

Philip Larkin, a Poet of Sadness and Deprivation was The Victim of His Own Circumstances

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*"The way the moon dashes through clouds that blow
Loosely as cannon-smoke...
Is a reminder of the strength and pain*

Philip Arthur Larkin was an English poet, novelist, and jazz critic of twentieth century. He was a great technician, craftsman and a strategist. He was associated with the Movement, a term which describes a group of British poets of 1950s who came together to protest against the inflated romanticism of 1930 and 1940. His famous poetic collections are *The North Ship*, *the Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*. *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* are his two most famous novels. He remained single through out his 63 years. He is buried at the Cottingham Municipal cemetery near Hull.

Larkin has been called "*The saddest heart in the post-war Supermarket.*" He is often criticized for being a poet of disappointments. His works, no doubt, justify this criticism. This aspect of Larkin's compositions made me surprise and curious to know why this great figure became so nervous in the modern era which is full of optimism and enthusiasm. I tried to discover his personal and social circumstances making him a poet of negative ideas.

The majority of poems written by Larkin reflect his disappointment and dismay at the spectacle of the life around him and he saw himself also a pathetic kind of man and not a hero capable of rising above his circumstances and above his fear of old age and death. "It is his propensity for writing about death, failures and disappointments that has earned Larkin the reputation of being a purveyor of sadness and pessimism, the frequent evidence of humour and the everpresent wit notwithstanding."¹ Larkin had become famous for keeping things to himself. His powerful self-esteem was matched by a virulent self-disparagement. He said in his poem 'Coming' that his childhood was 'a forgotten boredom'. He was pleased to remember that '*one of my mother's stories about me as a baby is how she could never keep me amused-every fresh thing put into my hands lasted me only a few minutes, then the wail began again*'² He said that when he read accounts of other people's childhoods they always seemed more lurid and exciting than his had been. Some of the reasons for his 'insulation' aren't hard to find. Even as a very small child, Larkin's eyesight was weak; his long back and comparatively short legs made him ungainly; and by the age of four he had started to stammer badly. In the first decade of their marriage, his parents hadn't stopped loving each other, but their feelings had gone musty. Larkin would describe how he came to consciousness with the sound of them '*Bickering stupidly at home.*' There was little outspoken anger but the sense that it was always just about to begin an atmosphere of irritation which curdled the whole experience of childhood. He said that he had hated everybody when he had been a child. When Larkin was five years old, his family shifted from Coventry to a house close to the city

centre-Manor Road. It was this house which became the main focus for his early memories. It was the place where his 'forgotten boredom' became acute. Larkin's earliest childhood acquaintances confirm this. As one of them thought that his house had been somewhat gloomy. Another said that Mr. Larkin was somewhat distant and unapproachable'. A third one calls the atmosphere 'colourless' and 'awkward'.

Far from being 'forgotten', the 'boredom' of Larkin's first few years stayed with him for ever. To be the adored only son, to have a comfortable house full of good books and to have annual holidays could not compensate for the 'drab' marriage of his parents, the 'intimidating' atmosphere of their home, and the web of disapproval that Sydney had woven round it. Visitors to Manor Road remember a large-faced, long-haired child haunting its gloomy rooms in silence, or hanging around the adults with awkward reverence until told he could disappear to his bedroom. Larkin's feelings turned into rage by early adolescence because of his desire to seem superior and separate. 'Please believe me', he told his first important friend, 'When I say that half my days are spent in black, surging, twitching, boiling HATE!!!.' ³ By adulthood, it had modulated into controlled but sinner resentment, a feeling which surfaces time and again in an unpublished fragment he wrote during the 1950s. His parents formed the cramped but creative shape of his mature personality'.

Larkin was unsuccessful in his schooldays which were uneventful. He had been forced to share the aloof life of his parents. His youth and shyness made anything impossible. At the age of five he had conceived a violent passion for a little girl named Mary and tried to make advances to her-only to be violently repelled. The embarrassment lasted for years, festering in solitude. Larkin would suggest that the two trips he made in Germany during 1930s sowed the seed of his hatred to abroad and became the reason for his Xenophobia. He felt disturbed being in Germany with someone of his father's extreme political views. By the end of his second trip to Germany, 'abroad' was connected with feelings of embarrassment at best, humiliation at worst –feelings which as the years went by he simplified and hardened into hatred. In one sense the experience hurt him deeply, increasing his awkwardness and driving him even further into himself. He was against the existing system of education and Christianity driving him into agnosticism. Much of his writing as KHS was a form of revolt. (Around 1939) His experience of childhood shaded off quickly an unknown future. In an imaginary world made of ships, shores and high windows, he watched the power of individual choice being challenged by death. He saw himself as someone both dependent upon and dragged down by his whining mother and autocratic father.

At the end of his first year, when the Oxford University Rhythm club was founded, Larkin was able to go to live performances more or less whenever he wanted. (The Rhythm Club turned out to be a disappointment; it was, he told his parents, 'the nesting ground of arty Shavians, Goodmanians, jitterbugs, and other pests of jazz,' ³ then suddenly and violently, his life was thrown into confusion. On 14 November 1940, at 7 in the evening, the German Luftwaffe bombed Coventry, dropping 500 tons of high explosive, killing 554 people and seriously injuring 1,000 others. Large parts of the city were obliterated. The cathedral in which Larkin had been christened was ruined. Three-quarters of the car and aeroplane was destroyed. Two thousand homes were made uninhabitable. It was Hitler's first blitz

on an English city- something that Sydney had imagined might happen and which his family had always feared. The raids on Coventry continued into the winter. The November blitz frightened him badly because for the first time it made the war real, and because in threatening to destroy his past it also reminded him that he could not escape it. As its echoes died away and were replaced with the sound of other raids, he brooded on the images of destruction he had seen.

*Life is an immobile, locked, Three-handed struggle between
Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse)
The unbeatable slow machine That brings what you'll get.*

The devastation continued to haunt him for many years- helping to shape his poem 'A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb', written three years later. When he was eighteen years old, his mother irritated him by being a dog's body. But her presence left him free for his own pursuits- which included writing angry accounts of his time at home. He realized that his anger was, to a certain extent, a displacement of the frustration he felt with himself. Yet it was also a completely independent feeling, a fury at being trapped, and a fear about what sort of prediction this made for his later life. He told Sutton that Isherwood was his destiny and let him hug defeat like a lover. It wasn't only rage but writing that Eva's coddling allowed- though for the time being Larkin couldn't produce any. When he picked up the booklets of poems he had made the summer before, hoping they would show him the way forward, he found that he despised them. As he finished the two poems he had started the previous term, he was dismayed by their lack of originality. He didn't want to write anything at present. He complained to Sutton that in fact, thinking it over, he wanted to die, he was very impressed by this sort of unrealised death wish of his. He supposed his writing was terrible. John Layard, a psychologist who made a direct address to unconscious came into Larkin's life when he was teaching at New College. He appealed to the frustrated and introspective side of Larkin's character. Regarding his pessimism, Larkin is compared with the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi who believed that "love, knowledge, all that man seeks is essentially illusion."⁴

Layard said the women were priestesses of the unconscious so Larkin thought they might endlessly enrich his work. How could he fulfill himself- as an artist, if not as a man- without them? He summoned up his courage and tried to know some of the girls who flattered him in the English club or met him in lecture. Every encounter was a disaster. After this string of defeats Larkin retired hurt sheltering behind the antagonism which had protected him in the past. This experience and his feelings towards women left him caught between rage and desire, cruelty and kindness and a longing for solitude. By the end of his first undergraduate year, all these paradoxical elements existed in his character. In 1941, Larkin's family shifted to a new house in Warwick where their miseries were recreated. Larkin felt dejected there. He thought his parents and sister as blokes. In order to resist them, he visited the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, read Lawrence daily and visited the cinema etc but it was just a temporary relief. When he turned nineteen and became eligible for call-up, he complained of feeling trapped and helpless. He

muttered desperately that he was in pensive mood. He had fears about the course of the war. When his call-up seemed imminent, he told Sutton that he just didn't want to go into the army. He wanted to pretend it wasn't there: that there's no war on. When he did get into it, it would be a hell of a struggle of readjustment. He would get over it in about 5 months. But they would be a dose of hell. He wondered if Suicide was very easy.

He wasn't interested in war. When his date of call-up came he had a strong presentiment he shall get killed in this war. He realized it had been the thing most dreaded by him. When he underwent a medical test for call-up, he felt his undergraduate life had been a waste of time. He sold all the books and burnt the notes he had taken in lectures. He had a wish to dismantle his eye at the university. Larkin was worried about his writing in the beginning. He said, "*I am very sick of my own life these days*", he says in one typical outburst to Sutton, "*I feel I have got out of touch with the main way of life at present; in fact I was born out of it, and I don't feel capable of becoming an artist. I am filled with waves of self- disgust and doubt washing and corroding my inner self away.*"³ He knew that he needed his parents as much as he resented them and this only increased his distress. He told Sutton that there was nothing but misery to come from his home. If death of his father and mother etc. happened he was too weak-Kneed to make any way in life. Then in the end his own death like a running wave tracked him down. The approaches he made to women were unsuccessful and they were continually depressing encounters. Larkin suffered from sexual frustration. He saw many dreams in which he is in bed with men and trying to seduce a woman etc. the word in which these encounter occur is drab and disagreeable. His degree work was always a prey to depression or proud laziness; his friends were scattered. He was confused about sex, confused about his worth, confused about what sort of personality he had, confused about the war. The more he tried to clear his mind, the more baffled and powerless he felt. That entire problem weighed very heavily on him as he told Sutton on the second day of the next year he felt absolutely without hope. Larkin felt blocked and inert after he had left Oxford. He was a melancholic figure, uncertain about his future.

After appearing in an Interview for Civil Service, he felt he was bound to be disappointed whatever happened. If he was accepted, it would mark the end of his ambitions as an artist; if he was rejected it would prove he was incompetent to deal with the world. If he set up as a solitary writer, he wouldn't be able to make ends meet; if he stayed with his parents he would be driven half crazy. He remained confused throughout about his future career. His job as a librarian in Wellington forced him to set aside his novel which gave him trepidation and irritation. His visit to Wellington made him depressed. The chance of finding creative solitude turned into the prospect of blank loneliness. The hopes of finding a cosy flat dwindled into cold discomfort. He felt uncomfortable at lodging. It was cheerless and gloomy. What might have been his first exciting step towards independent adult life was a frightened shuffle. His experience at the library was horrifying. He felt frightened torn between dread and contempt because of the stuffy and intimidating atmosphere.

"I work all day, and get half drunk at night. Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare. In time the curtain edges will grow light. Till then I see what's really always there: Unresting death, a whole day nearer now, Making all thought impossible but how And where and when I shall myself die."

Throughout his time at Oxford, Larkin had been snubbed by girls, confused by his feelings for Brown, disappointed with him. The nervous antagonism he had shown towards women in his first term had increased steadily until his last. Larkin's main fear was that if he got married he would end up imitating his parents' misery and marriage was incompatible with writing. Terrorized by sex, money, time, parental example and children, Larkin hesitated to take even the most tentative step towards anyone else, even a girl such as Ruth. Larkin's fears were strange. Ruth Bowman (his beloved) suspected that he depended on his melancholy, and resisted her efforts to lift him when he was down. Proving the point, she sorrowfully remembers a train journey they once took together. Larkin suddenly interrupted their talk and sat slumped and silent. Ruth wanted to know what the matter was. He replied that he had just thought what it would be like to be old and had no one to look after you. Larkin announced, evidently relishing his unhappiness.

Life at Wellington seemed a series a minor irritation, humiliations, boredoms, frustrations and disgust. In fact, his circumstances were depressing. When Larkin was twenty three years old, he was uncertain about his future. He was nervous because of the war. He was confused how he looked to the future. Not, as usual with confidence. The news of the 'atomic bomb' made such foresight a shade preposterous. He expected to grow sourer and sourer. Larkin's clinical tone, evaluating his life as if he were a stranger to him, spoke of self-regard as well as unhappiness. Once he wailed that he had no more determination or fire in his heart. He told Amis, *'I'm rather unhappy at present due to spiritual dryness. Did you know the soul could die and the body live on?'*³ Larkin's early theory about life is that life consisted of three stages; the first representing innocence; the second its loss resulting in devastation; the third struggle, after the desolation, to return to a truer and mature self: a sort of social history- his own.⁵

He was affected by Ruth's worries which made it difficult for him to start a relationship with any other woman. He felt that moving to Leister had been a mistake. He applied for a job with the British Museum and with Bodleian in Oxford but no success. Disappointment quickly turned to self-recrimination and then into depression. He felt the same dreariness here which he had felt at Wellington. He wrote to Sutton that he supposed he was generally wasting time and money to no particular purpose and that life was giving rather seedy returns. His experiences of various rented houses were very bad. He also redirected his anger towards his neighbours. His father's death in 1948 left him desolate. When Ruth tried to console him by writing in a letter that she wanted to lift him from awful experience and make him see some point in life, he decided not to reply as he didn't want to be reminded of the point of life; he wanted to come to

terms with his sorrow by possessing it utterly and alone. Actually, Sidney's death made him feel grave yet in certain respects theatrical.

When he returned to Queen's Chambers in January 1951, he wrote: *I am entering on a very anti-Queen's phase at present, along with sour depression and all the rest of it. Scarcity of any good Companions, my own inability to do anything myself, all contribute to day-cold depressions. When I am in I want to be out and when I am out I want to be in. Belfast is a dull unsociable place much worse than Leicester. They have nothing that appeals to me at all.*³ He got some happiness in 1952 but it was disturbed by the engagement of Winifred to someone else. He got disappointed and angry. For the next several weeks he converted his frustration into rage against the whole world of his affections. When he got disturbed, he started to write poetry. When Larkin abandoned his career as a novelist in 1952, it wasn't sorrow but rage with what he knew was a personal as well as an artistic failure. Monica, being one of the friends he would have most liked to impress by completing *A New World Symphony* had to bear the brunt of his disappointment. In April 1953, while spending Easter with his mother, he visited her in Leicester and directed his irritation against her. Isolation is the major factor for his melancholy. When he left Belfast for Hull in 1955 as a Librarian, he was dissatisfied. His future seemed dark to him. He really didn't know what he was doing in that job at all. As he moved from Ireland, he suffered from trauma. Larkin showed his anger to his mother because of many reasons. Anger with her interference, anger at her helpless pettiness, anger at the emotional legacy he believed that he had bequeathed him, and anger with himself for needing her in spite of everything. In 1957, reacting to some jazz programmes Amis had introduced on the radio, Larkin pictured himself as 'a corpse eaten out with envy, impotence, failure envy, boredom, fear, baldness, bad circulation, bitterness, envy, sycophancy, deceit, nostalgia etc. One day, a woman in front of him accidentally knocked over and smashed half a dozen jars of jam and Philip worried about what he would have done had it been he who had knocked them over. Anxiousness came easily to him and fear of death was a subject which featured frequently in his conversation, but his unpretentiousness and self-mockery stopped him from ever seeming morbid or self-dramatizing. Larkin changed his lodging places many times. Most of them challenged his solitude hence depression. In his lifetime, it was generally thought that the focus of his interest was death, and that what bound his poems together were themes of mortality. "Indeed, the movement of Larkin's poems is frequently away from the particular towards the general in an effort to identify our common natures, our common plight, our common humanity."⁶

His physical disabilities were somehow the reason of his being alone. He realized that he had started to go deaf. It was the latest in a series of minor disabilities, all of which cut him off from the world. As a child and young man his stammer had made ordinary life complicated. His weak eyesight had made school lessons difficult, and then separated him from his contemporaries during the war. Now with his stammer considerably improved and his eyesight showing only slight signs of further deterioration, he was again at a disadvantage. As his hearing grew weaker in the years ahead he felt more and more isolated, trapped in an incompetent body,

foolish and pathetic. Work in the library became awkward, talking in public places (bars, for instances) a trial, even listening to jazz at home- one of his greatest pleasures was a strain by the mid-1970s. Colleagues grew used to seeing his face remains blank as they spoke to him, or to watching him fiddle with first one and eventually two hearing aids. In a more temperate person this would have been bad enough; in Larkin it fuelled powerful feelings of self-disgust and resentment. His deafness steadily darkened his melancholy. Whenever, he visited his mother, he remained distracted. At the age of 39, he had fallen ill and got worried. He wrote at that point of time: *“I feel quite cast down and scared. All the grim devils are at my back, such as I needn’t specify, and this place has begun to depress me: I feel frequently alone and uncared for. Is all this a sort of breakdown? Should I ‘try to buck up’ and all that? It’s not just feeling depressed: I feel depressed because my head still feels wrong: it isn’t pain of any kind, but a kind of swimming giddiness that undermines everything I do and makes it impossible for me to enjoy doing anything. And this in turn worries me and gives me a central apprehensiveness in the chest.”*³ At Fielden House with his mother in 1961, he felt depressed, he told Judy Egerton that the sense of approaching forty was strong upon him and (of) having completely wasted the time of twenty to forty, when power should be greatest and relish keenest. Anything he did now would be a compromise with second or third best. He suddenly saw himself as a freak and a failure, and his way of life as a farce. He supposed work normally shielded one’s eyes from home truths of that nature. The same year in 1961, as soon as Christmas was over, he told Judy that he really had no sense of the future then except as the approach of death: he supposed he didn’t really believe that or he would be more depressed and frightened than he was, but it did seem barren of any hope in the usual directions of writing or sex or changing job. He seemed to have got into a rut which tended to frighten him whenever he realized how deep and narrow it was. Of course, such ghastly festivals as the one they had just endured make life seem bleaker and bleaker and generally more savour less. Or perhaps it was just that appalling cold, the whole hostile universe baring its teeth at one like some bald bat winged Chinese dragon. Larkin was a self-deprecating man.

“Work is a kind of vacuum, an emptiness, where I just switch off everything except the scant intelligence necessary to keep me going. God, the people are awful - great carved monstrosities from the sponge-stone of second ratedness. Hideous.”

Through his diaries, we come to know that Larkin is gloomily humorous, relentlessly intolerant, and eager to see the potential for disaster in everything and mocking himself for doing so. Because of the effect of the national economic recession by the late 1970s he felt that his work had become as disappointing as his home life. In 1971, back in Hull, Larkin sank once more into the irritable gloom which had stifled him on his return from Oxford at the beginning of the year. As invariably happened when he was suffering particular stress and unhappiness, he soon developed a minor ailment. Previously it had been his eyes, his nose, his hay-fever; now it was his neck, which early in the summer had inexplicably begun to ache. His mother’s leg broke in 1972. His mother’s condition distressed him. His mother’s weakness became the cause of his

bleak conclusion. He was propelled to write dark conclusion because of his nagging worries about his health. Once he even admitted to his mother he seemed to spend far too long sunk in a drunken stupor most evenings. He was afraid that he was a silly creature. When he grew fifty years old, he looked sixty. The lean and hungry young librarian who had arrived in Hull seventeen years earlier was now measuring his progress towards the grave by the speed of his mother's decline. He felt more strongly than ever that when her life ended it would be too late for his own to begin. Larkin's depression continued to deepen. Every way he turned he found evidence to justify his mood. In 1972, when Day-Lewis died, Larkin's sorrow at the loss of a friend turned into frustration with his own lack of fluency as a poet. In September, 1972 as he settled into Pearson Park once more, black comedy turned into bleak sadness. He heard that Pasty had been taken into the London clinic and was being treated for alcohol poisoning. Soon afterwards he was unsettled again. Even jazz reviewing, his ten-year-old stand-by no longer consoled him. He felt he was sitting among the ruins of his life. In the past, he had believed he should sacrifice his life for the benefit of his work; now, secure in his reputation, he realised that he was sacrificing his life in order to close his work down. Buying Newland Park was a form of creative suicide, one which left his achievements untarnished: Inside its darkened rooms, where he kept the blinds drawn even at midday, he could both relish his success and seem not to enjoy it. *He could freeze his talent to avoid the responsibility of having to live up to his reputation. He could watch his work float free from his life, waiting for his life to end.*

Early in 1975, Arthur Terry travelled over from Queen's, Belfast, to visit Hull. He hadn't seen Larkin for twenty years, and was shocked by what he found. He found him as much gloomier, and much, much more reactionary which was terrible, really. And was sad, very sad! On 17 November in 1977, his mother Eva died. Larkin didn't want his friends to think that Eva's death had taken him unawares or gored him painfully. Neither did he want to show how much he missed her. In truth, though, he knew that he had lost the person who had shaped his life more decisively than anyone else. Often he had felt her influence was stifling. During his childhood she had presented him with a model of timidity which later encouraged a wild range of adult apprehensions and hypochondriacs. During his adolescence and early manhood she had contributed enormously to his difficulties with girls. During his middle age she had blighted his life with her wheedling and whining. Every Christmas she had reduced him to a frenzy of frustration. Frequently he had lost his temper and blamed her for stunting his life. Increasingly he had felt that her death, whenever it came, would be too late for him to start again without her. He felt sad even on small events.

It merely adds the torment of having done nothing, when the time comes when it really doesn't matter if you've done anything or not."

[Philip Larkin: Letters to Monica](#)

In 1979, he ran over and killed a hedgehog while mowing the lawn and the death gave him a sharper grief than several of the larger losses which had recently blighted him. When

Lesley Dunn died in 1981, Larkin's wretchedness increased. Larkin had not lost an intimate friend, yet he had liked and admired Lesley, who with her husband had entertained him to dinner many times since first meeting him in 1968: he felt her loss grievously. It reminded him all too flagrantly of life's injustices and brought death uncomfortably close. His friend Monica's illness made him painful and distressed in 1982. Larkin was extremely anxious about her thinking she might be about to die. He told Monica that when she recovered she must come and live with him in Newland Park. When Monica stayed with him, He said at present that life had taken a major and permanent turn for the worse, arousing a pretty fair panic in me at times. Some alternatives are of course very much worse than others, but none was anything but gloomy. For several weeks, Larkin continued to take '*a gloomy view of thing*'. When *Required Writing* was published he had remained mockingly glum about the book's real quality, and inscribed copies for friends with remarks like '*Crumbs from a poor man's table.*'

"I am always trying to 'preserve' things by getting other people to read what I have written, and feel what I felt."

Now he was only a little cheered. The prize money pleased him, the presentation unnerved him, and his health, as well as Monica's, continued to worry him. He told Monteith that in fact, the future was slightly clouded by pain in his left leg, which was also somewhat swollen. He hoped that would cure itself, but if it didn't he didn't know what would happen. All in all that were being a rather odd year so far, awards and miseries. Really, at times he wished they would cancel each other out. Larkin was the victim of self-disgust. Larkin as a boy embarrassed by his 'long back and short legs,' the young man ashamed of his baldness, short sightedness and stammer, had turned into the deaf sixty-one year who hated himself for sweating so much and feeling of gargantuan.³ In 1984, he felt as if everything else which had once entertained or diverted him had dried up. Jazz, poems, the countryside work. Dr. Clive Aber, at the Hull Nuffield Hospital on 16 March, agreed that Larkin was suffering from acute depression and hypochondria. He had a cancer phobia and a fear of dying. When a polypoid tumour was found in his Oesophagus, Larkin was terrified. He reduced his drinking and began to lose weight, but this only cleared his mind so that he could concentrate on his unhappiness more steadily. In hospital, the awkwardness and anxiety continued for at least another fortnight, and as the days trailed by Larkin became implacably depressed. Pitifully thin, forcing himself to walk round the apple-tree-dotted lawn outside his room once a day, leaning on his stick and the arm of whoever was visiting, he insisted that he had nothing to live for. He was intensely depressed. On his sixty-third birthday, he felt pathetically weak and 'bloody depressed'. "two years before he was due to retire: he had dreaded retirement almost as much as he dreaded death."⁷ Larkin died of cancer at 1.24 am in Newland Park in 1985 on Monday on 2nd December. He is buried at the Cottingham Municipal cemetery near Hull.

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