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## The Bachelor Voice in Larkin's Poetry

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**Abstract:**

*In the 1950s there was no one British poet who embodied the spirit of the age as T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats had for previous generations. In the middle of the 1950s, a new generation of poetic built upon the old collectively called as Movement poets emerged with Philip Larkin as its poetic exemplar. His poetry is intended on telling the truth about life as it is and represents the voice of an accumulated experience of Larkin as a poet and Larkin as a person. He never married in his life and his poetry expresses considerable bewilderment about the prospects of sexual happiness and wedded bliss along with his ambivalent feeling of his failure to have a 'home'. Satirically, he disregards marriage, for to marry means, he believes, losing one's freedom. Sex is pictured in his poems as deceptive, and its promise proves to be empty or false and miserably disruptive. This paper aims to show the bachelor-self of the poet recurring in some of his poems.*

**Key words:** Bachelor, Deceptive, Marriage, Freedom

"Loneliness, or at least the sense of being left out, colours almost all of Larkin's speakers and their personal situations," says Joseph Epstein in an article in *Commentary* (p. 38). His individuality is most typically articulated as a middle-aged bachelor figure that trusts humans have little control over their fate and sees them as deceived by all modes of self-deceptions and wishful thinking. His imaginative self-projections as insouciant bachelor, as an amusing figure with women, emphasize his own poetic identity. He upholds relatively small number of themes in his poetry that includes the passage of time, memory and the past, the illusory visions of man (especially the failure of the promise of love), and old age and death.

Larkin's best poems are entrenched in authentic experiences and communicates a sense of place and situations, people and events, which gives an authenticity to the contemplations that are raised by the poet. His poetic identity has many tones and over-tones. It is sharp and satirical, conversational and meditative: resentful and bitter. However, in all these dispositions we witness the same tension at work, the conflict between our dreams and hopes, and the diverse ways in which it is collapsed in reality. He is concerned to expose our illusions and evasions so that we may stand naked but honest, 'less deceived' by ourselves before the reality of life and death.

In the poem "The Whitsun Weddings," (CP 114), we have a bachelor's musings on the 'significance' of a wedding, even when it is celebrated by naïve unreflecting

Working-class people and enjoyed in dreary environs. The train journey provided Larkin with the material for this most renowned poem in which the introverted poet observes, as a detached, maritally uninitiated figure, the attitudes and aspiring of the newlywed and their families. It describes an actual railway journey that Larkin undertook from Hull to London, on a Whitsun Saturday. The poem encapsulates graphic descriptions of the England landscape and the people crowding the railway platforms.

The references to the newly married couples are quite interesting. They are supposed to have inspired the poem, though marriage seldom grabbed Larkin's interest for who could not make up his mind to get married at any stage in the course of his own life. He often thought of getting married but did not actually marry. The phrases "a happy funeral" and "a religious wounding" in the poem are noteworthy:

The women shared  
The secret like a happy funeral  
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared  
At a religious wounding. (CP 115)

The poet treats marriage as a "happy funeral" and as a "religious wounding," which means that, although a marriage is a happy event, it carries within it the seeds of the death of happiness which is bound to occur in course of time. Similarly, the ceremony of marriage is here sensed as a religious wounding, meaning that the ceremony would subsequently turn out to be a painful affair. According to the cynic poet, the happiness of marriage cannot last forever. The couples symbolize the rejuvenating changes but hopes of fulfillment in the future are still a remote possibility.

The poem shifts from the detached perspective of the speaker towards a more participatory one: "Free at last, / And loaded with the sum of all they saw, / We hurried towards London, shuffling guilt of steam" (CP 115). The third person plural pronoun "they" is changed into the first person plural "we." It signifies that the poet comes out of his crust of detachment and identifies himself with the couples. He is lifted into a world of imaginative fulfillment when he speaks of "arrow-shower" (CP 116). The unpleasant snobbishness and the tone of disapproval in the details of the wedding behaviour and "parodies of fashion" are deliberately blended to undercut the validity of the weddings:

The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,  
The lemons, mauves, and olive-orchres . . .  
And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed  
Coach-party annexes [. . .]. (CP 115)

Larkin, an outsider, sees the whole procedure as purely a social and sexual exercise. By distinguishing the elements of the whole -- the fathers' "seamy foreheads" (CP115), "An uncle shouting smut," "mothers loud and fat" -- he is, essentially, questioning, even deconstructing the notion of the wedding day, perhaps of marriage itself. One may wonder whether the poet is writing from the viewpoint of an unfortunate experience of marriage himself, or whether he is a bachelor, inexperienced and averse to the institution.

Larkin himself said that there was hardly anything of him in this poem and that it circumscribed a picture of life just as he had seen it. Nevertheless, when we read between the lines there is everything of Larkin in the poem -- the yearning for love as well as the standing-off. He had never been able to make up his mind about marrying any of the women with whom he had become intimate at one time or the other. For a long time he wavered between two women, namely Monica and Maeve, but married neither of them. His hesitancy about marriage continued to be a stupendous claim of his life. Like Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," the poem *mélange* life in its vigor and indolence.

Larkin, often complains that life has never attempted to lure him. "Life is first boredom," he writes in "Dockery and Son" (CP 152), speaking of his own life, but generalizing the whole issue:

Life is first boredom, then fear.  
Whether or not we use it, it goes,  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age, and then the only end of age. (CP 153)

The poet reviews his whole course of adult life while returning home from a dinner at his old Oxford college, at Sheffield railway station late at night: "the ranged / Joining and parting lines reflect a strong / Unhindered moon" (CP 152). The moonlit railway track becomes an ideal metaphor for the invisible lines of destiny, which again stands for the two Oxford contemporaries: himself, and Dockery.

In the poem, both the poet and Dockery are Oxford graduates, but Dockery got married early in life and begot a son. Larkin remained a bachelor throughout his life and the poem renders Larkin's meditations on the subject of marriage and the offspring born of wedlock. The poem concludes with a gloomy reflection about life being first a "boredom" (CP 153) and then a "fear," and the thought of old age leading ultimately to death. The failure of "home," is so poignantly treated in "I Remember, I remember" (CP 81). It shows the drooping of the ideal, of romance, that characterizes post-war thought, where a sense of belonging is nowhere felt.

This is again the subject of the poem "Reference Back" (CP 106). Time connotes the chain that binds us to our hopes and dreams, which as we grow older realize will never become reality. This sense of withered loss, darned hopes and ideals destroyed, pervades the whole poem. Again in "Home is so sad" (CP 119), he writes that home is "A joyous shot at how things ought to be, / Long fallen wide." Here, he merely illustrates the way in which a home declines when people depart it, primarily when one of the partners of the marriage dies. This cataloguing of the familiar continues in "Show Saturday" (CP 199) also.

None of Larkin's poems registers the achievement of complete success in love, and even those that come closest, are rarely fulfilled. "Broadcast" (CP 140) for instance, for all its loving attentiveness, leaves its speaker in the dark, "desperate," and unable to discover the addressee's individuality. "Wedding Wind" (CP 11) too, in spite of its merriment and excitement, compensate its "happiness" with that of the speaker's "sad" moments since other people and animals cannot share her contentment. The poem ponders over the thoughts of a newlywed woman after her nuptial night, while walking on the farm in the morning. To her the whole of nature partake with her vigor and happiness that she now experiences.

The success of this poem is positioned in the way where the mood of the woman takes over the whole landscape and, in particular, invests the wind with a joyful force who in turn acquires power to overcome all resistance. However, the immediacy of her happiness with the "thrashing" energy along with the smile of the wind carrying her happiness like a thread carrying beads, hints at the frailty of the experience since a thread may easily break. But, the final image implies a hope of sustaining the dream of happiness, although the

interrogative leaves a slender doubt: "Can even death dry up / these new delighted lakes, conclude / Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?" (CP 11).

The poem seems to represent an imaginative attempt from the part of the poet to break out of selfish limitations by empathizing with a newly married woman. The most serious threat in the life of the poet during the composition of this poem was his emotional entanglement with Ruth Bowman. Larkin was very reticent about this relationship, and felt threatened by it, not only personally, but also artistically. His announcement on the engagement with Ruth to Sutton is made in a revealing, at the same time in an awkward manner:

To tell you the truth I have done something rather odd myself -- got engaged to Ruth on Monday. You know I have known her since 1943 or 4; well, we have gone on seeing each other until the point seemed to arrive when we either had to start taking it seriously or else drop it. I can't say I welcome the thought of marriage, as it appears to me from the safe side of it, but nor do I want to desert the only girl I have met who doesn't instantly frighten me away. It has been putting me backwards and forwards through the hoop for a long time now. I still console myself with the thought that all is not yet lost. No one could imagine me to be madly in love, and indeed I'm more "madly out of love" than in love, so much so that I suspect all my isolationist feelings as possibly harmful and certainly rather despicable. "Are you a bloody valuable vase, man, to be kept so carefully?" (qtd. in Booth 20)

Larkin parallels this failure of the relationship with his difficulties in writing his third novel. Poems like "Deceptions" (CP 32) and "If, My Darling" (CP 41), completed in the early months of 1950s, reflect the grim, guilt-ridden impasse which the engagement had become by this time. He did always see his difficulties over the idea of marriage in purely personal terms. In "If, My Darling" the speaker amazes the readers with the idea that life is quite weak and not so joyful and he was keen enough to avoid any idealizations of womanhood. In fact, the love poems of Larkin are very pessimistic and hopeless reflections on failure, weakness, and helplessness of the lovers. The poem is addressed by the poet to his imaginary wife, and seems quite realistic which further expresses his cynical view that marriage is a matter of accepting an undesirable partner. To marry, according to him, means losing one's freedom and giving a permanent place to boredom.

In "Deceptions" (CP 32) Larkin insists that it is the rapist, not the victim who is the more deceived when he "bursts into fulfillment's desolate attic." Critics express the view that, in this poem as in a few others such as "I see a girl dragged by the wrists" (CP 278), Larkin shows a tenderness, even a reverence towards women. Nevertheless, the ending of the poem in a problematic manner shows a great deal of sympathy for the man who had sexually assaulted her. He ends it with a marked detachment from the woman's suffering with which he began the poem. This ambivalence suggests a complex psychological tension underneath the poem, where the poet to some extent, identify himself with the woman's victimization. On the one hand, the poem shares some sympathy with her by identifying himself, with her pain, and on the other, he shows certain callousness towards the brutalized woman projecting the cloaked sadism on his part.

Larkin certainly felt that by rejecting marriage he is not only freeing himself from the personal entanglement, but prominently, protecting his art. The idea that marriage curtails the imaginative freedom of the artist recurs in several poems of the early 1950s, such as "To My Wife" (CP 54), "Reasons for Attendance" (CP 80), "No Road" (CP 47), "Marriages" (CP 63), "Absences" (CP 4) and "Latest Face" (CP 53). "Marriages" announces that in many cases marriage is a matter of accepting an undesirable partner in whose company "words such as liberty, / Impulse, or beauty / shall be unmentionable" (CP 63). The poem addressed to Larkin's imaginary wife, is an onslaught against the institutionalized marriages.

In "Afternoons" (CP 21) again, Larkin harks upon the tendency, to marry young and soon have children. We are given a portrait of young mothers gathering in the new recreation-ground with their husbands, and of their children at play. In the closing lines, as evident in other poems, we are told that something is pushing those women to the side of their own lives (thus depriving them of the happiness which they have been enjoying hitherto). "Vers de Soci  t  " (CP 181) is about an invitation the poet has received, which he interprets as meaning: "*My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps / to come and waste their time and ours: perhaps / You'd care to join us?*" The speaker is about to refuse but accepts the invitation since "Only the young can be alone freely" and boredom according to the poet is not pleasant when one is alone.

In 1950, Larkin shifted to Belfast and enjoyed the solitary life there. Living there was a recluse and relief for him after the feminine complications of the previous years. Later in 1970, he gave a nostalgic and highly symbolic poetic expression to this crude, male solidarity in his celebration of the "secret bestial peace" of "The Card-Players" (CP 177). Even though Monica Jones' relationship with Larkin did not prevent him from developing new attachments, he could not stick on sincerely to any one of these, as ultimately he withdrew from all attachments. "Long roots moor summer to our side of earth" (CP 96) expresses his feelings on the day she got married, and a distinct pensiveness underlies in "Maiden Name" (CP 101), written six months later.

"Self's the Man" (CP 117) is a satirical poem about marriage that is contrasted with bachelorhood. The poet says that Arnold married to earn and provide for his family and is no less selfish than any bachelor is. "He married a woman to stop her getting away," "He still did it for his own sake / playing his own game." Apparently, Larkin's "everyone" is bound to be disappointed: all people are either unloving or unloved, and their agony is deepened by the clarity with which they envisage how love ought to be. In "Love Songs in Age" (CP 113), it is the "bright incipience" which promises to "solve, and satisfy, / and set unchangeably in order." It is the triumphant justification for existence, and its most potent reward. But, because its possible benefits are so great, the opportunities for realizing them are very less.

The speaker in "Places, Loved Ones" (CP 99), explores the problem in waiting for that 'special person' whose love might make life redemptive and purposeful. A mixture of disappointment and relief in the tone evidences his scornful view of love. As usual, Larkin's love-poems are disappointed reflections on failure, impotence, and helplessness in life. In "An Arundel Tomb" (CP 110), the statues of

the couple, the Earl and his Countess, lie together frozen in their poses. Yet, they attain some lasting communion, as the Earl's hand is "holding her hand." He realizes that the faithfulness of the figurines that "lie in stone" is a deception and admits that to be shown "holding hands" is nothing more than "A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace." Larkin contemplates the durable witness of faith and love (which is a misrepresentation of reality), hoping it might be so in his own and in all other people's lives.

Larkin's poetry of love is filled with real women in real places. It focus on the five women (apart from his mother) to whom Larkin was closest: Monica Jones, Ruth Bowman, Winifred Arnott, Maeve Brennan and the woman he addresses in "When first we faced, and touching showed" (CP 205). He leaves the reader with a sense of the broken history of his affections, some of them simple and short-lived, some complex and lifelong. "Latest Face" (CP 53), completed in February 1951, shows the poet insistent in his rejection of domestic responsibility and its aftermath guilt. The obscure last lines of the poem even seem to show the poet strategizing his escape from any domestic involvement.

In "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" (CP 7), the poet portrays himself as a stereotypical bachelor, defenseless against a woman's charms. His "If, My Darling" (CP 41) launch a simple misogynistic attack on his darling's delusions along with the female attack on his own misogyny. In the poem "Deceptions" (CP 31), Larkin insinuates a wiliier personal subtext. Its insinuation, as Larkin himself exposed, is to Shakespeare's Hamlet. The Prince declares, "I loved you not," and Ophelia replies, "I was the more deceived" (Hartley, 1989, p. 74). This resonance, which would not have been detectable without the poet's help, is perhaps, here acknowledging to himself that, like some mock-heroic Prince of Denmark, he was also coercing his beloved to distraction by his moody frolics following the death of his father.

The above testimony shows that Larkin, like Prince Hamlet was aware of his "deceptions" towards those women with whom he had close contact. Andrew Motion judges that it is not Larkin's fault that he did not end up in wedlock or that he could not have a family, but he was born earlier than the sexual revolution of the early 1960s and therefore became a victim of dread, wariness, and ignorance. In the poem "High Windows" (CP 165) Larkin has rightly pointed out that too much preoccupation with sex is the result of disgruntled desire. The thought of the poem was quite revolutionary during the time, which compares the freedom of the present generation with the miserable repression of the past.

Larkin seems to believe that the only candid response to life is to rebuff ourselves any dreams of achievement, and his resistance to being 'conned' by life leads him to deny any possibility of sincere and everlasting love. To him the role of a detached lonely outsider is preferable to a counterfeit individual committed in love or marriage. He always embraced escapism when confronted by the problematic demands of real women. He seems to have maintained a method of his own, in preserving himself (and his women 'friends') from the devastating intensities of relationships like that with Ruth. His poetry can be appreciated as a poetry of disappointment, of destruction of romantic illusions, of man's defeat by time and his own inadequacies. It could also be seen as poetry of the impotent self, powerless or indisposed to risk being wrong. He believes that poetry is the only means to being honest by transfiguring into words exactly what he feels deeply and by registering his authentic response to experience.

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