



Themes in Philip Larkin's *Whitsun Weddings*

Rudaina Abdulrazzaq Alkumait

Tikrit university

College of Education for Women

English department

Themes in Whitsun Weddings

Larkin's themes in the *Whitsun Weddings* illustrate his pessimistic and detached nature. Notably, he has often been criticized as an inflexible pessimist or the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket (Macwan, 2012). Some critics argue that Larkin's skepticism is what sets his work apart and makes him one of Britain's greatest poets (Macwan, 2012). Themes, such as solitude dominate his poetry, especially in the *Whitsun Weddings*. Correspondingly, the *Whitsun Weddings* is a poem about an individual on a train ride from Hull to London. The poet's journey starts on a hot afternoon, and from his seat, he witnesses various weddings (Larkin, 1964). The happy and decorated brides and other attendants, such as the uncles, make him ponder about marriage. Simultaneously, Larkin observes the landscape shift from countryside to towns and outlines the adverse effects of modernization (1964). Again, the poet is cut off from other people and evidently strains to attain the spirit of community (Macwan, 2012). Other themes, such as marriage and time highlight his cynicism and alienation. It is worth noting that Larkin is proud of his isolation, which makes him feel superior to those around him. Macwan (2012) adds that the poem is autobiographical because it describes Larkin's actual journey from Hull to London when he used to work as a librarian at the University of Hull. However, Larkin's skepticism is also inspired by the post-war changes in England, which shaped artists' work (Nenni, 2020, p. 73). The themes of alienation, marriage, and time portray Larkin as a detached observer who is mostly pessimistic about social events.

Theme of Alienation

Alienation is evident throughout the poem. Although several characters, such as the brides, uncles, and mothers demonstrate isolation, the poet is the ultimate outsider who observes the happenings around him with skepticism. He is presumed to be Larkin, given his grim view about life (Nenni, 2020, p. 79). Larkin's idea of marriage and time, as explained further, stems from his childhood and the social, environmental, ideological, and economic shifts in England in the 1950s. Overall, he enjoys and justifies his isolation throughout the poem.

Alienation is apparent from the beginning of the poem. Notably, the train is three-quarters empty when it leaves the station and has shut windows and hot cushions (Macwan, 2012, p. 2). This already illustrates loneliness as the poet does not have company. Even so, the choice of words portrays him as a negative individual. For example, instead of writing that the train is 'a quarter full,' which is a positive phrase, he uses the word 'empty.' From the onset, it is clear that Larkin finds faults in minor occurrences. This cynic beginning sets the tone for the rest of the poem and other themes. One can predict that the poet will unlikely change his perception of what he will see.

The poet has the dismissive attitude of an alienated outsider. He observes the wedding activities with disdain and feels as though he is not part of the community (Macwan, 2012). Larkin implies that a man should not experience curiosity or interest in what others are doing around him. In fact, he is so detached from his surroundings that he does not discern that the noises are made by ongoing weddings (Larkin, 1964). He mistakes the 'whoops' and 'skirls' for activities by porters carrying their mails, and he continues with his reading (Larkin, 1964). Evidently, the poet seems self-centered and closed up from the rest of the world. However, his dismissive attitude reflects Larkin's perception of himself and the world. Nenni (2020, p. 77) states that Larkin tried to outline the difference between him and other people, and his works were discrete and self-referential. He partially chose this style because other artists in his era also used pessimism and realism in their works. Additionally, the poems resembled his views of isolation and connectedness. As such, Larkin uses the poet to highlight his dismissive nature and prove to society that he is not interested in what they do.

The guests also demonstrate a lot of detachment. Although they are in the same location, each struggles with their thoughts. For instance, the children are bored and frown at something dull (Larkin, 1964). Conversely, the fathers, who have broad belts under their suits and seamy foreheads, are in their worlds and ignore the children. Conversely, the fat mothers are loud, while the uncles are shouting smut (Larkin, 1964). The women are also sharing their secrets like a happy funeral. Again, the girls are gripping their handbags tighter and are concerned about their religious wounds (Larkin, 1964). They are also instinctively fearful of what will happen to them now that the wedding is over (Larkin, 1964). Clearly, the wedding attendants are in their unique worlds, although the wedding ceremonies are supposed to unite them. Even the weddings are isolated given that the train stops and picks up couples at every stage. Thus, each wedding has its specific groups, parties, and a sense of celebration. They also have their sense of community, which makes them separate from each other. Larkin's description of the weddings and the attendants prove that gatherings do

not cure loneliness. He insists that people cannot avoid being overcome by their thoughts and individualism, which causes detachment. Equally, the theme illustrates the poet's dismissive attitude towards people and weddings, given that he is a bachelor and alienated outsider. Larkin scorns how families gather at the stations to see their couples go off. He is also unimpressed by the unreflective married couples with whom he shares a coach.

Larkin's style of the lonely observer is not limited to just the *Whitsun Wedding*. To illustrate, the *Reasons for Attendance* closely resembles the *Whitsun Weddings*. In the *Reasons for Attendance*, the poet, possibly Larkin, is an outsider who expresses his alienation. He does not partake in the activities of those around him even though they share the same social status (Nenni, 2020, p. 79). Larkin describes how his ideas and expectations are different from those around him. He criticizes how couples dance but eventually realizes that he is a lonely individual (Nenni, 2020, p. 81). Comparatively, in *Dublinese*, Larkin attempts to reflect the impact of alienation by using a detached speaker. He is a distant observer of an ongoing funeral and cannot even assert whether the person being buried is his sister. The poem, *Here*, also demonstrates personal isolation (Nenni, 2020, p. 81). The speaker is alienated from the crowd and the landscape. He is concerned about his identity and belonging in Hull. The poem suggests that place is impactful in people's perception of whom they are and if they fit. Evidently, the alienation theme is not unique to the *Whitsun Weddings*.

In all the poems, Larkin is cynical and scornful of individuals who engage in social activities. Correspondingly, he implies that isolation is a better option through his work. Nenni (2020, p. 81) notes that alienation in the *Whitsun Weddings* and other similar poems reflects Larkin's life in Hull and overall personality. Nenni (2020, p. 80) claims that his time there made him lonely and isolated. However, he enjoyed the isolation and desired distance between him and people. In fact, he would use his binoculars to watch people, which helped him distance himself. Eventually, he became an observer and applied this approach to his poems.

Theme of Marriage

The theme of marriage justifies Larkin's preference for isolation. He questions the importance of marriage through characters, such as the uncles, fathers, and mothers. It also reflects his personality and the changes in England, which make him cynical about marriage. Larkin portrays a grim picture of the unions when he writes, "The women shared/ the secret like a happy funeral" (Larkin, 1964). This implies that they know something about marriages, which the newlyweds do not understand. From their experience, it could be that marriage is not a happy endeavor. In fact, as Hogan (2011, p. 7) adds, the ladies' participation in the nuptials of their children is akin to attending a funeral. Even so, it is evident that the brides may have an idea of what awaits them after the fanfare, and it is not pleasant. Larkin (1964) notes, "Stared at a religious wounding/ free at last." These women, who also tightly hold on to their purses, are distracted and contemplate if they will be happy in their unions. To be precise, the brides are anxious about the physical pain of the sexual experience on their honeymoon (Hogan, 2011, p. 7). Larkin emphasizes that the misery of marriage starts almost immediately, especially for women. The pain they will feel on their first night will set the pace for more unpleasant situations for a lifetime. Equally, Larkin shows his disdain for marriage entirely and states, "Success so huge and wholly farcical" (Larkin, 1964). What this implies is that beyond extravagant weddings, nothing is exciting about marriage. Accordingly, he tries to convince the audience that being alone and detached is better than being dissatisfied in a union. Banerjee and Senapoti (2018, p. 616) state that dejection, disappointments, and the voice of failure are characteristics of Larkin's poetry. Consequently, it is unsurprising that he would view marriage as a painful experience, which will dissatisfy the partners.

Larkin also implies that commitment to marriage does not last long. He illustrates this by comparing the older generations to the newlyweds. He grimly describes the participants, citing that the fathers have 'seamy foreheads,' while the mothers are 'loud and fat.' Equally, the uncles are 'shouting smut' (Larkin, 1964). Such description shows that the idealism of marriage will be quickly replaced with the ugly reality. Thus, the newlyweds should not celebrate marriage because it will eventually sour, just like their parents'. Moreover, these unions will make them physically unattractive. The lines prove that Larkin is justifying his abstinence from marriage. More so, Nenni (2020, p. 82) attributes this pessimism to Larkin's childhood. He spent a boring, painful life and had selfish parents. Larkin's parents' relationship was also broken, which influenced his trust in people and unions (Nenni, 2020, p. 82). Essentially, his childhood made him a loner, who is doubtful of intimate relationships. As a result, Larkin extends his negative experience to the characters in the poem and asserts that since his parent's marriage failed, no one else's will thrive.

Moreover, Larkin stresses that all weddings and possibly marriages, are the same. The commonality is evidenced in how the women are dressed for the occasion, "The parodies of fashion, heels, and veils/ the nylon gloves and jewelry-substitutes" (Larkin, 1964). Women wear imitations of fashionable items, which make them brash and common (Hogan, 2011, p. 8). As such, the weddings, which are supposed to celebrate the special uniqueness of a relationship, cannot be differentiated from each other (Hogan, 2011, p. 8). Hence, their marriages will also likely have a common miserable outcome. The comparison also shows that Larkin wants to stress his uniqueness because he is not married. However, his biased perception does not necessarily represent the fates of newlyweds.

Nonetheless, weddings are not entirely bad affairs. They are a source of unity to the community. In one stanza, Larkin (1964) notes, "Fresh couples climbed aboard/ the rest stood round." What this shows is that weddings bring people together, as all wedding party members would gather at every station to see off the newlyweds (Banerjee & Senapoti, 2018, p. 628). In fact, the poet observes many weddings, which unite various families. Several stanzas describe this, "Yes, from cafés/ and banquet-halls up yards/ and bunting-dressed Coach-party annexes/ the wedding-days/ were coming to an end" (Larkin, 1964). Banerjee and Senapoti (2018, p. 628) note that these weddings align with the importance of Whitsun, which means the New Testament. Whitsun has a wide religious significance and illustrates the unity of the transforming landscape between post-war England (Banerjee & Senapoti, 2018, p. 628). Being the main occasion throughout the poem, weddings also have a symbolic meaning. In this case, they represent England and its resilient people, who want to move on past the raging war. It is worth noting that the poem was written in the war era in England. Clearly, Larkin was inspired by his environment when writing the poem.

Similarly, weddings are a sign of hope. Towards the end of the poem, he seems to have changed his mind about marriages and views them positively. This is implied in several stanzas, "A sense of falling, like an arrow shower/ sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain" (Larkin, 1964). Larkin uses the term arrow, which could be Cupid's, the god who changes indifference to desire (Weiner, 2007). Indeed, this proves that the speaker is confronted with the joy and hopefulness of married life, although he, unfortunately, cannot participate in the same excitement. However, this positivity is not guaranteed because his stand on unions remains ambiguous. Reibetanz (1976, p. 537) notes that although rain is linked to life, it can also create an image of desolation. Rain blocks the sun, which was present in the previous stanzas. Furthermore, the arrow-shower signifies destruction, which awaits the newlyweds. Accordingly, the newlyweds should not expect anything less than disappointment when they settle in their new roles. Larkin acknowledges that marriages can bring happiness, although this feeling is not permanent. The pessimistic view attempts to justify his preference to be detached from social occurrences.

Larkin also makes a close connection between the landscape and marriage. It sets the stage for the poet's view about marriage. Just as Lincolnshire and the sky and the water meet along the river's water, all the Whitsun weddings converge around the train's route and eventually, the thoughts of the poet (Weiner, 2007). Larkin draws a similarity between all these relations. To illustrate, he describes the unappealing urban settings, which have led to the destruction of the environment. He writes, "Now fields were building-plots/ and poplars cast," which is then followed by a pessimistic description of the wedding couples. He perceives that the couples are exhausted from all the activities that they take off their hats and exclaim, "I almost died" (Larkin, 1964). Conversely, when they observe the landscape, they seem to overcome their loneliness as "none thought of the others they would never meet" or what awaited them after they left the train (Larkin, 1964). Larkin's comparison shows that his surroundings influence his view on marriage. Since his world has changed for the worst, he finds that everything else would also be negatively affected. He connects environmental degradation to the erosion of society through unhappy unions.

Larkin's environmental concerns stem from the transitions in England after the two World Wars, which pushed people towards slavery of technology and machinery (Nenni, 2020, p. 73). Consequently, the industrial and socio-cultural developments negatively affected the individual psyche and structure of the society (Nenni, 2020, p. 73). Evidently, Larkin shows his distaste for industrialization, which he compares to weddings. The transition to mechanization has harmed the environment, just as the shift to marriage will destroy the happiness the couples had before they wed. Worse still, industrialization in England was unsuccessful and the factories were damaged and material supply was short (Nenni, 2020, p. 74). Accordingly, Larkin shows this reality in his poem, when he writes, "Approached with acres of dismantled cars" (Larkin, 1964). Thus, by comparing the economic stall to marriages, he implies that couples have a promising beginning but a painful end awaits them.

Larkin's pessimism towards marriage is mirrored in other works. To illustrate, In *Self's the Mah*, the speaker compares his life to Arnold, whom he uses to cruelly describe marriage (Ahmed & Kudhair, 2012, p. 667). He feels better off than Arnold because he has escaped the 'happy' married life, which entails staying all day long with the woman. Unsurprisingly, Arnold's wife ends up being nagging and takes Arnold's wages (Ahmed & Kudhair, 2012, p. 667). Although Larkin is more descriptive about marriages in the *Self's the Man*, he has an overall dislike for them because he extends the same attitude in the *Whitsun Weddings*. Moreover, in both cases, Larkin considers his solitude better than being entangled in a marriage like those he observes.

Theme of Time

The poem proves that Larkin is concerned about time. However, he is still pessimistic and hopeless because it brings him discomfort. Although Larkin is generally a pessimistic individual, he highlights the struggles of the 20th century, which caused rapid and unsettling changes. Nenni (2020, p. 73) notes that the rapid industrialization forced artists to find a way to escape from the turmoil of development by focusing on an autobiographical inner world of pessimism and alienation. Forthwith, the artist creates an imaginary world, which he tries to understand himself and others (Nenni, 2020, p. 73). Clearly, Larkin embodies the traits of the artists of his era. He portrays pessimism in his perception about time, which was also evident in his assessment of marriages. Larkin's obsession with time is evident in the third stanza, "One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday" (Larkin, 1964). Throughout the poem, the poet uses other time-related phrases, such as 'end,' 'departing,' and 'hour' (Larkin, 1964). Setting out time involves the reader's senses in the situation. For example, it is possible to perceive the afternoon heat, given that the seats are hot and the windscreens are blinding, as described in the poem (Reibetanz, 1976, p. 533). Although Larkin's vivid description of time makes his poem easy to understand and interesting, he has other reasons. In this case, Larkin suggests that people should endure these discomforts for being involved in the world of time (Reibetanz, 1976, p. 533). Evidently, Larkin is pessimistic and shows that there is little to celebrate about being thrust into everyday activities. Moreover, according to Chelliah (2016, p.1), Larkin is constantly aware of the passing of time and that people are always in its thrall. Thus, he illustrates that people are powerless in controlling time, which is a realistic perspective. Other than the surroundings, time's destructiveness is notable in the idea of marriage. It makes unions sour with age (Hogan, 2011, p. 8). In this case, the older generation, which comprises the uncles and fathers, are disinterested or even unhappy about the nuptials, while the mothers feel like they have lost their daughters. To this group, marriage seems burdensome. As Chelliah (2016, p. 2) notes, time removes the illusion and is the bearer of realities, which people would rather avoid. After a few years, the newlyweds will realize that marriage is difficult and different from their colorful and happy weddings. Again, this misery is unavoidable even if the newlyweds might try to convince themselves otherwise. Even so, the poet's perspective may be tainted by his flawed perception of time and marriage. Chelliah (2016, p. 2) adds that time reminds people of what they might have had and creates a disappointment of not having attained this goal. However, this sense of loss is not entirely the fault of time passing; rather, a person's deception (Chelliah, 2016, p. 4). Time also hardens people's feelings. Perhaps, the poet is bitter because he may have lost an opportunity to be happy in a union and believes that everyone's marriage is doomed to fail in the future. If anything, he might have misinterpreted all the scenes because his prejudice clouds him. Marriage could be a happy union, which he will never enjoy. As a hardened bachelor, he does not see the beauty in marriage, and this may not change with time. Larkin perceives marriage as a disappointment in the long-run, although his negative perception could flaw his judgment. He also seemingly tries to convince himself that time will prove his ideas right. Time is a constructive force, as it brings liberties, which may not have existed previously. For example, weddings take place in locations, which would not have been frowned on by society. To illustrate, they happen in "cafes/ and banquet-halls up yards" (Larkin, 1964). This shows a shift from the churches, which were typical locations for such events. It also shows a religious change, where people do not need to include religious figures or places to host their ceremonies. It seems that time has rendered revered traditions meaningless, and people have become more secular. In fact, the implicit role of churches in this poem seems to answer the question of religious relevance, which Larkin poses in his other text, *Church Going*. In the poem, the poet wonders what would happen when churches are no longer the sites for prayers and traditional ceremonies (Chelliah, 2016, p. 3). Evidently, the *Whitsun Weddings* demonstrate that people are in more control of where their nuptials are done. Nenni (2020, p. 74) adds that the first half of the 20th century led to the emergence of new ideologies and religious views. Essentially, Larkin uses the theme of marriage to demonstrate social progress during his era, which created

the view that religion was not a personal obligation. In addition, the weddings illustrate a change to better economic times. Notably, these events are so many, "And I saw it all again in different terms" (Larkin, 1964). The poet regularly sees the grinning and pomaded girls as the train moved, and some would enter at every stop. According to Nenni (2020, p. 78), the weddings have been used to express the prosperity of England's post-war culture. Furthermore, the numerous weddings on the Whitsun Saturdays are motivated by the government's tax relief, which makes the wedding affairs cheap (Weiner, 2007). Larkin uses his poem to highlight his society's changes and how they affect people's intimate activities. Equally, time changes the poet's perception of marriage. In the beginning, he is dismissive about the unions and calls them 'farcical' (Larkin, 1964). However, as the day progresses, he starts viewing them as a blessing and compares them to arrow-shower (Larkin, 1964). In fact, his mindset changes as the day progresses. When he started the journey, while it was a hot afternoon, he was an isolated and hardened bachelor. However, by the time the sun is blocked by the rain, he has a different perception. Interestingly, the train ride plays an integral role in this transition. Larkin (1964) notes, "this frail traveling coincidence/ and what it held, stood ready to be loosed with all the power/ that being changed can give." The stanzas imply that the journey was instrumental in helping him to let go of his skepticism about the marriage. His experience with newlyweds on the same train has positively affected him. Equally, it portrays the stark contrast between him and them; he is alone while they have people who love them. Overall, Larkin illustrates the power of time in creating and destroying things. What is notable is that he is still a pessimistic writer. His gloominess is evident in how he portrays the degradation of buildings and the abandoned vehicles. Even so, Chelliah (2016, p. 1) adds that Larkin's writing is appropriate for the period in which he lived. The poems in the *Whitsun Weddings* were written at the height of anti-romantic poetry, which dominated the 1940s. Further, Nenni (2020, p. 76) finds that authors dealt with the suffering, which affected the mental stability of the men. Again, the writers presented various characters and explored various themes in society. While Larkin was a melancholic writer, he was also up-to-date with techniques that inspired other creatives during his time. Equally, because Larkin was unique to other writers, he exploited the existing styles and mood to create his exceptional work.

Conclusion

The themes of alienation, marriage, and time illustrate Larkin's skepticism about life, which are influenced by his environment, preference for solitude, and unpleasant childhood. They demonstrate that he enjoys being separated from the rest of society. They also highlight Larkin's pessimistic outlook on life. In the theme of alienation, the poet, presumably, Larkin is distanced himself from the others and has a dismissive attitude about the happenings around him. He does not immediately recognize the wedding noises, and he continues reading, mistaking them for commotions caused by mail carriers. Larkin also extends the loneliness to the other characters in the poem. For example, the women, children, and men are in different worlds, although they are in the same gathering. The women are loud while the children are bored, and the fathers are detached. Again, each wedding happens in a different setting, instead of one location, which alludes to alienation. Correspondingly, in the theme of love and marriage, Larkin proves that unions are a miserable endeavor. The newlyweds would end up bitter as they age with their husbands, just like their mothers, fathers, and uncles. Furthermore, the women understand the misery that marriage brings and compare their children's weddings to attending a funeral. Equally, all marriages are the same, as evidenced by the brides' dressing and will, consequently, have a similar miserable ending. Nonetheless, marriage represents hope, and Larkin finds himself immersed in the excitement of the unions towards the end of the poem. Again, time is a central theme in the poem. Larkin proves that it can be destructive, as noted in the environmental degradation caused by urbanization. However, time also creates new standards, given that people do not have to go to church for wedding ceremonies. However, as the poem illustrates, time is not entirely responsible for the misery people experience; the poet may have had an opportunity to engage in marriage but passed it off. The *Whitsun Wedding*, just like other poems mentioned in the essay, is influenced by Larkin's real-life experiences and personality. They are full of pessimism and isolation, which are notable traits in his existence.

References

- Ahmed, T., & Khudhair, B.M. (2012). The theme of death and time in Larkin's the Whitsun weddings. *Midad Al-Adab Refereed Journal*, 1(3), 563-682.
- Banerjee, B., & Senapoti, P.K. (2018). An analytical study of some of the poems of Philip Larkin based on his theme of death. *European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*, 7(3), 616-622.

Chelliah, S. (2016). Philip Larkin's concept of time as projected in his poetry: A brief analysis. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 3(2), 1-5.

Hogan, C. (2011). Philip Larkin. *Squarespace*. Retrieved from <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/5083c23f84ae0236022a3d76/t/52f26ff3e4b03345ab3c7302/1391620083806/Philip+Larkin+Notes+.pdf>

Larkin, Philip. (1964). The Whitsun weddings. *The Poetry Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48411/the-whitsun-weddings>

Macwan, J.M. (2012). Theme of isolation and alienation in the poetry of Philip Larkin. *Review of Research*, 1(6), 1-3.

Nenni, S. (2020). Alienation in the poetry of Philip Larkin. *The Journal of International Social Research*, 13(71), 73-86.

Reibetanz, J. (1976). The Whitsun weddings: Larkin's reinterpretation of time and form in Keats. *Contemporary Literature*, 17(4), 529-540

Weiner, J. (2007). Philip Larkin: "the Whitsun weddings." *The Poetry Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68946/philip-larkin-the-whitsun-weddings>