

Philip Larkin: A Vitalist Poet Exploring Death

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Abstract— Philip Larkin's name is held in great respect in the world of English literature as a great novelist, realistic poet, bibliophile, critic and a distinguished essayist of the 20th century. Today, he is synonymous for a realistic poet highlighting the fall of human values born through industrial revolution, world wars, genocides and inhuman human actions. Larkin definitely holds a right position in the literary world as a poet who criticizes the society at its losing humanity, an enemy of modern chauvinism, a poet representing the overall pessimism of 20th century and a social poet expecting positive changes from the society rather than discussing meaninglessly on empty idealism. Larkin's contemporary poets produced prolific poetry. Although, the bulk of Philip's poetic creation is little, but it is capable of marking his position as an eminent and god gifted poet. He created four volumes of poetry, "The North Ship", "The Less Deceived", "The Whitsun Weddings" and "High Windows". His poetry can be studied from different perspectives depending on the content. In his poetry death is felt more widely and intensely. Through this research paper, an attempt has been made to trace Philip Larkin's death poems and to find a pessimistic state of mind in his poetry.

Index Terms- Realistic, bibliophile, chauvinism, pessimism, synonymous

I. INTRODUCTION

The field of English poetry is tremendously vast. English literature is not limited to the country of England where English is the mother tongue, but English literature is written abundantly and fluently in most of the countries of the world. An English poet Philip Larkin who was born in the year 1922 in Coventry, England and died in 1985, lived a life span of merely 63 years is known in the literary world for his peculiar writing style. His first volume of poetry "The North ship" was published in 1945. In 1955, the second anthology of poetry "The Less Deceived" was published. "The Whitsun Weddings" (1964) and "High Windows" (1974) these two collections of poetry were published and after that he gained popularity as a distinguished poet of 20th century. In 1988, Editor Thomas Thwaite compiled 242 of Philip

Larkin's published and unpublished poems and published them into "Collected Poems".

Educated at the world famous Oxford University, Philip Larkin also earned a reputation as a renowned critic and a novelist. Larkin's name is connected with the prestigious "Movement School of Poetry". Philip got an opportunity to be honoured with a title like Poet Laureate in his life, but he refused such awards and preferred to keep himself away from the glittering, showy and ostentatious life. He is looked upon as a shy and sensitive poet who dreams of a better, ideal society. He accepted to depict the vivid, burning realities of life through poetry rather than portraying wonderful scenes and images of the sun, moon, stars, nature and taking leap of imagination. In his poetry, he deliberately denied the characteristics of imagist poetry and neo romantic symbolist movement. He worked to break with English poetry that embraced modernism and chauvinist culture which was popular around 1920 to 1930's. Although his poetic style is somewhat traditional, his poetry has to be mentioned as a poetry having a harsh blow to the modern life and modern era. His poetry is rich in both subject matter and manner. His poetry is devoid of monotonousness. All the issues of life and death in modern era are vividly displayed in his poetry.

II. INFLUENCES ON HIS POETRY

Every writer of every age is influenced by some writer. Every writer or poet in the world is initially inspired by someone's influence to create literature. How could Philip Larkin be an exception? The poets whose works Philip Larkin read in his early years, obviously influenced his early poems. But then he appears to free himself from their debt. The greatest and most profound influence on him was Thomas Hardy, an English poet who lived in Wessex region of England. He imbibed the qualities of style, reality, honesty use of everyday language, experimentalism, melancholic tone from Hardy's poetry. Hardy had faith in God and fate but Larkin rejects God and religion. His early

poem “Winter Nocturn” shows a clear influence of a famous English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson’s romanticism but later he moved closer to reality.

20th century English poet W. H. Auden also influenced and shaped Philip Larkin’s poetic personality. W. H. Auden used everyday language of the common, humble humanity in his poetry, Larkin also employed everyday language in his poetry. But while doing this, he definitely inculcated the principle of identifying the difference in the language usage in poetry and prose. Just as Auden’s poetry creates various layers of confusion, Larkin’s poetry creates vivid layers of meaning. Like W. B. Yeats’ poetry, Larkin’s poems are also seem to be lyrical. Like Yeats, Larkin in his poetry does not refrain from giving social touch to his personal experiences. Both Hardy’s Naturalism and Yeats’ Symbolism are strongly reflected in his poetry. Larkin’s early poems are dichotomy between these two contradictory forms. T. S. Eliot had a great influence on English poetry of 20th century. He influenced this poetry’s language, style, experimentalism etc. in the 20th century. Philip Larkin was also influenced by T. S. Eliot.

Just as T. S. Eliot’s poetry distrusts modernity and refers to contemporary anarchy, Larkin’s poetry criticizes the modern world and modern life style. Although his poetry was influenced by a number of great English poets, he was not completely overshadowed by their poetry, in addition to this, realistic poetry preserving his own identity and commitment to society was created by him. “Larkin’s distrust of modernism, such as represented by T. S. Eliot, is hardly a secret. It shows forth his selection of poems for the ‘Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse’ in personal remarks as well as in his own poetry. Take any given Larkin poem and compare it to one from Eliot and the contrast will speak loudly.”¹ Although the influence of Hardy, Auden, Yeats, Eliot and Tennyson’s poetry on his poems is noticeable, but in his poetry after 1960, he finds his own characteristic tone as he brings at the root of his poetry - human being, life, love, loss of humanity etc. Poet T. S. Eliot presents the miserable condition of the modern world through past references, ancient stories or myths while Larkin captures the world in the grip of his poetry by creating his own world of unique imagery. “He is not a transcendental writer, he is not

Yeats, he is not Eliot, his subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love or the fading of love.”² Hence it is said that, Philip Larkin’s is a poetry of eternal value.

III. MAJOR THEMES

Larkin is a humanist poet with a unique perspective on human suffering. Although his sufferings are personal, they touch the entire human world. “The Whitsun Weddings” (1958) is an important poem that reveals his personal grief. Larkin also wrote a number of poems on many issues relating to society. His attitude towards society can be a separate topic. Larkin is a poet who grew up in a post world war industrial and urban environment. It is seen that he satirizes the modern society many times and criticizes the useless customs and traditions that do not suit him. Despite living in the society - loneliness, boredom, depression and negativity suffered by the modern people are vividly reflected in his poetry.

Philip Larkin rejects hypocrisy, the artificiality of life and thus becomes a strong realist. In his poetry, one can see a poet’s mind who observes the society very closely, minutely and neutrally. Although he disapproves many wrong things in the society, he does not accept the escapist role of running away from the society but is seen to be ready to face life in any situation. Although he has been accused of being an agnostic, in poems like “Church Going” he asserts the urgency of religious places like churches for spiritual satisfaction. Although religion is not a very important thing for him, he knows the importance of religion for the perfection of human life. Larkin was accepted by his readers with his virtues and vices and was rated by them as a ‘true genius’. “With Larkin and his English readers, the silliness which helped to make him popular was his genuine, uncultivated, sincere philistinism”.³

He came out defying many influences on him as well as he disconnected himself with “Movement School of Poetry”. Larkin touches a number of difficult topics using simple everyday language. He writes poetry on the fragility of human life, evanescence and fear of death. In the real world the dreams and the ideals of the people are shattered. He demonstrates that the fulfillment of dreams is impossible through his poetry.

Rather than brooding over past opulence, he acknowledges the bittersweet situation of the present as reality and skillfully portrays the death stricken mind and real life through poetry. Larkin composed some love poems expressing his concepts of love. He wrote a large number of meaningful poems on one or more topics such as time cycle, transience of human life, nihilism, pessimism etc. A strange situation of confusion and anarchy has arisen in the modern age. In such a strange environment, Larkin presented this strange situation through poetry in a strange language “Larkin commented - we live in an odd era, when shocking language can be used yet still shocks - it won't last”.⁴ Although Larkin wrote poetry on many themes, the most prominent and intensely felt theme in his poetry is death.

IV. LARKIN'S DEATH POETRY

Philip Larkin writes about time as intensely as he writes about life and death. The passage of time is life and the passage of time also means death. Life and death are the two opposite aspects of time. Time is the link that connects the two different extremes of life and death. Larkin in his poem “Triple Time” has revealed the intimate relationship between life, death and time. One day, the wheels of time will break and the end of everything is inevitable. “He knows that the wheel of time spins out and all created things will meet their end, yet does not want to acknowledge. He presents death and time in conjunction with the feeling of loneliness and emptiness and differs from his contemporaries”.⁵ No one can beat time. No one can challenge the death that comes with the passage of time. Time creates everything, time is the creator of the universe and it also brings the fall of everything. He describes the glory of time in his poem “An Arundel Tomb”.

“Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon.”
 (“An Arundel Tomb”)

Each rising day gives new hopes, new dreams to life. Days come and go, with the passage of time a person has to endure the pains of old age. In old age man finds himself in a very pitiable, miserable condition. Larkin, in his poem “Going” honestly expresses the fear of

death. In many of his poems Larkin depicts his mind haunted by the fear of death. Thought of death haunts him like a ghost. One day death appears at our doorsteps and the cycle of time of human life stops. In his poem “Days” he writes:

“What are days for
Days are where we live
They come, they wake us
Time and time over”

(“Days”)

Death is inevitable. So there is no reason to turn your back on life. Without the triumphant frenzy of overcoming death and attaining immortality, Philip Larkin pursues the truth of death directly. We cannot stop living because of the fear of death. For everyone, it is necessary to maintain faith in life and duty. Larkin says that the only option before human being is to face death boldly instead of becoming sad and disturbed by the thought of death. His role is not that of an escapist, but of accepting the reality of death and giving more importance to the duties of life. Larkin garlands the realities of the common men's lives in poetry. He is more interested in writing about the bitter truth of death than in dying a heroic death, no matter how worse, bleak and hopeless the current situation is. This feeling about death takes Larkin's poetry to a different poetic height. “What is typical about the poetry of Larkin centered on the theme of death is the poets avoidance of all romanticisations of death and the expression of an attitude that is in turn realistic, rational, occasionally ironical, but always stoical”.⁶

No doubt the Second World War could be the reason why death had such an effect on Larkin's mind. His hometown Coventry was razed to the ground in the Second World War. Then Larkin was a young man. Although he did not participate in the actual world war, but he had suffered the consequences of the war. Losing hometown in a war is emotionally draining on the part of every human being. Perhaps it was this reason that affected his youthful mind and turned him from romanticism to realism. He has said in a poem:

“Throw away that youth
That jewel in the head
That Bronze in the breath
And walk with the dead
For fear of death”.

(“Nothing to be Said”)

As Larkin’s poetry matured, his contemplation of death deepened and expanded. Death is a sword that hangs constantly on the neck of the human beings. In “Nothing to be Said” he says:

“In mill - town on dark mornings
Life is slow dying
Hours giving evidence
Or birth, advice
On death equality out slowly.”

(“Nothing to be Said”)

One of Larkin’s important poems is “Unfinished Poem” (1951). All the characteristics of his poetry are found in this poem. Although his poems reveal his pessimism and deal with various themes such as death, loneliness, failure and so on but made him immensely popular. As Philip Larkin himself once said, “I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any, after all most people are unhappy, don’t you think?”⁷ Through accurate imagery, he is seen expressing the intense feelings of death in different ways. According to him, death is:

“Death is a cloud alone in the sky
With the sun
Our hearts, turning like fish
In the Green wave
And the waves sing
Because they are moving?”

(“And the Waves... Moving”)

A plow that goes deep into the ground means death. Death is a ship that follows us in search of us. Death is a darkest evening approaching human beings from afar. Death is the house owner coming to collect the unpaid rent. Death is a big tree that embraces the earth and the sky. Death is an inevitable event in everyone’s life. Larkin has dealt with this theme of death with great skill and depth in most of his poems. He full knowingly called life meaningless and deathV. meaningful. “The Old Fools”, “Absences”, “Ambulances”, “The Building”, “Aubade”, “DockeryVI. and Son”, “Next Please” are some of his famous death centered poems. Verbalizing of feelings eases suffering. Suffering is eternal. Suffering is permanent. Twentieth century has deeply wounded the modern age. Reading Larkin’s poems that grow from the soil

of his heart, the sense of death comes from the lines of how terrible and painful death is. His contemplative poems on death undoubtedly raised the scope and status of death poems in English literature.

CONCLUSION

Death is a dominant theme that takes precedence over all other themes in Philip Larkin’s poetry. Larkin perceives death in different ways and every time presents death in different manner through his poetry. His extraordinary imagery is seen celebrating death by embracing this human being’s last friend. His death poetry becomes an artistic means of escape from the fear of death. This poet writes not only about death but also about life with equal force and equal strength and equal skill. ‘Death in Life’ has become the motto of all his poetry. A number of his poems show the inextricable connection between life, death and time. Man wanders in search of many deceptive illusions throughout his life. No one is certain that he will find that thing which he is searching for. Death surely overtakes all, self-discovered or undiscovered. The ultimate truth is that the ideals of life, desires and ambitions are destroyed in a moment by this death. After the world war, the public mind easily felt the terrible after effects of bloodshed, loss of relatives and loss of everything. As a sensitive poet how Philip Larkin be away from all this sorry state of affairs? His poetry is a representative expression of 20th century’s restless social mind. “Larkin is truly representative of the modern age with all its conflicts and upheavals. In his poems, we can see the effects of modernism on an individual who is suffering with all the dilemmas of the modern world”.⁸ Philip had been called by a number of noted critics as a modern poet with a comprehensive sense of reality. Poet Philip Larkin did a great job of freeing poetry from the shackles of romanticism by giving space in his poetry to the conflicts, frustrations of the second half of the 20th century.

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