the continuous stanzas of the poem highlight the endless monotony of existence that continues unbreakably from Mr. Bleaney to the next tenant of the room. Donald A. Crosby cites Schopenhauer's example as the perfect “exponent” of the idea of existential nihilism claiming:

For him, as for existential nihilists in general, human existence in all its manifestations exhibits an inescapable and unalterable absurdity. Strut, fret, and delude ourselves as we may, our lives are of no significance, and it is futile to seek or to affirm meaning where none can be found.

(*The Specter of the Absurd*, 32).

This is the idea that gripped Larkin's thinking when he witnessed the chaos that the world had turned into after the two world wars. Human beings, as individuals and in collectivity, were rendered inconsequential and insignificant. The only certainty in life was the eventual coming of death for which people had to live through an insufferable existence.

Another crucial poem from Larkin's poetic output, “Next, Please” hits out at the “bad habits of expectancy.” People are always too eager to gain insights into their future as if something miraculous is about to happen to them. Larkin metaphorically links the habit of

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people awaiting auspicious moments to an observer standing on the top of the cliff watching several ships approach him in a cluster:

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear  
Sparkling armada of promises draw near.  
How slow they are! And how much time they waste,  
Refusing to make haste!

(“Next, Please”, *Philip Larkin Poems* )

Actually the observer is deceived by his expectations and the good things do not tend to happen that quickly and easily in life as one would want them to. The nihilistic tendency overtakes the poem fairly soon when the speaker comments that not only these expectations take a lot of time in materializing but they eventually do not lead to a fulfilling happiness anyway:

Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks  
Of disappointment, for, though nothing balks  
Each big approach, leaning with brass work prinked,  
Each rope distinct,

Flagged, and the figurehead wit golden tits  
Arching our way, it never anchors; it's  
No sooner present than it turns to past.  
Right to the last

(“Next, Please” *Philip Larkin Poems*)

No sooner than the good moments happen, they escape us and the satisfaction always seems fleeting just as the ships as they reach the observer, turn towards the opposite direction and move past him. Thereafter, people go through times of despair and disillusionment at the dashing of their hopes and the suffering of meaningless existence that they are subject to. The poem affirms the Nietzschean philosophy as also the pessimism of Schopenhauer where they advise that life is essentially meaningless and so it is better to separate oneself from expectations and desires in order to lessen the suffering of unbearable human existence.

The statement "God is dead", occurs in much of Nietzsche's works indicating his belief that life is inherently meaningless and ultimately amounts to nothing. The human being takes birth, suffers the pangs of existence awaiting death which is certain. This is the precise sentiment voiced by the last and the decisive stanza of the poem where Larkin states that only one of the human expectations is bound to be realized in totality and that is death. It is something inevitable:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-  
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back

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A huge and birdless silence. In her wake

No waters breed or break. ("Next, Please" *Philip Larkin Poems*)

Larkin has explored his obsession with death in several of his creations. Here too, he comments that death silences all our expectations and worries alike and when it approaches, it cannot be escaped for any pleasure of life. In the battle between life and death, it is death which turns out to be the ultimate winner and so it is futile to expect anything from life. Nietzsche views this as the problem of the modern world. Although, he also sees a possibility of such nihilistic tendencies to be overcome in due time, which, is not the case with the outright gloomy atmosphere of the poem. Nietzsche was also a critic of mass culture and regarded the modern human world in a pessimistic light. He believed that the expansion of the mass culture leads to mediocrity in human species, leading further to an intellectually deficient class of people. Will power is an instrument that people may use to overcome this sort of a popular culture. This is precisely the idea that Larkin seems to be hinting at in his criticism of the modernized society. The craft of the poet speaks for itself when he makes effective use of literary devices such as enjambment in order to indicate a continual movement towards death. Thus nihilism is not a part of human beings' life but a mirror to their essential condition. As Crosby puts it, "It purports to describe, not some passing mood or phase of life, not the contingent situation or outlook of some human beings, but the human situation as such." (*The Specter of the Absurd*, 32)

In another of his poems, "Afternoons", Larkin presents the belief that all happiness in life is transitory, and the powerful natural imagery of the poem, surprisingly works to support his claims. If we take a close look at the title of the poem, it seems quite in conflict with the bleak theme of the poem. The afternoon is the time when the sun shines the brightest indicating the strength of optimism and a possibility of fulfillment of human life. But, the natural imagery in the poem is employed in such a way as to debilitate this nurturing capability of nature:

Summer is fading:

The leaves fall in ones and twos

From trees bordering

The new recreation ground.

In the hollows of afternoons

Young mothers assemble

At swing and sandpit

Setting free their children. ("Afternoons", *Philip Larkin Poems*)

The drooping leaves also hint at the inevitability of death and the mothers who gather in that ground are also losing their youthful charm. The wind also works as a destructive agent when it is seen "ruining" the places where the same women had been courted by the

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fathers of the children playing in the playground. These women have started ageing and a newer generation has taken the centre stage. The playground serves as the microcosm of life wherein the older generation, which has been caught up in the daily routine of life, has been oblivious of the ultimate approach of death. These women are being pushed “to the side of their own lives” implying that they have now begun to experience the troublesome responsibility of managing a home, which has started withering their beauty. The poem also comments how every form of happiness, even married happiness, is momentary. The couples which used to indulge in romantic courting are now indifferent towards those cherished moments and this is indicated by the abandoned wedding album by the side of the television. Any sense of fulfillment in this life continually evades us rendering existence a mere burden upon the human beings. Also the domesticity of the home seems to be stifling the family members just as the human beings are trapped in this world which may be said to be a huge abode for all humanity. The women in the poem set their children free thus gaining a short-lived control over the captivity of their homes, but they are helpless before the confines of time and death which constantly work towards snatching their vitality and human strength. As in most of his poems, Larkin makes emphatic use of punctuation and imagery to suggest how meaningless the lives of these married couples have become and the only anchors of their lives are their children for whom they continue to work steadfastly without being bothered about how taxing this is on their mental and physical well-being.

Larkin’s “Days” is one of his most poignant remarks on the inevitability of death. The poem directly brings the pessimistic stance of the poet and a nihilistic worldview to the centre where days are contrasted with death. This is also pretty strange as days are associated with life and rejuvenation whereas the poet sees in them a warning bell of approaching death. The poem seems to begin by affirming the awakening properties of the titular “days”:

What are days for?

Days are where we live.

They come, they wake us

Time and time over.

They are to be happy in:

Where can we live but days? (“Days”, *Collected Poems*)

There seems nothing pessimistic thus far in the poet’s description. The days are a time of activity and it is in days that we live and achieve certain things in our lives. Days are meant to be celebrated and life is possible only in their existence. But as soon as the rhetorical question is stated, the poem takes an altogether different turn. The answer to that question leads inevitably to the two symbols of overshadowing death, that of the priest and the doctor. As death approaches close, both these personalities are summoned in order to provide the dying person some physical and spiritual aid. Therefore, even a poem which stresses the

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significance of days as the time in which people live and breathe is plagued by the shadow of death which is an ever-present fear in the minds of human beings. The terseness of expression in the poem is a brilliant specimen of articulating the strongest arguments as compactly as possible in order to create an everlasting impact. Though people live in days, still such a living seems immaterial as one day everyone has to face death and till then this life is just an insufferable pain of existence that constantly harasses the human psyche. Milton Sarkar observes that Philip Larkin's poetry, as that of Ted Hughes, is inspired by the "post-imperial situation" wherein the loss of the might of the British empire greatly and adversely affected the sensibilities of an entire generation. To quote him:

The term post-imperial has been used here in the particular context of the post-War situation, as it has been felt that the loss of the empire affected the mindset not only of the political leaders of the nation but also its common middle class population who felt the impact in their lived experiences. It was a very important factor no doubt, but in artistic and cultural representations the impact may not always be directly stated. Mediated through artistic sensibilities, the percolated experiences were not always rendered in political terms. (*Englishness and Post-imperial Space, Introduction*)

Therefore, the poetic oeuvre of Philip Larkin is characterized by a sense of overarching gloom and pessimism at the loss of long-cherished "Englishness", as Sarkar puts it. The dominance of the British Empire was shattered to its core with the culmination of the Second World War and the worthlessness of human existence bred a deep-seated nihilistic tendency in Larkin's grave poems. In this context, Sarkar comments: "One cannot deny the presence in contemporary works of an overwhelming sense of frustration and ennui as well as of a pressing need for resurgence and regeneration both of which can be, in some way or other, related to the political situation of the time." (*Introduction, I*) The temperament that we find dominant in both Larkin's work and his mindset is that of frustration and futility of human existence. His work clearly mirrors the disillusionment of the post-War era where life human was as worthless as that of an insect and could be ended in split-seconds through the markers of modernity and progress, that is, the weapons of mass destruction. This pessimism is the foundation ground from which much of his poetry stems.

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