FLIP LARKIN AND HIS ADJECTIVES, PHILLIP LARKIN: BORN YESTERDAY

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Introduction

The dissertation aims at studying Philip Larkin's poetry as trapped between Modernism and Postmodernism, hence, before studying Larkin's poetry it will be necessary to discuss what Modernism and Postmodernism are. It will also be fruitful to study the socio - cultural conditions of the early and the later 20th century English history, broadly defined as the Modern and the Postmodern era respectively. In addition, it will be most appropriate to discuss the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism - how Modernism and Postmodernism are related to each other and how Postmodernism grows from Modernism. Larkin's poetry embodies the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism. Larkin grew to manhood in the era of Modernism and unconsciously, rather than with conscious effort, drew towards postmodern directions. His poetic career also, which begins under modernist influence, matures towards postmodern directions. Thus, Larkin's poetry, belonging mainly to the period of shift from Modernism to Postmodernism, reflects, from time to time, modern as well as postmodern tendencies. The subject of the present research is selected on the basis of the above stated hypothesis. Out of six chapters building up the argument, the present chapter will discuss Modernism and Postmodernism, especially as prevalent in the modern and the postmodern eras of English history. It will attempt to justify the assumption that Postmodernism grows from Modernism. It will also attempt a comparative analysis of Modernism and Postmodernism.

The poetry foundation

Philip Larkin, an eminent writer in postwar Great Britain, was commonly referred to as "England's other Poet Laureate" until his death in 1985. Indeed, when the position of laureate became vacant in 1984, many poets and critics favored Larkin's appointment, but the shy, provincial author preferred to avoid the limelight. An "artist of the first rank" in the words of Southern Review contributor John Press, Larkin achieved acclaim on the strength of an extremely small body of work—just over one hundred pages of poetry in four slender volumes that appeared at almost decade-long intervals. These collections, especially The Less Deceived, The Whitsun Weddings, and High Windows, present "a poetry from which even people who distrust poetry, most people, can take comfort and delight," according to X. J. Kennedy in the New Criterion. Larkin employed the traditional tools of poetry—rhyme, stanza, and meter—to explore the often uncomfortable or terrifying experiences thrust upon common people in the modern age. As Alan Brown john notes in Philip Larkin, the poet produced without fanfare "the most technically brilliant and resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable, body of verse of any English poet in the last twenty-five years."

His Plain Far-Reaching Singleness

I have two of Philip Larkin's poems by heart—"Sad Steps" and "Aubade"—though I admire many more, and it was while reciting the former poem silently to myself during a particularly boring meeting that I noticed a number of things for the first time, most of them related in one way or another to the poet's use of adjectives:
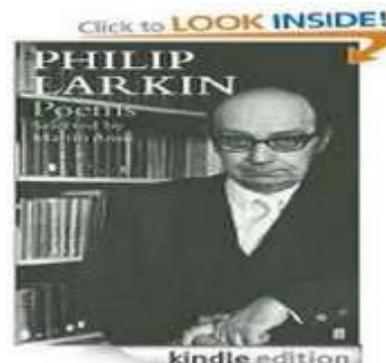

Fig. philip larkin new poems

Groping back to bed after a piss
I part thick curtains and am startled by
The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness.
Four o'clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie
Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky.
There's something laughable about this . . .

There's much here that's typical Larkin, from the word "piss," to the metrical compression of the line it ends, to the off rhyme it makes with "cleanliness." What struck me most, though, was the adjective "cavernous" modifying "sky" in line two of the second stanza. I'd noted it before, noted the way it renders the space described at once enormous and claustrophobic. What I hadn't seen

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was the allusion to Plato's metaphor of the cave. This being larkin, of course, there's no sense that there is a higher world beyond the cave to which we might escape.

How had I missed this? And what else had I missed? Well, for one thing, there's the way "cavernous" and "wind-picked," the latter a wonderful coinage in itself, and again, an adjective, combine here to turn the land and skyscape of the poem into the Cavern of the Winds. Earlier, in the last line of the first stanza, there are "[t]he rapid clouds," the adjective "rapid" not only indicating the relative speed of the clouds, but conjuring up an image of whitewater. It doesn't seem too much of a leap, when imagining whitewater flowing through a cavern, to recall Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and its "stately pleasure dome" here:

Where Alph the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

By the time I had gotten this far in my rereading of "Sad Steps," I was beginning to wonder if I had misjudged, not just this particular poem, but Larkin the poet. What was the Cavern of the Winds doing here, given Larkin's scorn for "the myth kitty"? And the brief but profound allusions to Plato and Coleridge—where these really the hallmarks of the poet who wrote "Get stewed / Books are a load of crap"? Of course, the title "Sad Steps" is itself an allusion to sonnet 168 from Astrophil and Stella, and of course Larkin, as a writer, reader, reviewer, and librarian, loved literature. He was as much the average bloke at the pub as Frost was the average New England farmer. Still . . .

In more narrowly technical terms, I was struck by how abundant adjectives are in the poem, and by how inventive Larkin's use of them is. I realized that, at some level, I had accepted a false chain of logic that went something like this: Larkin is a master of the plain style. The plain style is characterized by a relative paucity of adjectives. Therefore, adjectives play a relatively minor role in Larkin's poetry. While this didn't prevent me from appreciating individual cases here and there in the poetry where the use of adjectives was crucial, it did effectively block me from seeing what those cases had in common. Once I started looking for adjectives among my favorite Larkin moments, I realized that they were everywhere. I thought of the speaker in "Dockery and Son," and his description of himself as "[d]eath-suited, visitant," of the "wide farms" and "short-shadowed cattle" in "The Whitsun Weddings," and of the "harsh-named halt" and "gull-marked mud," among numerous other examples, in "Here."

I thought in particular of the first stanza of "Aubade," and the speaker's meditation on "Unresting death, a whole day nearer now." Larkin is obviously playing off the fact that we refer to the dead as resting in peace, yet if the adjective doesn't quite personify death, it certainly portrays it as a relentless, vaguely intelligent force—active, as opposed to the utterly passive dead. The adjective really seems to refer to at least three things simultaneously: to death, which never rests, and presumably never will, as long as anything is left alive; to the dead, who cannot be said to "rest in peace" because they cannot be said to exist in any meaningful sense; and to the speaker, who is lying awake in bed contemplating mortality. I thought, too, of the conclusion of the poem, where "The sky is white as clay, with no sun." There the adjectival phrase "white as clay" has the finality of earth thudding on a coffin lid. Then there was the last stanza of "High Windows":

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

Philip Larkin was a significant 20th century poet whose work is characterized by detailed observations of everyday life and relationships. His poetry is often described as being melancholic (the tone can be downbeat), although he is also famous for celebrating the ordinary by writing about things not usually considered suitably important enough to be the subject of poetry. He did not marry, had no children, never went abroad and worked as a librarian at Hull University for over 30 years. To many people Larkin's life seems unremarkable.

Subject

Born Yesterday was written "For Sally Amis", the newborn daughter of Kingsley Amis, a friend of Larkin's and a famous novelist. In the poem the speaker offers the child a welcome into the world and outlines what he hopes will become her attributes. The poem briefly presents traditional good wishes and hopes offered on such occasions - "the usual stuff" - but follows with the suggestion of a less conventional path to "happiness" won by "An average of talents" rather than great beauty.

The title is a pun, or play on words: literally the poem was written shortly after Sally's birth, but "Born yesterday" is also a phrase used to describe someone who is **clueless about the world**.

Structure and language

Structure

Born Yesterday has **two sections**, a ten-line stanza and a 14-line stanza. The lines are short and direct. The first stanza concentrates on the presentation and eventual deflation of traditional wishes for a newborn child. The second stanza presents the speaker's unconventional hopes for the child. The greater length of the second stanza is an indication of the belief that this attitude is more worthwhile.

Language

The poem opens with a natural image associated with a newborn baby, that of the "Tightly-folded bud". This metaphor reflects the baby's curled posture, as well as drawing on the natural comparison of a leaf or flower in bud ready to open to full beauty and potential.

The third and fourth lines start with negative words "None" and "Not", shifting the emphasis from "the usual stuff/About being beautiful" and leading a life "running off a spring/Of innocence and love". The use of negatives undermines the presentation of traditional wishes as well as preparing the reader for the second stanza in which less conventional wishes are offered.

The speaker sets himself apart from "the others", brushing aside their sentiments ("They will all wish you that"). The tone at the end of the first stanza seems negative, resigned to the idea that life is unlikely to be "About being beautiful":"should it prove possible,/Well, you're a lucky girl."

At times *Born Yesterday* is conversational, suggesting a close, friendly relationship between the speaker and subject. The frequent use of pronouns such as "I" and "you", as well as line openings "Well," and "In fact," bring an informal, honest tone to the poem.

The closing lines are presented as a list, an energetic, optimistic outburst that contrasts with the previous language of being "average" and "dull". The poet is, after all, wishing the baby happiness in the future, but is more honest, realistic and sincere.

Comparison

To His Coy Mistress

- *To His Coy Mistress* offers a good contrast to Larkin's poem as Marvell presents the idea that life is short and so people should aim for as much excitement and pleasure as possible regardless of the consequences; whereas in *Born Yesterday*,

Larkin encourages the reader to accept life's limits, and in doing so offers a more reliable path to happiness.

Hour
- *Hour*, like *Born Yesterday* is a poem about finding pleasure in ordinary, everyday experiences, rather than chasing the impossible and facing disappointment.

Attitudes, themes and ideas

The speaker in *Born Yesterday* asserts the opinion that the best way of "Catching" happiness is to embrace the "ordinary", "dull" life that so many people experience. To wish for more is perhaps to focus on unrealistic and ultimately damaging ambitions. The language of the poem reflects certain beliefs: "ordinary", "average", "nothing uncustomary", "balance", "dull" are all presented as desirable qualities or conditions, despite their customary negative associations.

A stylistic analysis of Larkin's 'Talking in Bed'

Philip Larkin's 'Talking in Bed' (1964) is a poem about isolation, disillusionment and failure, about the gap between expectations and reality, about the ironies of love in the modern world. It is also about the difficulty of telling the truth and being nice at one and the same time. Compared to other poems by Larkin, such as 'Church Going' and 'Whitsun Weddings', 'Talking in Bed' seems to have received very little attention, probably because of its superficial simplicity. The present study provides an integrative, bottom-up stylistic analysis of the poem. The analysis is done in three main steps corresponding to the three main "stylistic levels" of a text: the "micro" level of the poem as form, the "intermediate" level of the poem as discourse, and the "macro" level of the poem as a communicative event (Finch, 1998, p. 208). At the level of the poem as form, the study investigates the overall structure of the poem and the grammatical structure of the sentences therein from a rather traditional, pre-functional, point of view. The different meanings of the major lexical items, the semantics of negation, the instances of anomaly, ambiguity and polysemy and the use of adjectives in the poem are also explored. These aspects inevitably lead up to the higher and broader level of the poem as discourse.

The discursive aspects investigated in the study, based on Halliday's three met functions, are images and isotopies - language, love, and nature; lexical sets, cohesive devices, representation of reality (field) and transitivity choices - processes,

participants and circumstances; demonstratives, pronoun reference, interpersonal relationships (tenor), deictics and the deictic sub-worlds of the poem. At a broader level, the study addresses the communicative situation of the poem. This is where the biographical context and generic and other text-external aspects of the poem are explored. This wider context subsumes ideological as well as historical aspects of the text. It also includes the external tenor, i.e., the author-reader relationship, the code, mode and channel and more comprehensive comments on the field of the poem.

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