

Philip Larkin: The Poet of Duality

Asst. Lec. Noor Shakir Mahmood

The General Directorate of Education in Nineveh Governorate

Email: noor.shakir86@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper tackles the technique of duality; the most distinctive doctrine and motif which Philip Larkin presents in his poetry. At the same time, it is the cause of his appeal to discard Modernity in poetry and adopting new tools for Post WWII poetry. However, Larkin's duality in meaning, feeling, words, terms, places and times can demonstrate the poet's feeling of melancholy, pessimism and alienation from the self, society and place besides his permanent hostility and fear of the death .

Key words: duality, melancholy, death.

فيليب لاركن: شاعر الازدواجية

م.م. نور شاكر محمود جاسم
المديرة العامة للتربية في محافظة نينوى
المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث تقنية الازدواجية والتي تمثل العقيدة والموضوع الأبرز الذي عرضه فيليب لاركن في شعره. في نفس الوقت هذه الازدواجية كانت السبب في رفضه للحدثة في الشعر وتبنيه لأدوات جديدة لشعر ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية. على أي حال، الازدواجية في المعنى وفي الشعور وفي الكلمات وفي المصطلحات وفي الأماكن وفي الأزمنة تستطيع أن تجسد شعور الشاعر المأساوي وتشاؤمه وعزلته بعيداً عن الذات والمجتمع والمكان وخوفه وعدائته للموت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الازدواجية، الكابة، الخوف من الموت.

Philip Larkin(1922-1985) was born in Conventry in England and worked there as a librarian most of his life. In spite of people called him as "England's Other Poet Laureate," he considers himself as " a freak and a failure and [his] entire life as a farce."¹ The main cause of this duality in fame and belittling the own self can be traced back to his early childhood; in his "This Be The Verse," he laments his parents because " they fill you with the faults they had, \ and add some extras, just for you," ("This Be The Verse," l. 2-3) thus he grows hostility against marriage and bringing children. Although he admits that his childhood was unpleasant and full of fear and domination, after his father's death he became "proud of him" and his cold relationship with his mother was transformed into pity during her widowhood.² The oedipal effect is clear in his personality since his father was a misogynist the poet became so. yet he shows an ambivalent attitude towards women and died without being married. He fail to love or to be loved or even to evolve himself in his community because of his family relations and his physical appearance that he was tall and short-sighted. This lack of confidence affected his carrier when he graduated to lock himself

inside a small room which was full of books and he worked as a librarian for the whole of his life. After that his talent of writing starts to appear wrapped with melancholy, repulsion and duality towards matters.

In "Fiction and the Reading Public," Larkin challenges Modernists to:

Give me a thrill, says the reader,
 Give me a kick;
 I don't care how you succeed, or
 What subject you pick ("Fiction and the Reading Public," l. 1-4)

What Larkin wants is that the poet should represent himself, talking about his experiences and feelings everywhere during all the times. That is the basis of the Movement which was adopted by Philip Larkin, the most attractive characteristics of it is writing in duality³;

In "At Grass," the poet bursts more than ten contradicted situations and images; the 1st duality deals with the factor of time that Larkin is standing in front of two retired horses in the first stanza in the second one the stream of his consciousness⁴ forces him to remember those two horses again but at fifteen years ago;

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
 Two dozen distances surfaced
 To fable them: faint afternoons
 Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps
 Whereby their names were artifice
 To inlay faded classic Junes ("At Grass," l. 7-12)

The 2nd duality is the parts of the day itself that he sees their shadows in the "dusk" when they are old enough to reinforce their anonymity but during the afternoon they are famous. In spite of their victory in the races the poet belittles their achievements and this is the 4th duality of the poem.

In the 5th duality, Larkin denotes about the factor of weather; in the dusk "wind distresses tail and main," ("At Grass," l. 3) but the "heat" of the race in the third stanza disturbs people, "

squadrons of empty cars, and heat,

and littered grass: then the long cry

Hanging unhushed till it subside

To stop- press columns on the street. ("At Grass," 1.15-18)

Here, in 6th duality, Larkin contrasts the rural life symbolized by "grass" and the industrial life symbolized by "cars." The 7th duality is colour contrast that the green colour and the grey one which symbolized the passage of time and death for the retired horses.

Lastly, the poet returns back to the aged horses that he asks them if they have any memories concerning their races and tiredness, they "shake their heads" as an image opposes the unforgettable memories the poet has. In this 8th duality forgettable memories of the horses make them happy being free from responsibilities though they are alone now and the vice versa occurs for the poet. Thus, happiness versus sadness and loneliness versus communication are put together in the last stanza to be the 9th and 10th dualities of the poem. In fact, Larkin wrote every contrast in his whole poems to refer to life, death, alienation, religion and work.

In "Toads" the poet tries to present working, workers and payments according to Marxists' point views alongside his use of duality. He begins the poem with an essential and important question;

Why should I let the toad work

Squat on my life?

Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork

And drive the brute off? ("Toads," 1. 1-4)

The toad is a symbol of his assertion to work as a librarian in the urban life though he doesn't want to work. Furthermore, he contrasts his physical work with the mental and feeling one, poetry, and asks himself why he doesn't want to earn money by composing poetry instead of working for six days to earn money for paying bills!

Later in the following stanzas Larkin starts to do double comparison between rich people who doesn't work but use their wit and poor people who don't work though they can eat and drink easily. This duality of the educated people and their richness and the uneducated people and their poverty ends to the fact that: "No one actually starves." ("Toads," 1. 20) thus the poets challenges himself that if he is "courageous enough" and ask for pension.

According to Hegelian theory, the unity of dualities can be achieved by presenting the thesis and antitheses to find the antitheses. " the thesis in this

poem is the toad which urges Larkin to leave working and the antithesis is the other toad which squats in his mind and threatens him that if he leaves working, he will lose all his dreams of fame and money. To solve the problem and extract the suitable solution of these opposed and contradicted wishes, Hegel's syntheses will be;

I don't say, one bodies the other
 One's spiritual truth;
 But I do say it is hard to lose either
 When you have both. ("Toads," l. 33-36)

So, the poet is forced to accept both toads in spite of their contradicted attitudes.

From the very beginning of "Aubade" the worker Larkin opposes the idea of the Aubades poems which are a poetic genre that welcomes the coming of dawn and parting the beloved instead Larkin in this poem renews his encounter with the beast of death;

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, ("Aubade," l. 1-5)

Larkin exchanges the beloved with death and departure with the renewal encountered with enemy, death, which "larks" everywhere in front of him. Furthermore, the dualities of "day" and "night" and "working" and drinking reinforce the previous main contrast of the Aubades poems.

According to Gardner Murphy the main reason of thanatophobia, the fear of death, is "the fear of loneliness" and individuality"⁵ since Larkin Wrote this poem on November 1977 after the death of his mother and the separation from her. What Larkin particularly fear from death is:

No rational being
 Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
 This is what we fear- no sight, no sound,
 No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
 Nothing to love or link with, ("Aubade," l. 25-29)

The poet, here, stands against the idea of famous people don't fear "loneliness" rather than they will be worry about the lost of their incomplete tasks.⁶

In the last stanza, Larkin again puts along together two different situations of dying people and alive ones;

In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring

Intricate rented world begins to rouse.

The sky is white as clay, with no sun.

Work has to be done.

Postmen like doctors go from house to house ("Aubade," l. 49-53)

Calling doctors to come and see patients in order to save their souls from departing bodies is just like the work of the postmen who hold messages as means of communication between the alive ones. Thus, communication is the lost episode in Larkin's life especially in his last days which were full of fears from doctors and ambulances. In fact, this poem reflects Larkin's psychological alienation from himself because of this fear. Furthermore, he doesn't find a solace in religion and that is clear in his following poem "Church Going."

A religious duality occurs when the unbeliever Larkin tries to go and enter one of the abandoned churches. Unfortunately, this inner conflict ends negatively;

Back at the door

I sign the book, donate an Irish Sixpence

Reflect the place was not worth slopping for

Yet stop I did in fact I often do,

And always end much at a loss like this. ("Church Going" l. 16-20)

This religious alienation is a part of the psychological alienation the poet always endures. He often stands in front of a church then he opens the door and after his entering he close the door behind him and that is clear reference to his solitude and isolation. However, the unbeliever tries to practice some of the religious rituals, but he is satisfied. Thus, he decides to not come there again though he promises to do so every time he comes to a church that he doesn't try to enter the same church but different churches and that is clear from the beginning of the poem when the poet compares the church of this poem with another one he entered recently. Another duality appears in the same previous lines is connected by the coin he pays as a charity; it is an Irish coin. He refers to

Catholic doctrine since most of Irish people are Catholic and contrasts it with the Protestant doctrine represented by the church itself.

In the last stanza, Larkin puts together symbols of life and religion and death. He asserts that churches are the "proper [place] to grow wise in / if only that so many died lie round" ("Church Going" l. 62-63.) Thus churches are the suitable places of graves and dead people rather than alive ones. Again death and graves refer to alienation and isolation. Furthermore, the confessionals of churches are places of privacy just like ambulances.

"Ambulance" is another poem that expresses Larkin's hostility and fear of death. Instead of referring to the ambulance itself as a symbol of hope and rescue it becomes the symbol of death which comes everywhere and shares churches in privacy:

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb
light gloss grey, arms on a plaque
they come to rest at any kerb:
all streets in time are visited. ("Ambulance," l. 1-6)

calmness of the privacy contrasts the "loud noons" of other people in the city. Furthermore, the same duality is reinforced in the second stanza that gathered and active women and children are opposed with the patient's "wild white face" inside the ambulance. Lastly, the contrasted colours of brightness and absorption and the whole poem reflect the modern social alienation and disconnection.

Another kind of alienation accompanies with duality is the geographical alienation in Larkin's "Here;" he says: "swerving east, from rich industrial shadows / and traffic all night north; swerving through fields. ("Here," l. 1-2) the poet is upset because the transformation of the agricultural fields into industrial urban life, however, life should be continued and work have to be done.

To sum up, in all the poems presented previously, the poet is alone everywhere; in the house, street, on the fields and at work and every when at down, in the noon, at sunset and during the whole day and night. This loneliness is a result of the psychological, social, religious and geographical alienations covered by contrast and duality. Thought his declared refusal of marriage and family, what the poet wants is to be loved and not to be alone and "his hand withdrawn, holding her hand" ("An Arundal Tomb," l. 12) because "what will survive of us is love." ("An Arundal Tomb," l. 42).

References

- ¹ Qtd in Nikhilesh, "Critical Assessment of Poetry of Philip Larkin." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, no.6, 2022. P. 203.
- ² Laurence Lerner, *Philip Larkin*, (Horndom: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 2005), p. 2.
- ³ Duality in Collins dictionary is:" a situation in which two opposite ideas or feelings exist at the same time." Collinsdictionary.com, 28/6/2024.
- ⁴ The stream of consciousness is a technique used by the poet to express his feelings as a kind of "faithful x-ray ever taken of the ordinary human consciousness." Qtd in Kenneth S. Pope. *The Stream of Consciousness: Scientific Investigations into the Flow of Human Experience*. (New York: Plenum Press)2003, p.5.
- ⁵ Gtd in Thomas S. Langner, *Path in Psychology Choices for Living Coping with Fear of Dying*, (New York: Kluwer AcademicPublishers Ltd, 2002), p. 3.
- ⁶ Thomas S. Langner, p. 3.